

**Parenting: Putting the Pieces Back Together Again – Parashat Chayei Sara**  
**Rav Hanan Schlesinger**

Many times in my life, in moments of pain and despair, have I said to myself and to others: ‘If I had only known how difficult it would be to raise children, I wonder if I would have done it?’ There can be so much frustration, so much disappointment. How many times have I experienced such a feeling of utter failure in my efforts to nurture well-adjusted, well- functioning, happy and God-fearing children?

But I should have known better. Had I remembered the lessons of the Book of Genesis, I might not have been so despondent. I might have gained a measure of comfort. From the outset parents have failed, and still God wants us to continue on and keep trying. Even the greatest of our ancestors have made mistakes and run into impossible parenting dilemmas from which they could not elegantly extricate themselves, and yet this does not detract from their greatness. It seems to be God’s will that raising children be an open-ended challenge that defies simple solutions and rarely entails easy and clear cut successes.

Remember, we read it only a few weeks ago - the first family on earth was ripped apart by fratricide. Adam and Eve’s first born son murdered his younger brother. Who can imagine the feuds and the acrimony that the walls of their home witnessed – both before the deed and after. Before – the hate that divided the brothers, the poisoned words they flung at each other, the anger of the parents towards their maladjusted children – and their guilt at not having raised them properly. And what about the mutual accusations that Adam and Eve must have flung at each other over their ineffective parenting. And after – living with the murderer, who was after all still their son...or was he? How did they relate to him, or did they?

Schultz Rosenberg Campus, 12324 Merit Drive, Dallas TX, 75251

Phone: 214-295-3525

Fax: 214-295-3526

Email: [kollolofdallas@sbcglobal.net](mailto:kollelofdallas@sbcglobal.net)

Web site: [www.kollelofdallas.org](http://www.kollelofdallas.org)



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Two weeks ago we read Abraham's plaintive cry to God: "If only Ishmael would live before You!" My heart goes out to our suffering patriarch who sees himself as a failed father. He waited decades for this first child to be born, a child who would follow in his footsteps and pass on the legacy of a life lived in God's presence. But Ishmael does not choose to live his life in God's presence. And Abraham is beside himself with disappointment.

This young man upon whom Avraham had pinned all his hopes makes his father's life bitter indeed. Soon after the birth of his brother Isaac, in last week's Torah portion, Ishmael is described as "mocking" so meanly that Sarah finds it necessary to literally throw him out of the house. Looking at the context, he might well have been proclaiming to all who would listen that this new son of his mother is not the son of his father. According to his incessant accusations, Sarah had been unfaithful, and baby brother Isaac is nothing but an illegitimate bastard fathered by none other than Avimelech king of the Philistines.

Most painful of all is perhaps what we find in this week's Torah reading. Or what we don't find! In the wake of the *Akeida*, the binding and near sacrifice of Isaac by his Avraham, there is no contact at all between father and son. Decades go by and not one word of communication. Avraham seems not to have been present at his son's wedding. The only time that Isaac will be able to bring himself to ever again lay eyes upon his father is when he is summoned to lay the old man's body in its grave. This is as far as we have read this year in the Book of Genesis. Those of us who remember from last year's reading know that the tales of tortuous family relations continue – Esau was a source of terrible vexation to his parents, and the animosity and bickering between Joseph and his brothers made life miserable for Jacob and his three wives. While Esau married out of the faith and later threatened to kill his brother,

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Joseph's siblings kidnapped him and sent him off to slavery. And we ask ourselves: Can it get any worse? Will it get any better?

But God apparently does not despair of us. Genesis ends on a note of reconciliation, when Joseph and his brothers mend their ties and the family is reunited. There is hope. After failure, we can try again and do a little bit better. Rarely is all completely lost. The small successes of second and third tries make it all worthwhile. It's not about getting it all right the first time around. Parenting is about drawing strength from the knowledge that the best of us err in this most challenging of endeavors, and we can and must keep going back to pick up the broken pieces in order to fit them back together again. It is a work in progress to the very end. May God be with us.



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