Paradise Lost

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I have a brief announcement – something has been lost and we need everyone's help in finding it and restoring it to its rightful owners. It is extremely valuable; priceless really. People tell me that without it, they would not have become who they are today. It was last seen about 10, maybe 15 years ago. When I last saw it, it was literally all over the place, it was in schools, it was in homes, it was in parks and on baseball and soccer fields. It came out particularly in the afternoon, around the time school let out and you could often find it working a part-time job or just hanging out at the mall. Some mornings if you were up early you could find it delivered with your newspaper. It very complex and multi-faceted – this thing that we have lost – in fact that is part of what made it so incredibly valuable, it could be so many different things all at once.

Everyone if you would please look under your seats and next to you for just a moment – we seem to have lost – **childhood** – and I am hoping that the key to bringing it back might be somewhere in this room!

A brief story:

A mother, concerned about her child, comes to see the rabbi. "Rabbi, can you talk to my son Jacob? He's angry all the time and I think something is bothering him. Maybe it's the divorce, maybe it's something going on with his friends… I don't know, but you seem to be able to get kids to talk. Can I bring him in to see you?"

The rabbi then offers a time, say Wednesday at 4:30pm.

"No, that won't work, Jacob has basketball practice."

The rabbi offers another time, Thursday afternoon.

"No, sorry no good again, He has a math tutor and tests every Friday in school."

And another.

"Nope, Guitar lesson."

The rabbi realizes that Jacob's calendar is even busier than his own. He turns to the mother, and says, "I think I already know what Jacob is angry about!"

Jacob is angry because he's 12 years old and he has the schedule of a 30 something professional. Jacob is angry because his summer vacation is filled with test prep courses and summer school classes so he can be a step ahead when he enters 7th grade. Jacob is angry because he is under incredible pressure to succeed and produce, he's 12 and truly believes that his whole future is dependent on him getting into a good middle school, so he can get into a good high school, so he can get into a good college so he can get a good job and if he fails to perform at the highest levels in anyone of those steps, if he doesn't build his resume from grade school, do all the community service, score in the top percentiles on his standardized tests, distinguish himself in every manner and in every way, then he might not have a future at all. Jacob is angry because right when he is trying to figure out who he is and how he fits into the world around him, he has been placed on the fast track to adulthood and his childhood has been run over – or to put it more accurately – it has been deemed not applicable to his future advancement.

When I was growing up, which wasn't that long ago, and when you were growing up which was – well a little longer but still mostly in the time of color television – childhood – particularly our teenage years, consisted of 6 hours of school 5 days a week and afternoons spent hanging out with friends, if we had homework it took an hour or two and our future wasn't in grave peril if we didn't finish it. We played pick up games of baseball and basketball and touch football in the park – where we learned to pick our own teams, be our own coaches, refs and umpires - fair or foul, safe or out – we learned a lot in just negotiating those minor conflicts without adult supervision.

In our childhood there was such a thing as an after school job – not internships needed to round out our college resume, but real lousy jobs that often required us to wear a silly uniform but paid enough to put gas in our car so we could go out on the weekends. There were weekends, 2 ½ whole days of personal time, family time – free time. And Summer vacation - was just that, a vacation that lasted 3 months and was uninterrupted by test prep seminars, quasi-mandatory summer school, or year-round school schedules that keep a family in a perpetual state of academic preparedness. How many families in this room have had to plan a summer vacation around summer school or not take one at all? Not because your children needed remedial work, but because there was not enough time in the school year to fit in all the classes your child needs to have a competitive college resume. Who here has done there child's home work, not because they can't, but because they don't have time? Who keeps a separate calendar, one for your self and your own busy life and one for your child? Would you venture to guess whose is busier?

I can remember, as a child, lying on the grass watching the clouds roll by. I could stare at the clouds for hours, daydreaming and imagining what it would be like to touch one or sit on one. This summer I read that Einstein discovered the theory of relativity this way. Starring up at the sky for hours he would imagine a problem and test solutions to it in his mind. He spent his childhood daydreaming.

Do our children have time to daydream anymore? And if we suggested it would they ask what the point was? To what end? What purpose will that serve me later in life? I guess we could tell them daydreaming got Einstein the Nobel Prize therefore it could lead to something – but that would be to wholly miss the point.

Our children need this time – they need childhood to think, to contemplate, to do the very important work of childhood, which is to have periods when they do absolutely nothing at all. They need time to contemplate life, to relieve boredom by entertaining themselves, to discover and enjoy a general sense of peace and contentment, to discover themselves, who they are and who they want to be. Wendy Mogel writes, "If kids are not taught to reflect on things how can they learn to weigh issues, actions and consequences later in life." Plato, said it even better, "An unexamined life is not worth living."

Twenty-five years after David Elkind wrote his landmark book, *The Hurried Child,* and chronicled the damaging and crippling effects of hurrying our children through life – childhood is not slower – it is in fact so fast that our children only glimpse

it as they wiz by on the fast track to adulthood, with its own set of new responsibilities, stresses and time management issues. Twenty-five years ago Elkind showed that when we blur the boundaries of what is age-appropriate, by expecting or imposing – too much too soon, we force our children to grow up too fast, to mimic adult sophistication while they secretly yearn for time to act there age and while the desperately need time to discover who they are, not who they are going to be.

In rabbinic tradition, childhood is revered as *zman kodesh,* as holy time. Childhood is seen as a symbol of creation, a time when the development of the human being is at its most critical stage. Where personality is molded and the physical and mental faculties developed. It is a time of joy and pain, of learning what makes you happy, a time filled with wonder and curiosity about learning and exploring the world around you.

The imagery of our tradition compares childhood to the Garden of Eden – to paradise. Our time there is sacred and our experiences holy, we are fascinated by everything and obligated to nothing. As we grow up we eat from the Tree of Knowledge, and knowledge in the Garden is not academic success but self aware, we realize we have potential beyond this place and conclude we cannot live in the Garden forever and so we have to leave the Garden, we have to seek the world outside that is what the apple taught Adam & Eve – they were evicted by our own desire for more - but our tradition admonishes us, while we may leave the Garden it doesn't leave us. It remains inside us, what psychologists call our inner child. And as long as we can remember the way back, as long as we can access our memories of Eden then we will never be without hope, because we have been to Paradise and can revisit it as often as we like.

Rabbi Shmuley Boteach explains that this is why our children must live fully as children before they are thrust into adulthood. "A person who was truly a child first, a person who experienced life as something wonderful and awe-inspiring, takes that with him into adulthood. He permanently internalizes the magic and sense of wonder that give him the best of both worlds: the strength, seriousness and emerging wisdom of adulthood, with the boundless joy and curiosity of the child within. That is what Adam and Eve were all about: Their childlike and adult qualities were perfectly blended and developed. It is what we strive for in our own lives as adults and what we are trying so hard to create in the lives of our children and grandchildren. Adults who are able to internalize there inner child, remain creative, youthful and joyful well into adulthood. But we cannot hurry up the child, we cannot shortcut the process, an adult without an inner child, who was hurried though or never fully experience childhood is like a house with a rickety foundation – forever in danger of toppling over."[i]

Let me give you an example of the danger, it's a true story. I am friends with a elementary school principal, she told me that just a few weeks ago she was giving a tour of her school to perspective Kindergarten parents, at the end of the tour a group of parents approached her and asked her if she could provide a list of what colleges graduates of the elementary school were accepted into.

As our children are initiated at a younger and younger age into the pressure to succeed of our adult world, as childhood is replaced with junior adulthood, in every way their lives have become more difficult, more confusing, more stressful - in short more like ours. We've paved over the paradise of childhood and put up a job training center. Every decision is viewed through the lens of, "will this look good on his college resume?"

But, you say – Rabbi, the world has changed – your reminiscences are quaint, but we live in the real world. This is all just part of modern family life, we live in a global economy our children have to work harder in every endeavor to constantly sharpen there competitive edge – if they are not prepared for the world ahead of them they will not succeed and if they don't succeed they will not be happy. And we like all parents want them to be happy.

But we have confused external marks of success with internal happiness. In our pursuit of our child's happiness as measured on the scale of academic success we have become co-conspirators in the destruction of childhood. Indeed shaping and planning there success has become for many parents a full time job, we take to it with a religious ferver and determination unmatched in our spiritual lives.

"Successism" has become a new religion, with its own commandments, rituals and rites of passage. The US News and World Reports annual list of top colleges and universities has become is bible, test prep courses have replaced religious school on the scale of what is really valuable and important for our children to learn. Whatever measures or practices the school ordains we obey with a religious fervency unmatched in our spiritual lives. Indeed we have become fundamentalists in our pursuit, it is not enough just to do what is asked, our children must do even more, must surpass expectations; more homework, more extra-curricular work, more activities to impress college referees, more of everything, so they can make it, so they can get in, In the religion of "Successim" the right of passage is not a Bar Mitzvah it is a college acceptance letter from your Early Decision school.

We have convinced ourselves that happiness comes through success – instead of happiness being success in and of it self. Therefore grades – our societies measure of success become more important than anything else. We push and pull our children and justify the time and energy and expense of this relentless race to the top because we know it is for there own good. Indeed success has become not only the road to happiness but the measure of their goodness.

All this pressure to succeed leaves our children in a panic. What if after all their effort, and all our effort, they don't get into the 'right school', what if they try their best and they fail? If they are not an A student, can they still be an A person?

It is the terrible downside of the incredible pressure we place on our children to succeed. They are not adults, though we may treat them that way, and without a solid

grounding in a sense of self gained through a fully experienced and developed childhood they see there social worth as contingent on their academic success, and when success becomes a measure of goodness – goodness itself loses its moral connotation. In the pursuit of success all is permitted because to obtain success is to obtain goodness – thus nothing done in its pursuit can be bad or wrong. And so what we see is that otherwise good, honest and responsible students will compromise their values to get ahead and to please us, so they can be 'good' in our eyes. They learn to cheat, kiss up, form treaties, contest school decisions and act in ways that run counter to the school rules and guidelines…but yet work to their advantage. In the words of sociologist Denise Clark Pope, they learn to 'Do School,' to work the system to their advantage however they can which is justified because they are pursuing success which is good because it leads to happiness.

One of my 8th grade students explained it to me this way he said, "Cheating on a test or your homework is OK because what matters most is your grades, grades are the most important thing, because if you have good grades you can get into a good college and if you get into a good college you can get a good job and that is the whole point of being in school." It's not really cheating he explained, "Because getting into a good school is a good thing."

No getting into a 'good' school is not a good thing, not in the moral sense of the word good. It may be good for you, it may be good for your future job prospects but it is morally neutral, and if it is achieved through unethical means or through the precipitous abandonment of childhood then it is morally a bad thing and psychologically damaging. Achieve, perform, succeed are not Jewish values! "My child is a *mensch*" has nothing to do with his GPA! The ends do not justify the means, but we seem to have lost that in our head down race to the top of the Dean's List. Sacrificing childhood at the expense of early adulthood is not justified by getting into a good school, childhood is too important. Likewise stressed out kids who are afraid of failure and therefore compromise there integrity and participate in behavior that contradicts the very traits and values many parents, students and community members expect schools to instill are not successful because they gamed the system, they fail at the only test that really matters – are you a good person, in the traditional / moral understanding of the word good.

A person's goodness cannot be measured by test scores or the diploma that hangs on the wall, nor the balance in their checkbook. Jewish values are honesty, integrity, reverence, respect for family and tradition. We value education - not as a means to an end, but as an end in itself. We study *L'shma* for the sake of Heaven – not for the reward, but for how it impacts our soul and relationship with the Divine, the world around us. We study not to master over things but to understand them.

In Judaism we pursue wisdom not success, because wisdom is a holy pursuit – it is *kadosh* - because the purpose of wisdom is to cultivate the heart, elevate the spirit, broaden the mind – to better understand the self and our relationship with the world around us. The Tree of Knowledge was located in the center of the Garden of Eden, when Adam and Eve ate of its fruit they became self aware – and it was only then that

they were mature enough to leave the garden and go out into the 'real world' but it took time.

Three weeks before his death, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel was interviewed for what would be the final time. When asked by the interviewer what message he had for young people Rabbi Heschel replied: "Let them remember that there is a meaning beyond absurdity. Let them be sure that every deed counts, that every word has power, and that we all can do our share to redeem the world in spite of all absurdities and all frustrations and all disappointments.... And above all, let them remember ... to build a life as if it were a work of art."

Living life like it is a work of art is the real work of childhood; teaching our children to view life that way - that is the job of parents. If we can overcome some of the stresses of own adult lives and disconnect our own happiness from our children's academic success we can once again appreciate the value of childhood with its own special joys, sorrows, worries and rewards. Valuing childhood does not mean seeing it as a happy innocent period but, rather, as an important period of life to which children are entitled, it is there time to roam in the garden. It is a child's right to be a child, to enjoy the pleasures and suffer the pains of childhood as the children they are, and not as the over-programmed "junior adults" we make them by forcing them to hurry through their youth in a head-down rush to adulthood**.** For our children and our grandchildren, childhood is the destination, the gift we give them by being their parents and grandparents. Let's lock the gates on the Garden of Eden for a few more years – they have a lifetime to be grownups – indeed they will be grownups the rest of their lives, but childhood is for only an instant. Let's not make it any shorter than it already is.

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[i] Boteach, Rabbi Shmueli *Ten Conversations You Need to Have with Your Children* p. 10