Lost & Found

Rabbi Dan Moskovitz

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's a very complex and multi-faceted thing – 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 its 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!"

Childhood has been lost – or to put it more accurately – we have rescheduled it out of existence.

It wasn't always this way, 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 were times of – well time, lots of time, unstructured time, free time, time to think, to play, to explore, to experiment, to discover who we were, who we wanted to be.

Afternoons were for 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. 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 we 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 it 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 - perpetuality.

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 imposing 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 year for time to act there age and while the desperately need this time to discover who they are; not who they are going to be.

In rabbinic tradition; in the pages of the Torah and the Talmud, 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 Talmud sums up the period of childhood in the following passage, "Better are the late fruits we ate in our childhood than the peaches we ate in our old age."[i] Put another way, nothing tastes as sweet as new discoveries.

The imagery of our tradition compares childhood to the Garden of Eden – to paradise. As we gain knowledge of the world around us we are evicted from the garden, we realize we can live there forever and so we have to leave the Garden, but our tradition admonishes us, while we may leave the Garden it doesn't leave us. It 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 this is what we need to strive for in our own lives as adults and to create in the lives of our children as their parents and grandparents. An adult who is able to internalize his inner child remains creative, youthful and joyful well into his adult years. On the other hand an adult without and 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.[ii]

In the twenty or thirty years that many of us we went from teens, to the parents of teens our society has inadvertently or maybe with our own help stepped up the assault on childhood through the media, in schools and at home. Our children are busy, they are stressed, and they are scared that if they fail to perform they will never succeed. They have come to believe that success leads to happiness – rather than happiness being success in and of itself. Our children are future focused, and to be honest so are we, Headstart, Advanced Placement, Early Decision. No Child Let Behind is a fast moving train and we feel we no choice, our kids have no choice – we either get on board or get run over - left behind in the dust.

The absence of a real child is apparent everywhere , but most apparent in our Middle Schools and High Schools where our children are graded and tested at every possible instance. We have all heard of teaching to the test – they are living for the test. Teachers and students a like tell me there is no time to think, to dive deeper, to explore a subject of interest or to go beyond the material presented. What is important to kids is not the mastery of the subject but the grade. "Just tell me what I need to know, so I can tell it back to you, get the grade and move on to the next hurdle or hoop, the clock is ticking, college is looming – I don't have time!"

This relentless process of continual evaluation has made child and parent obsessed with the shorthand external validation of success - the holy grail of child progress – The Grade Point Average or GPA. We look to this oracle to tell us our kids will be all right, that we are doing right by them as parents, that they will have a bright future – a future so bright the glare has blocked our view of the present. We are not living in the moment – childhood and parenthood which were once - and still should be - about the journey have become – sadly - about the destination – a four year degree from a good school so they can get a good job, which will mark them as a success and us as successful parents.

This obsession and focus on success as the measure of goodness has another equally damaging ramification as well. Our children know that there success makes us happy, they see the pride we take in there accomplishments, the pain we feel at there failure. Our children love us, we are good parents, we love them and coach them and encourage them, we give them every resource, every advantage possible to succeed and they want to succeed, they want to repay our efforts on there behalf - they want to make us happy.

This focus on success as a measure of goodness creates an intense fear of failure because to fail is to not be good, to not fulfill your potential – to let down your parents, to waste your gifts. As Rabbi Harold Schulweis observes it, "Failure has become a sin and success has become a virtue. We, parent and child have confused achievement and success with being a good person."

When success becomes a measure of goodness – goodness itself looses its moral connotation. In the pursuit of success all is permitted because to obtain success is to obtain goodness – thus nothing done it is 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 to stay ahead of the curve, at the top of the class. The same strategies we use to stay float and get ahead in the adult work place our teens use to survive in school.

One of my 8th grade students explained the pursuit of success during a discussion we had on the ethics of cheating in our weekly Jewish ethics class. He said, "Cheating is OK because what matters most is your grade, 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." Its not really cheating he explained, "Because getting into a good school is a good thing."

Our children have learned to think that achievement and success, will make them happy. But when did the pursuit of happiness come with a report card and a GPA? Who says happiness is an Ivy League school, a resume built from Nursery School, and a course load that allows no time to reflect and to think…only to react and produce.

All of this pressure to succeed; this constant pursuit of some external validation that you are good is really just a modified expression of materialism. Turning every valuable relationship into a commodity – and childhood into a launching pad for adulthood instead of the sacred and distinct garden it was intended to be.

For the last 40 years UCLA and the American Council on Education have surveyed college freshmen asking them why they went to college. In the 1960's and 70's, and 80's when we were in school the vast majority of incoming college freshmen answered 'to become an educated person' or 'to develop a philosophy of life.' When the same question was put to incoming Freshmen in the 1990s and after they answered, "To make a lot of money".

This isn't the Jewish way, stereotypes aside – "to make a lot of money" is not a Jewish answer. Judaism is present world focused. The reward for doing G-d's work is the quality of your life while you are here, while you are living it. The reward is not in what you will obtain in the future but in what you experience in the present. This moment, this interaction, this experience, this is the reward. There is nothing more. Indeed there is nothing greater.

Likewise - achieve, perform, succeed are not Jewish values! My child is a *mensch* has nothing to do with his GPA!

A person's worth 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, it is 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 the repair of the world. *Ltaken olam b'malchut shadai,* to repair the world in the image of God. The acquisition of Jewish wisdom is to cultivate the heart, elevate the spirit, broaden the mind - not to fatten the purse.

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 essentially a way of looking at our lives and our children's lives in perspective. If we can overcome some of the stress of our adult lives and disconnect our happiness from our children' 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 a child's right to be a child, to enjoy the pleasures and suffer the pains of childhood that are infringed upon by hurrying. 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 - lets not make it any shorter than it already is, for there sake, for our sake and for the sake of the world.

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[i] Talmud, Pe'ah 87:4

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