THE JEWISH MOTHER STEREOTYPE – A SHABBAT MOTHER'S DAY SERMON
RABBI DAN MOSKOVITZ
TEMPLE SHOLOM
May 11, 2018

On this Shabbat immediately preceding Mother's Day, I think it's only fitting that we spend some time reflecting on the importance of mothers.

The Jewish mother is a strange and unique species. If you were on safari and there was a herd of mother's roaming the Serengeti or the school courtyard at pick time, the keen observer should be able to pick out the Jewish mothers from about 50 meters.

I am kidding of course, trying perhaps unartfully to be funny; but there are very specific stereotypes about how a Jewish mother, in particular among all mothers, thinks and acts. Most of them, at least on their surface, are not very complimentary! Are they true? Well, about as true as any other stereotype. They wouldn't exist if there wasn't some basis of truth. But as stereotypes always do, they have become exaggerated over time. And of course, not every Jewish mother fits the stereotype.

If Jewish Mother stereotypes are not especially complimentary, they are at least funny – funny enough that an entire genre of jokes has been built up on the subject. Actually, we Jews are known among the nations for our humour. Last week at our Temple Sholom fundraiser, Comedian and co-founder of YukYuk's Mark Breslin reflected on the importance of humour in Judaism and how we use it to cope with trauma and the challenges of assimilation. He made the convincing argument that the Jewish ability to laugh in the face of adversity is the key to our survival and largely the reason why Jews in particular have dominated the field of, and succeeded in, comedy of all kinds.

Not to *shrey gevalt*, but we Jews have a difficult history. A history peppered with persecution and tragedy. The summary of all Jewish history goes something like this: "The tried to kill us, we survived, lets eat."

Not that we have a monopoly on suffering, but we have survived more than our share of persecution and resulting tragedy. And over the generations, we have developed a knack for comedy as an antidote to the tragedy of our lives and condition.

So a series of stereotypes of the Jewish mother has crystalized over the generations. In each is a virtue obscured or softened by humor. We laugh at these stereotypical jokes about Jewish mothers, but it's the kind of laughter that also acknowledges a greater truth, we love our mothers, we embrace these stereotypes even with all the *tzurius* and neurosis it brings. Without them, our mothers stereotypical and those that break the mold, we wouldn't be who we are today. And while we must acknowledge all jokes and humor aside that there can be some painful realization in that, not all mother's build up their children, some also tear them down, even then the Jewish coping mechanism is humor, as well as food, therapy and

shopping. In doing so, we are not being less than reverent towards our mothers; we are simply finding a device for coping with them!

So lets looks a few Jewish mother stereotypes through some classic Jewish Mother jokes as a way to celebrate and appreciate the unique gifts that our mothers give us on this Shabbat of Mother's Day, some will say they are the gifts that keep on giving. A special note of thanks to my colleague Rabbi Don Levy, who compiled many of these jokes on his blog, I never would have remembered so many of them.

The first stereotype of Jewish mothers, is that they are overprotective.

Little Sam wants to go outside and watch the solar eclipse. His mother says: Okay, *Bubbeleh*…but don't get too close!

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Hannah comes home from her afternoon out with her boyfriend Arnold looking very unhappy.
"What's the matter, Hannah?" asks her mother.
"Arnold has asked me to marry him," she replies.
"Mazeltov! But why are you looking so sad?" her mother asks.
"Because he also told me that he was an atheist. Oh mum, he doesn't even believe in Hell."
Her mother then says, "That's all right Hannah, it really isn't a problem. I suggest you marry him and between the two of us, we'll show him how wrong he is."

The next stereotype about Jewish mothers, is that they are cheerleaders for their children:

What is a genius? An average student with a Jewish mother.

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Of course, this boosterism can be somewhat conditional:

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Harry Goldberg has been elected the next president of the United States—the first Jewish boy to reach the White House. He is very proud and phones his mother in New York to invite her to the inauguration.
Harry: Momma, guess what! I've just been elected president, won't you come to my inauguration?
Mother: Harry! You know I hate trains. I can't face the journey all the way to Washington. Maybe next time.
Harry: Momma! You will take no train. Air Force One will collect you. The journey will be over in 30 minutes. Come to my inauguration, please...
Mother: Harry, I hate hotels. The non-kosher food! Nahh, maybe next time.
Harry: Momma!! You will stay in the White House, a kosher chef to yourself. PLEASE come.
Mother: Harry! I have nothing to wear!

Harry: I have someone on his way to take you to Macy's and Bloomingdale's to make you look perfect. You must come!!!
Mother: Okay, okay, I suppose I will come.
Inauguration day comes. Mother is on the front row, next to the Secretary of State. Harry is called up to become the next president. Mother digs the Secretary of State in the ribs and says, "Hey, you see that boy Harry? His brother is a very successful doctor!"

The next stereotype about Jewish mothers, is that they are pushy.

Why do Jewish mothers make such good parole officers? Because they never let anyone finish a sentence.
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There are two theories on how to argue with a Jewish mother. Unfortunately, neither works.
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There comes a time in every Jewish man's life when he must stand up to his mother. For most, this comes at around age 45.
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Jewish mothers only offer advice twice: when you want it, and when you don't.
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Your Jewish mother is the only one who knows more about you, than you know about yourself.
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But probably the most prevalent stereotype about Jewish mothers, and the most popular source of jokes about them, is that they are expert at the art of imposing guilt.

I have learned in my interfaith work that for Catholics, it is their religion that seems to be the source of guilt. For Jews, it seems to be our mothers.

Son (on the telephone): Hi, Mom! I was thinking about you and decided to give you a call! How are you feeling?

Mother: Well, I'm feeling much better than on the last 35 days when you didn't think about me or call me!

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If the Mona Lisa had been Jewish, her mother would have said: So, after all the money we spent on the orthodontist for you, that's the best smile you can come up with??!

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Sophia and Hannah are discussing the best ways to make their young sons finish their meals. Sophia says, "As an Italian mother, I put on a fierce look and say to Primo, 'if you don't finish your meal, I'm going to kill you.' It works most of the time."
"Well, as a Jewish mother, I look mine Isaac in his eyes and say, 'if you don't eat the meal I've slaved over all day, I'm going to kill myself.' It works every time."

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Dear Darling Son and That Person You Married,
I hope you are well. Please don't worry about me. I'm just fine considering I can't breathe or eat. The important thing is that you have a nice holiday, thousands of miles away from your ailing mother. I've sent along my last ten dollars in this card, which I hope you'll spend on my grandchildren. God knows their mother never buys them anything nice. They look so thin in their pictures, poor babies.

Thank you so much for the birthday flowers, dear boy. I put them in the freezer so they'll stay fresh for my grave. Which reminds me – we buried Grandma last week. I know she died years ago, but I got to yearning for a good funeral, so Aunt Minnie and I dug her up and had the services all over again. I would have invited you, but I know that woman you live with would have never let you come. I bet she's never even watched that videotape of my hemorrhoid surgery, has she?

Well son, it's time for me to crawl off to bed now. I lost my cane beating off muggers last week, but don't you worry about me. I'm also getting used to the cold since they turned my heat off and am grateful because the frost on my bed numbs the constant pain. Now don't you even think about sending any more money, because I know you need it for those expensive family holidays you take every year. Give my love to my darling grand-babies and my regards to whatever-her-name-is – the one with the black roots who stole you screaming from my bosom.
Love, Mom

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- Overprotective is just another way of saying Jewish mothers are caring.
- Cheerleading just another way of saying Jewish mothers are encouraging.
- Pushy just another way of saying Jewish mothers are passionate.
- Guilt inducing, it's how Jewish mothers try to teach empathy.

It's not a source of jokes about Jewish mothers, nor is it a stereotype at all, but rather it is a truth that holds *L'dor v'dor*, from generation to generation; Jewish mothers are among the most devoted, giving, and longsuffering members of the human race. If you don't believe me just ask one and they will be sure to tell you.

Happy Mother's Day to all Jewish mothers! We truly wouldn't be who we are without you. Shabbat shalom.