



HIGH HOLIDAYS

Rosh Hashanah 2

The Greatest Unsung Heroes in the World

September 22, 2017

THE GREATEST UNSUNG HEROES IN THE WORLD

ABSTRACT

Some of the least appreciated people in the world are our parents. One of the most undervalued achievements in life is the art of childbearing and childrearing.

We hear so much about the innovators in science, medicine, economics, business, the arts, and even in sports and entertainment. We have Hall of Fames in all modern sports. Academy awards, Tony awards, Grammy awards, Emmy awards.

But where are the Halls of Fame and the awards recognizing and honoring those that brought every single one of us – and every single one of these innovators and artists – into this world?! We worship all these shallow and inconsequential accomplishments, while virtually neglecting the single most important event in our lives: Our birth, and those that gave us birth!

Enter Rosh Hashana and it reminds us of the foundations upon which we are built – the parents that gave birth to us. And how the tears they shed and the prices they paid shape the lives of their children and of their offspring till the end of time.

Long before the Oscars and the Hall of Fames honoring the superficial and the temporary, long before the World Series, the World Cup, the Super Bowl, the Stanley Cup – and all the other major events in our material world – came Rosh Hashana and wakes us up to appreciate and celebrate the eternal things in life, the things that truly matter, now and forever.

A deeper look at the Torah readings of Rosh Hashana, an awe-inspiring Midrash about Rachel's tears and sacrifices for her children piercing the very heavens and eliciting G-d's sacrifices for His children; a heart-breaking story of children in Auschwitz keeping a promise made to their mother; a few powerful anecdotes and insights – all come together to remind us that raising children is our most sacred mission. And it's worth every sacrifice.

1. Opening Blessing: Parents and Children

Shana tova!

Baruch Hashem, we have many wonderful parents and children in the synagogue today. May you all be blessed this New Year in seeing nachas from each other – parents from children, children from parents, and all family members from each other.

And, please G-d, may our community continue to grow – building new families, filling up this shul with many more parents and many more children!

And this is the topic I would like to speak about today: Parents and children.

This is an area that deserves far more focus and recognition in today's society, because after all, healthy parents and healthy children are the foundation of a healthy world.

I saw this great line: “We don't need to build a better world for our children. We need to build better children for our world.”

Indeed, this is one of the central themes of Rosh Hashana. A theme relevant and vital to each one of us.

2. Parents

Have you ever heard this one?

By the time I realized that my father was right, my children are telling me that I'm wrong...

Some of the least appreciated people in the world are our parents.

One of the most undervalued achievements in life is the art of childbearing and childrearing.

We hear so much about the innovators in science, medicine, economics, business, the arts, and even in sports and entertainment.

We have Hall of Fames in all modern sports. Academy awards, Tony awards, Grammy awards, Emmy awards.

But when was the last time you heard a parenting award presented with anything close to the same fanfare?!

Where are the Halls of Fame and the awards recognizing and honoring those that brought every single one of us – and every single one of these innovators and artists – into this world?! Without them none of us would exist.

Now for the good news.

Enter Rosh Hashana and it reminds us of the foundations upon which we are built – the parents that gave birth to us. The miracle of birth and birthing, which in turn allows for every other achievement in existence to occur.

3. Rosh Hashana Birthing

You may be wondering: where exactly does Rosh Hashana celebrate parenting, birthing and childrearing?

But think again, and you'll see that it's right before your eyes.

What did we read about in the Torah yesterday, the first day of Rosh Hashana?

We read about the birth of Isaac.¹ The stirring Torah reading began: *V'hashem pokad et Sarah*.² “G-d remembered Sarah...and He did for Sarah as He had spoken. Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son.”

Then in the Haftorah we read³ about Chana (Hannah) heartfully praying for a child, and then giving birth to Shmuel (Samuel).⁴

The central theme of both readings is the miraculous birthing of a child by a woman who was naturally barren. After these women cried out to G-d and made sacrifices, G-d remembered them and opened their wombs and they gave birth to a child – Isaac born to Sarah, and Shmuel born to Chana.

4. The Day After Birth

But it doesn't end there.

In today's Torah reading – the second day of Rosh Hashana – we continue reading about the parenting of a child, the child Isaac, but now the focus is on the sacrifices made not in child-birthing but in childrearing.

We read the famous portion of the Akeidah,⁵ the binding and offering of Isaac. And how ultimately a ram replaces the sacrifice of Isaac.

This then is followed by the Haftorah, where we read⁶ in Jeremiah⁷ how the people are exiled, and Rachel cries for her children, and then Jeremiah's prophecy of hope, how G-d promises that ultimately the children of Israel, my dear son Ephraim, will be redeemed.

The Talmud explains the connection to Rosh Hashana: “G-d said: ‘Sound before Me a shofar made of a ram's

1 Megilah 31a.

2 Genesis 21.

3 Megilah ibid.

4 I Samuel 1:1-2:10.

5 Genesis 22:1-24.

6 Megilah ibid.

7 Jeremiah 31:1-20.

horn that I may remember for your sake the offering of Isaac, the son of Abraham, and I will consider it as if you bound yourselves before Me.’”⁸ Indeed, according to the Midrash, the *Akeidah* actually took place on Rosh Hashana.⁹ And “because you listened to Me,” G-d promises Abraham, “I will bless you and through your children all the nations of the world will be blessed.”¹⁰

5. Rosh Hashana: Birthday of the Human Race

Why do we read about birthing and parenting of children on Rosh Hashana?

The obvious connection is that both Sarah and Chana (whose stories we read on the first day of Rosh Hashana) were childless until their prayers were answered on Rosh Hashana when they gave birth to a special son.¹¹

But the question is: Why this happen specifically on Rosh Hashana?

Because Rosh Hashana is the day when the human race was born. On this day – the sixth day of creation – G-d created Adam and Eve, the first human beings and forbearers of every human being born since.

That is one of the primary reasons we celebrate Rosh Hashana on this day, and we actually describe it as *zech bayom techilas maasecho*, “this is the day which is the beginning of Your work.”¹² Even though the first Rosh Hashana was the sixth day of creation, yet it is considered “the beginning of your work” because on this day the human was created, and it is the human, the central force in the universe, who fulfills the entire purpose of existence, of all the six prior days, by transforming the world into a divine home through his/her divine service in refining the world.

On Rosh Hashana each year we re-experience this birthing: Every Rosh Hashana new unprecedented channels of energy open up that allow the world to be born anew.¹³ In Kabbalistic terms this is called the building of *malchut* (“kingship/sovereignty”). Sarah and Chana both represent the feminine *malchut*, which like the woman, is the source of all life. The channels of birth are often closed or blocked, as they are every year right before Rosh Hashana. On Rosh Hashana, through our prayers and blowing shofar, we eliminate these impediments and allow the new birthing to take place.¹⁴

⁸ Rosh Hashana 16a. Rashi Megilah ibid.

⁹ Midrash, Pesikta Rabbasi, ch. 40. Zohar III 18a.

¹⁰ Genesis 22:17-18.

¹¹ Talmud Rosh Hashana 10b-11a. Rashi Megilah ibid. The Shaloh writes that also Chana’s prayer was on Rosh Hashana (Mesechta Rosh Hashana 214a).

¹² *Hayom barat olam*, recited in the Rosh Hashanah Mussaf service, also includes the meaning: ‘Today the world is conceived.

¹³ See Tanya, Iggeret HaKodesh 14. See also Pri Eitz Chaim, Shaar Rosh Hashana, ch. 1. Shaar HaKavanot, D’rushei Rosh Hashana. Siddur Arizal. See Likkutei Torah Netzavim 51b

¹⁴ See Ohr HaTorah Shabbat Shuva p. 1530.

6. Rosh Hashana: The Day of the Parent

Now we can understand why the Torah readings of Rosh Hashana center around birthing and parenting:

Jewish thought teaches us that everything in macrocosm also exists in microcosm: Just as Rosh Hashana celebrates the collective birth of the human being, so too does it celebrate the birth of every individual child.

Thus the Torah readings of both days of Rosh Hashana are about birthing and parenting.

Can there be any more beautiful way to honor and celebrate our parents, our children, our lives, then to designate the New Year, Rosh Hashana, as the day of the parent – the day when we recognize the great sacrifices every parent makes in both bringing a child into this world (on the first day of Rosh Hashana), and in rearing that child (on the second day)?

So now, when we look at the superficial world in which we live in we can truly appreciate Rosh Hashana:

Long before the Oscars and the Hall of Fames honoring the superficial and the temporary, long before the World Series, the World Cup, the Super Bowl, the Stanley Cup – and all the other major events in our material world – comes Rosh Hashana and wakes us up to appreciate and celebrate the truly eternal things in life, the things that truly matter, now and forever.

7. The Foundations

Why is it that we worship all these shallow and inconsequential accomplishments in sports, arts and entertainment, while virtually neglecting the single most important event in our lives: Our birth, and those that gave us birth?

A touching story sheds light on this absurdity.

A young couple working in Jewish outreach came to see their Rebbe to request a blessing for their work.

In the course of their conversation, the Rebbe made a point of encouraging the wife to see herself as an equal partner with her husband in their holy work of disseminating vital information to Jews who had been deprived of their heritage.

Reticently, she answered, “I try my best, but to be very frank, most people don’t appreciate the hard work I invest in this effort. For example, any given Friday night we will have many guests for Shabbat dinner, and they will usually thank and compliment my husband. Rarely does anyone remember to mention me.”

The Rebbe replied: “That is absolutely wrong of them. But you need to know that we live in a superficial world in which people value externals and not the core foundation. For example, you will see visitors to a

home complimenting the nice furniture, carpets, lamps or paintings. But you will never hear anyone say: ‘My, how beautiful is the strong foundation this home stands upon!’ This is because the foundation is out of sight and people forget about it, even if it is, in fact, the basis of the entire structure.”

The same is true with parenting: Parenting builds the foundation of a building: invisible to all, but it holds up the building and all its floors and beautiful rooms.

Our external-oriented world, which judges a book by its cover (despite the cliché that states otherwise), and values the package more than the content within, ostensibly does not appreciate the foundation – our parents and all the process and sacrifices they made in birthing and bringing us up.

Comes Rosh Hashana, the collective birthday of the human race, and reminds us of the essential role of our parents – and how the tears they shed and the prices they paid shape the lives of their children and of their offspring till the end of time.

8. Two Days of Rosh Hashana: Two Parenting Sacrifices

Why do we need two days of Rosh Hashana to remind us about the importance of parenting? What is the difference between the theme of day and day two in regard to parenting?

The sacrifices our parents make divide into two categories, one more difficult than the prior one:

- 1) The commitment and sacrifice of giving birth to a child.
- 2) The commitment and sacrifices of bringing up that child.

Day one of Rosh Hashana recognizes the sacrifice of child birthing (the birth of the world, the birth of Isaac, the birth of Samuel). Day two honors the sacrifice of childrearing.

Both of these are profound commitments parents make. Yet, the latter – bringing up a child – is in the long-term more challenging and rewarding.

Giving birth to a child is a gift from heaven. It is a blessing, a miracle from above, not requiring much of our effort (beyond the good deeds and prayers that help us merit this blessing). By contrast, raising a child takes tremendous effort, very much dependent on the selfless sacrifices we make.

To conceive a child takes moments. For that conception to develop into a child takes nine months. And for the child to actually be born takes a few hours.

By contrast, raising a child takes a lifetime.

Pregnancy and birthing aren’t easy. They are painful for the mother. (May all mothers be blessed with the easi-

est possible labor.) But this difficulty lasts at most nine months and is overshadowed by the great joy of birth.

The challenge of childbearing is mostly physical and defined, and only the woman experiences it fully; but the challenge and sacrifices necessary in raising that child is physical, spiritual, emotional, psychological, and both parents experience it.

These two sacrifices every parent makes – birthing and childrearing – reflect two types of challenges in life: The first day of Rosh Hashanah addresses the challenge of creating something new into this world, birthing a new child. The second day of Rosh Hashana focuses on the challenge of sustaining that creation – raising, cultivating and nurturing the new child, ensuring that the child always continues to grow and thrive, in a healthy and everlasting way.

9. A Parents Tears

This sacrifice is captured in the tears of our beloved matriarch, Rachel, as we read in today's Haftorah:

So says the Lord: A voice is heard on high, lamentation, bitter weeping, Rachel weeping for her children, she refuses to be comforted for her children for they are not.

So says the Lord: Refrain your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears, for there is reward for your work, says the Lord, and they shall come back from the land of the enemy.¹⁵

We also find that the angel cried over Isaac at the *Akeidab*.¹⁶

Why does Rachel cry for her children? And why did the angel cry for Isaac?

These are the tears related to all the trials and tribulations of raising a child. Especially when the mother Rachel sees her children suffering, and going into exile. All these sacrifices cause a mother and angels to weep.

The awesome power of Rachel's tears is captured in a moving Midrash:¹⁷

When the holy Temple was being destroyed, the Jews suffered terribly. They were being driven away from their homes into a bitter exile. Men, women and children were being slaughtered, sacrificed *al kidash Hashem*.

All this caused an uproar in heaven. The Midrash describes the multitude that came begging G-d to have mercy on His suffering people. Going through each letter of the Aleph Bet as an acronym, the Midrash enumerates the name of each one of the greats as they came pleading for the Jews: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah,

¹⁵ Jeremiah 31:14-15.

¹⁶ Genesis Rabbah 65:5; cf. 56:11 where it states that Abraham too cried rivers of tears.

¹⁷ Pesichta Aicha Rabti 24.

Rebecca and Leah; Moses, the prophets and sages – they each come beseeching G-d. But all to no avail. G-d “defiantly” responds: I created the world and this is how it will be.

Until...

Until Rachel comes, crying for her children. Rachel pours her heart and soul to G-d, telling Him: I sacrificed everything for my children, so that they may serve You. I sacrificed my marriage to Jacob, giving Leah the signs identifying me as his wife, even lying under the marriage bed so that Jacob would think Leah was me. I gave up my life at Bet Lechem on the road between Chebron and Jerusalem for my children, so that I can cry for my children – and you G-d, the King of all kings, can stand by as idol worshippers slaughter Your own children?

You, G-d, who, as we say throughout our Rosh Hashanah prayers, are our father, our parent, and we are Your children, how can You not sacrifice your principles and ways for Your children? Just as I was able to sacrifice all for my children, cries Rachel, so can You!

Upon hearing these heart wrenching words, G-d immediately acquiesced to Rachel, as we just read: *So says the Lord: Refrain your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears, for there is reward for your work...they shall come back from the land of the enemy.*

This teaches us the power of a mother’s tears, of a parent’s sacrifices – and this is what we honor and recognize on Rosh Hashana, especially on the second day.

As parents we have special power today to implore of G-d to do for us what we have done for Him: Just as we have sacrificed for our children, we ask that G-d bless them with all the possible blessings, to protect them and help them grow and thrive, all in the best of health.

This is true also for those that not parents. Because every one who has taught or inspired another is consider like a “parent.”¹⁸

The first day of Rosh Hashanah teaches us how to create and birth. The second day teaches us how to overcome challenges, raise that which we have birthed, and how to sacrifice for the things that matter most.

10. A Mother’s Eternal Love (Optional Story)

[We bring you the full story. But we marked sections in brackets (and smaller typeface) which can easily be skipped]

“We received your check in the mail,” Rabbi Bochner dialed the hasty scribbled number on the back of the large, unidentified check made out to Bonei Olam. “Thank you very much.”

¹⁸ Sanhedrin 19b. Rashi Bamidbar 3:1.

[Bnei Olam was founded by a group of individuals who experienced the hardships of childlessness. Rabbi Shlomo Bochner, one of the founders of this organization, has developed a strong and dedicated network of doctors and fertility centers across the world, enabling them to offer unsurpassed medical and financial assistance to all applicants. The costs, however, are staggering.

“It was my pleasure.” The thick-accented voice indeed seemed pleased.

“I was wondering, what is it about?”

“What it is about? This is a check. I do not understand what you are asking me.”

“Yes, but the cheque was made out for \$10,000! And there was no name on the check.”

“Ah, why would I need my name on the check? This is a donation. I am not looking for honor, for great awards, you know. I just want to give, that’s all.”

Shlomo’s curiosity was piqued.]

“But tell me, sir, what is the reason that you sent us such a large donation?”

“This is my appreciation to G-d!” The elderly man said, his tone rising an octave, his joy obvious. “Let me tell you a story.”

World War II spread its wings over the Jewish communities like an angry-looking eagle. The inhabitants of the once-vibrant towns and shtetls -- which until recently had bustled with life -- sat huddled together within the walls of the ghettos; some of them hurrying through quiet alleyways feverishly planning escape, others trembling in fear. All of them dreading the frightful actions called “Judenaussiedlung,” wherein the Gestapo would round up men, women, even children, and dump them into waiting trucks like piles of rags.

[As Gershon would lie in bed at night, with eyes open, unable to sleep out of hunger and fear, he would listen to his brother, Shimon, lying beside him, groaning in his sleep. He would listen to the quiet murmurings of his parents and he would feel his heart-beat thumping in his throat. Lately, people were disappearing off the streets, with only a handful returning badly beaten, broken and bent from pain and humiliation. One sad incident followed another and terrible rumors were spreading throughout the ghetto.

Mornings were no better, as everybody walked around the crowded apartment as though walking on eggshells. The other families crammed into their tiny apartment were busy preparing hideouts underneath the stairwell, in the attic, and in closets. Some had even ventured to run to the nearby forests, but were barred by soldiers and policemen stationed all around the city.]

Fear lurked in every corner; deportation was imminent. An action had taken place in the nearby town. A cloud of worry had enveloped Mama, who had a premonition that the family would be separated. Her tired eyes set deep within her worried face, seemed to recede even more with each passing day.

Suddenly Mama approached her children Gershon and Shimon. Gershon felt her light touch on his shoulder, and out of the corner of his eyes, he noticed Mama lovingly patting Shimon’s head. Shimon’s large saddened eyes stared up at her. Slowly he turned to face his mother.

Mama opened her mouth to say something, then shook her head and closed it. She tried again. “Gershon, Shimon,” she whispered with sobs choking her voice. She paused for a moment to pull herself together. “I want you to realize that it is very likely that we will be separated from each other,” she said and then lifted her hands in the air. “Maybe even forever.”

[Gershon couldn’t hear it. Something inside him urged him to turn on his heels and flee. With all his being he wanted to run from

these terrible words. But he did not run. There was nowhere to run from the awful truth. Gershon remained frozen in place. With his eyes, he begged Mama to say it wasn't so, to say that the danger would pass. Life would soon return to the way it was, and once again he would be standing at the door, the lunch packed by Mama in his hand. And Mama would wish him a day full of success.

But Mama didn't seem to share his mental picture.]

Standing stoically in her usual regal manner she continued talking. "My dear children, when the Gestapo come and get us, I do not know what will be. One thing I ask of you. Please take care of each other."

Gershon stood erect, not daring to utter a single word lest the dam on his oceans of tears break loose. Shimon couldn't look at Mama. His chin quivered and there was a noticeable tremor in his hands. But Mama, her gentle blue eyes reflecting so much sorrow, did not break down.

"Gershon," she whispered, "if you manage to find a piece of bread, share it with Shimon." Gershon nodded solemnly.

Mama turned to Shimon, "And Shimon, if you come across a drop of water, remember that Gershon is also thirsty."

Mama paused. She turned her eyes heavenward, whispering a prayer supplicating G-d to grant her children life. Gershon swallowed hard.

"Take care of each other, my dear children," Mama repeated. "Wherever you go, wherever you hide, take care of each other. This is what I ask of you. Do whatever you can, but do not separate!"

Things happened so suddenly afterwards. The Gestapo stormed their apartment and chased them out of their home and into the waiting trucks.

Gershon and Shimon held on to each other as they endured the worst of human cruelty. They never forgot their mother's parting words, and indeed they managed to stay together and to care for each other through the inferno of Treblinka and the evils of Bergen-Belsen.

Then they arrived to Auschwitz.

Mengele, may his name be blotted out, stood at the platform in his impeccable suit and shiny boots, casually swinging his finger to the right and to the left. For each person assigned to "Life," an S.S. guard would hurry to affix a red stamp on the forehead. Those fated for the gas chambers were not stamped.

The long line of suffering prisoners meandered slowly ahead. Broken, beaten and humiliated, but with a powerful desire to live, Gershon dragged his brother along. His heart pumped wildly. His dear brother Shimon, so scrawny and sickly, appeared half dead. He could hardly hold himself up. Would Shimon make it past the discerning gaze of this Angel of Death?

In a moment, all of Gershon's doubts vanished as the Nazi nonchalantly flicked his finger to the left...and then, before he could even think, it was his turn.

His mind numb, Gershon did not quite grasp that he had been slated to the right -- to life. "Take care of each other, my dear children," Mama repeated. "Wherever you go, wherever you hide, take care of each other." Like a shadow, he languidly followed his brother to the left side, before an S.S. guard shoved him to the right and brutally stamped his forehead with that red, telltale mark that separated him from his brother.

Tears welled up inside him, blocking his vision. He had promised his mother. They had been through so much together, caring for each others' wounds, splitting their morsels of food, and miraculously they had never been separated. How could he break his promise now?

Slowly, a plan began to take shape in Gershon's mind -- a dubious, daring plan, but it was a plan nonetheless -- built on unquenchable hope, inspired by a long-ago promise.

With a prayer in his soul and heart pummeling within his chest, Gershon hurried over to where his brother was standing. Fervently he kissed his brother's forehead. And then he kissed it again. Shimon stared blankly, apathetically, as his brother showered him with wet, sloppy kisses. Gershon appeared as though he was not aware of anything else going on around him. Like a man possessed, he kissed and kissed.

But from the corner of his eyes, Gershon remained on the lookout. When he was sure that the Nazi's weren't watching, he quickly pressed his forehead with the red mark granting him the right to live against Shimon's forehead. Satisfied, he backed up to inspect his handiwork. A red stamp now appeared on his brother's forehead. Wasting no time, he dragged his brother to the right, and not a moment too soon.

G-d was with him on that day.

"Both of us survived the war, Mr. Bochner; we were spared. No one else in our entire town survived."

He fell into a reflective silence. Shlomo Bochner, mesmerized by the story, remained motionless in his seat.

"Many years have passed since then. My brother is gone and I am already an old man. But I have no children.

"I sent you the money because I owe a debt of gratitude to G-d. I survived the war. I survived together with my brother! I want to help a couple who does not have children. I want a couple to experience the joy of having children."¹⁹

19 http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/716526/jewish/I-Kept-My-Promise-to-Mama-Even-in-Auschwitz.htm.

11. Conclusion: Raising the World

As parents we are entrusted with raising our children.

A mother and father will sacrifice everything for their children. And the biggest blessing a parent can ever have is to know and see her/his children taking care of one another.

We do this by making sacrifices for the things we love. It is much easier, cheaper, restful, and peaceful not to have children, just as it is much easier, cheaper, restful, and peaceful not to have a world. But we aren't born to sleep, be cheap, be at peace, or have it easy – for that we could have stayed in heaven.

As Rachel our mother and Abraham our father demonstrate to us, and embed within us – we raise healthy spiritual and physical children by influencing them with light, by showing them that we are willing to sacrifice everything for them, which in turn teaches them by example to dedicate and sacrifice themselves for each other, for their future families and for fulfilling their respective mission in this world.

So on this Rosh Hashana we raise our cups to the greatest unsung heroes in the world – to the parents in this room, to the parents in our community, to the parents in all communities, to parents all over the world.

On the birthday of the human race, we honor every birth and every sacrifice made for our children.

And in return, we can ask G-d to honor and bless our children, our families and all of us, with a *Kesiva V'chatima Tova* – A Happy and Sweet New Year!

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