

Living with Sin: Growing up Jewish



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It's a Sin

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Until I declared myself emancipated from my Jewish father, I was what you might call a *nebbish*. It was easier to bow to dad's values and beliefs, most of which were firmly rooted in Jewish traditions.

So before I entered the childbearing years, I had already received a fair number of Talmudic decrees. They usually came during Friday night's eve-of-Sabbath dinner--in between the gefilte fish and the roast chicken. While clutching a piece of challah in one hand, my father would gesticulate, admonishing me in sonorous tones (reminiscent of Charlton Heston's Moses) to refrain from committing "sins." These might be anything from nasty words or white lies to reckless deeds and irresponsible decisions.

With a rebuke and a twitch of a wild and hairy eyebrow, he would reduce me to a quivering mass of guilt. I did not attend Hebrew School (a quirk of fate and lucky timing) and tended toward the ecumenical in my social relationships. The result? I had learned that there were a variety of paths to atonement. My Catholic friends told me they repented with a few Hail Mary's, and other Christian buddies said they prayed on Sundays for forgiveness.

So while my non-Jewish peers received mild rebukes for slipping broccoli to the dog, I knew I was a stone's throw away from being shipped to Attica . Of course my adolescent sins were all too mundane, but to hear my father talk, I was letting all 12 tribes of



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Israel down.

Gradually I discerned the underlying reason for my father's vigilance. His ultimate goal was righteous--that I become "a good wife and mother." Nothing wrong with that, of course, except if you were ambivalent, as I was, about having children.

Little did I know then that according to the National Jewish Population Survey 2000-2001 (released in September, 2004), I was not alone in my conflict. The percentage of childless, or childfree, Jewish women was nearly double that of U.S. women as a whole. Until age 35, about 54 percent of all Jewish women remain childfree compared with 28 percent of U.S. women in general.

So, in hindsight, if Torah considered me a bad Jew, I was in good company. Genesis 1:28 may command the Jewish people to "be fruitful and multiply," but the United Jewish Communities survey indicated a slowdown.

In my father's house, that sentiment never took root. "Childless" meant failure--a denial of Jewish law and a failure to accept a woman's intended role. As my father repeatedly reminded me, my children would not remember me by lighting Yahrzeit candles when I died. I had to bite my tongue not to say that it was just as well since many fire departments considered those 24-hour memorial glasses to be safety hazards.

When my father's eyes would fall on my flattened, married belly, his words were heavy with subtext. "So, what's new?" he asked, reaching for another rugelach.

I knew he wasn't talking about my job or summer vacation plans. I had explained my position on children many times--I felt I could contribute to the Jewish community in other ways. Since my father stubbornly refused to see my side, I had all but given up rational conversation. Humor appeared a better coping mechanism.

I told my father we were expecting a blessed event. My dad's eyes lit up with excitement, and just as his lips were beginning to turn up in a broad smile, I announced, "We're converting to Jehovah Witnesses and buying a Miniature Schnauzer."

"But what will you do with the dog when the baby comes?" he shot back, purposely misunderstanding my statement.

To his credit, my husband said nothing. He had warned me of the hazards of Torah bashing. But I wasn't my father's daughter for nothing. If he wanted "stubborn refusal," I'd give him that.

"No problema," I said, glancing at my mother, busily clearing the table of the remnants of potato pancakes and brisket. "Those ER docs are used to handling dog bites, and the kids love the attention."

"Don't joke like that," my father replied. "It's a sin."

"Who's joking?"

But my father's Jewish education had gone beyond reading Philip Roth and Bernard Malamud. He also knew how to play poker. On his worst day, he was a great bluffer. "I can read between the lines," he quipped. "Weren't you the daughter who babysat and worked as a camp counselor for seven consecutive summers?"

I couldn't deny my long association with kids, which included five years of elementary school teaching--the best contraceptive known to man (and woman).

"It's sinful to talk about hurting your child," my father continued, alluding to my theoretical child's theoretical dog bite. "He's always listening."

Well, I knew who HE was, and this was my cue to pack up the leftovers and truck on home.

But not before pulling a few punches myself. "Well," I said with an exaggerated glance at the Heavens, "I don't keep kosher or plan on visiting Israel either. So strike me dead."

I could tell my theatrics weren't going over too well. The hand wringing gave it away. But Pops was not to be outdone. "Did your mother tell you we're taking OUR THREE LOVELY GRANDCHILDREN YOUR SISTER GAVE US to Europe on an extended vacation?" he said all in one breath.

I was sure he was bluffing--my father hadn't taken a vacation in the last 25 years and he wasn't starting now. He was trying to use sibling rivalry and competitiveness to shoehorn me into parenthood. And darned if it wasn't starting to work. I began wondering what I'd look like in DKNY pregnancy fashions.

Still, I managed to toss the ball back in Dad's court.

"Mother said you swore on Torah that you'd pay for my kids' college educations," I deadpanned. "Including grad school."

A great silence fell on the room. I never knew the subject of money could be so comforting. No one spoke for a full five seconds, and I assumed Dad was mentally skimming his memory bank for a Biblical passage that prohibited cash withdrawals. I was wrong.

Angling his head to peer at me through his bifocals, he proclaimed, "Deuteronomy 16:19 and Exodus 23:8 both say the problem with bribery is that it blinds the wise and intelligent," Dad finally said, "You've heard the phrase, 'love is blind,' but Torah tells us that it's not love; it's self-interest. Actually bribery blinds us to self-interest"

Wait a minute. Was my father warning me against a too hasty decision about children? Was he admitting that any monetary bribe to become a parent might blind me to self-interest? I felt certain that was the logical inference.

"But when does self interest become selfish?" I asked, worry creeping into my voice.

"That's easy," my father said. "When I tell you."

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