

Letter from an Expecting Parent

Dear almost-son,

This is your almost-father speaking. I hope you're still comfortable in there. It's not too long now until, God willing, we'll meet. Your mom and I can hardly wait; although, on the other hand, we're not ready!

I haven't received your owner's manual yet. Maybe that comes out with you when you're born. I'm not sure. In the meantime, since I've never been a father before, I've been wondering about a few things.

I thought of you when I read a story recently by Isaac Asimov, the famous science fiction writer. He wrote:

A friend, whose family was slightly more affluent than my own in its time, had been condemned to endless piano practice despite the fact that she was virtually tone deaf. Painstakingly, she memorized enough piano compositions of one sort or another to complete the course and then never ceased to bewail the fact that she had not been allowed to have dancing lessons, for it was dancing that she had *really* wanted to learn.

I said, "At least you won't make your mother's mistake with your own daughter."

"Certainly not," she said fiercely. "Whether she likes it or not, my daughter is going to *dance*."¹

As you can imagine, parenting is on my mind a lot these days. I'm pretty sure that story is an example of how not to do it. So is, perhaps, the Torah portion we just chanted about Abraham nearly sacrificing his beloved son Isaac. A story of unswerving faith, yes. But of healthy fatherhood? I'm not so sure. Abraham seems to have passed God's test of faith, but he and Isaac never speak again. What a terribly high price to pay.

This past year, there's been a lot of public chatter about parenting in the wake of the bestseller *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, Amy Chua's story of a Chinese mother bumping up against Western parenting norms. She starts the book by explaining how Chinese parents raise such stereotypically successful kids, how they produce, in her words, "so many math whizzes and music prodigies." The secret, she says, is in the list of things her daughters were never allowed to do:

- attend a sleepover
- have a playdate
- be in a school play
- complain about not being in a school play
- watch TV or play computer games
- choose their own extracurricular activities

¹ Asimov, p. 243, joke #353.

- get any grade less than an A
- not be the No. 1 student in every subject except gym and drama
- play any instrument other than the piano or violin
- not play the piano or violin.²

Now, son, I hope this isn't making you squirm. That's a lot of pressure, it seems to me, to put on you. Of course I want you to be successful and use your gifts to their fullest, but I worry about pushing you too hard. I'm well aware that we live in a culture that values resume padding and overprogramming. One parenting expert (if there is such a thing!³), Wendy Mogel, tells this story that she heard from two different rabbis:

A mother, concerned about her child, comes to see the rabbi. "Rabbi, can you talk to my son, Jordan? He's angry all the time and I know 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 4:30.

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

The rabbi offers another time.

"No good again. He has his math tutor."

And another.

Guitar lesson.

The rabbi sees that this young person's appointment calendar is even busier than his own. He tells me that he believes he already knows what Jordan is angry about...⁴

Here's the thing, son. I want you to be active, and achieve great things. But I don't want to overwhelm you! Should I let you decide which activities you're passionate about, or should I decide for you? And at what age does that change?

From what other parents tell me, this valley is less plagued by the problems of high pressure and empty overachievement than big city or suburban communities. Families move here, in part, to escape the hustle and bustle of that life. But even here, they tell me, you can't escape it completely.

I've heard stories about parents who over-program their kids, thinking it will give them a leg-up in college admissions. I've heard about parents who swoop in when their child gets less than an A, or gets cut from a team, to argue with the teacher or coach about how their kid's self-esteem will suffer. They want to protect their children from failure and disappointment -- I get that, and I'm sure I'll feel it, too, someday soon.

² Chua, 3.

³ A friend, Lori Berman (who is a parent), recently told me that everyone is an expert on parenting until they have kids...

⁴ Mogel, 209.

But then I hear other advice out there. Like from Wendy Mogel again, who says:

When we treat our children's lives like we're cruise ship directors who must get them to their destination -- adulthood -- smoothly, without their feeling even the slightest bump or wave, we're depriving them. Those bumps are part of God's plan.⁵

Maybe instead of shielding you from every bump, I should help you develop resilience and self-reliance. That way, you'll have the resources as an adult to handle the inevitable bumps and disappointments that come along. After all, though I know we'd both rather not think about this now, I'm not going to be there forever to swoop in and save the day for you.

And what makes for real self-esteem, anyway? One therapist says that "measures of self-esteem are poor predictors of how content a person will be, especially if the self-esteem comes from constant accommodation and praise rather than earned accomplishment."⁶ My son, what seems more important than making sure you never suffer or fail is helping you build the kind of character that can cope with suffering, and bounce back from failure, throughout your life. From what I've heard, your character is a better predictor of future success and contentment than your report card, your resume, or your trophy case.

* * *

Ayelet Waldman, author and Jewish mother, offers an alternative to the "extreme parenting" of the Tiger Mother in an essay titled "In Defense of the Guilty, Ambivalent, Preoccupied Western Mom." Here is her list of things that her four children were *always* allowed to do:

- Quit the piano and the violin, especially if their defeatist attitude coincided with a recital, thus saving me from the torture of listening to other people's precious children soldier through hackneyed pieces of the juvenile repertoire, plink after ever more unbearable plonk.
- Sleep over at their friends' houses, especially on New Year's Eve or our anniversary, thus saving us the cost of a babysitter...
- Participate in any extracurricular activity they wanted, so long as I was never required to drive farther than 10 minutes to get them there, or to sit on a field in a folding chair in anything but the balmiest weather for any longer than 60 minutes.
- Quit said extracurricular activities, especially if their quitting coincided with league finals that might have demanded participation on my part exceeding the requirements stated above.⁷

⁵ Mogel, 91.

⁶ Gottlieb, 76.

⁷ <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB1000142405274870333504576080422577800488.html#printMode>

In Waldman's humor there is real wisdom. She goes on to tell the story of her daughter Rosie, who was diagnosed with dyslexia in second grade. Rosie fell behind her classmates in reading, and Waldman tried to help by forcing her to drill spelling exercises and reading tests. All this motherly attention only left Rosie miserable and frustrated, and made her hate school.

Finally they learned of a special intensive reading program -- 4 hours a day of drilling letters and phonics -- and Rosie insisted on doing it. It was painful, Waldman said, both for Rosie and for her parents, to see her exhausting struggle. They urged her to quit, but she refused!

Ultimately she learned to read. Not because of parental pressure, but because she forced herself. Here's how her mother describes it:

She climbed the mountain alone, motivated not by fear or shame of dishonoring her parents but by her passionate desire to read. She did it herself, without us, and it is no exaggeration to say that we were and remain stunned with pride. What's more, she came out of the experience with a sense of herself as a powerful, tenacious person, one who is...proud of having succeeded despite her dyslexia -- "like Alexander Graham Bell, Winston Churchill and Albert Einstein," as she likes to say...⁸

There's a case, then, for the parents who step aside and let their children find their own way.

* * *

In addition to the Tiger and Western Mothers, my son, there is our ancient tradition of Jewish wisdom. Maybe most famous of all is the Proverb, "spare the rod and spoil the child." But that's not a great translation. The Bible actually says something like, "He who refrains from the rod hates his child; he who loves his child seeks to discipline him diligently" (Proverbs 13:24). In other words, I think, I'm not doing you any favors by failing to set limits. One midrash⁹ blames Abraham's lax indulgence for Ishmael's misbehavior and banishment from the family. I certainly don't want that for you.

In the end I can only promise to do my best as a father. Not taking you up a mountain to sacrifice you is probably a good start. Or maybe I'm being too critical of Abraham. Some midrashim say that Isaac knew what was happening and went willingly, but that Abraham had decided from the beginning that he would never go through with it. In that case, imagine the deep bond of trust that linked father and son. I hope we'll have that some day.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Exodus Rabbah 1:1. Cf. *Book of Legends* 637:258.

By the way, Western Mother Waldman reports that, in defense of her parenting, her kids wrote, as she called them, “compelling and bombastic” rebuttals to the Tiger Mother’s manifesto. And Amy Chua’s “Tiger Daughter” Sophia thanked her mother publicly in the New York Post for giving her the gifts of knowing how to live a full, meaningful life.

As Waldman put it: “our job as [parents] is to be the type of [tiger] that each of our different cubs needs.”¹⁰ In the words of our tradition: “Train a child according to his way, and even as an adult he will not stray” (Proverbs 22:13). Experts and theories aside, maybe the most important thing for me, as a parent, is to get to know *you*, my son, for who you are about to be.

So, for now, keep doing what you're doing. When the time comes, I think we'll be learning from you how to be parents. I have a feeling you'll be a good teacher.

I love you already,
Your dad

¹⁰ <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB1000142405274870333504576080422577800488.html#printMode>

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