

Sermon delivered on Yom Kippur 5777, October 11th, 2016, at Temple Israel of Boston

By Rabbi Matt Soffer

My Dear Carmel:

I must confess: it wasn't until you were born, when Caleb and I planted a garden in our backyard, that I learned that the word "parent" is more of a verb than a noun. Sure, I knew the basics of parenting, but gardening with Caleb taught me how much I have to learn—and how much you children have to teach.

Tradition teaches that actions mold character, and not the other way around. Our Torah describes our ancestors standing at the foot of Sinai accepting the Covenant, saying the words, "naaseh v'nishma—we will act and then we'll understand." Well, the Israelites who at some point wrote that story down were probably farmers. Perhaps what they really meant was, naaseh v'nishma- plant a garden, and you'll gain understanding.

Naaseh, v'nishma, working the earth, planting a garden, really does change the way we understand reality. Your brother and I spent hours laying down fresh soil, planting seedlings, dividing water between our cans, watering just the right parts of the soil to nourish the roots. We tended the garden, making sure the leaves and branches grew in the right directions. We hoped for the best, and the plants flourished. Flowers sprouted and then fruits appeared and ripened.

Planting, watering, and tending— this process caused us both to pay so much attention to the earth, the soil, the sun, the rain—the real world. You, children, are naturally amazed by the natural world. You see it for the glorious mystery that it is.

While planting our garden, Caleb asked me so many questions:

Why is the sun so bright?

Where do the crickets go during the day?

Why do we make shadows?

And I gave him the very best of the very first things that came to mind: the sun is so bright because that's where we get our energy. The crickets go underground in the day, like we go under sheets in the night. We make shadows because—hey, what's that over there, Caleb, a bird!

Why do we make shadows? My goodness, what to do with a question like that? Naaseh v'Nishma, plant a garden and you'll understand.

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While we were planting, watering, and tending our garden, we picked up food each week at Temple Israel's CSA. I found myself asking new questions to farmer Jim. Not quite as brilliant as Caleb's

questions, but the more I learned about how hard he and his wife Hannah were working, the better the food tasted.

While we were planting, watering, and tending our garden, Farmers Jim and Hannah told me about the drought that was hurting so many family farms. I told Caleb about the drought, but he didn't quite understand – because our water was working just fine, and the supermarket was so bright and filled with everything.

While we were planting, watering, and tending our garden, one day Caleb and I took a break to buy some tools off of Craigslist. We went to the house of a lady in West Roxbury—we walked up her stone steps to her front door. She appeared with her tools, I gave her a \$20, and before leaving I asked why she was unloading them. She pointed over to what I suppose used to be her garden. All we saw was a huge ugly pit, and in its shadow someone planted an oil pipeline.

While we were planting, watering, and tending our garden, she was mourning hers and begging to know: why do we make these shadows?

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My Dear Carmel, I must confess. There are questions that I cannot answer. I cannot tell you why, but I cannot tell you nothing at all. While we were planting, watering, tending, and hoping for the best, you were born. So, naturally, I thought a great deal about parenting.

I know in the Jewish tradition there are certain obligations of parents toward children and certain obligations of children toward parents – and they're not identical.

From parent to child, it's essentially about love. We read V'ahavta et Adonai Elohecha... V'shinantam l'vanecha v'dibarta bam.... that the parent is commanded to love God and to show that love by teaching children the right way to live. Loving God is tantamount to teaching children.

And as per the child's obligations, it's simple: "Cabeid et avicha v'et amecha. Honor your father and thy mother."

So I have to love you, and you have to honor me.

But my dear Carmel, I confess: I wonder, from time to time, why we need these as commandments. In my own life they seem self-evident. As a parent, from the instant you and Caleb were born, to borrow a phrase from Sefer Hamilton, "you knocked me, out I fall apart." I fell in love like never before. Really, your mother and I, I confess, we took a little while to fall in love — and by "a little while," I mean for me "little" and for her, "a while." But my tradition commands me to love you? That's like someone telling me to breathe.

Your end of the deal has puzzled me too. Carmel, you honor me every day your eyes light up. So the Torah of parent-child obligations didn't quite add up. But naaseh v'nishma, we planted a garden and I understood.

I saw Caleb show off our garden to your grandparents. "Look!" he said, "This is a tomato! And here, this is a cucumber! And that, over there, that's a baseball!" And then we visited your great-grandparents and saw their garden. Caleb watered it. And then, I understood: these parenting commandments are not just about the love from parent to child. Or the honor from child to parent. Naaseh v'nishma, plant a garden and you will understand: Tradition is deeply concerned over how we honor generations past, and how we love generations yet to be.

Why else would we refer to our ancestors in our prayers as Avoteinu v'Imoteinu, our fathers and mothers? My dad isn't Abraham the wanderer, he's Jim the dentist! And why else would God promise Abraham "more offspring than stars in the sky? Why else would the Talmud tell us "all generations stood at Sinai!" Honor your past and love your future: obligations so challenging that they need to be commanded.

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My Dear Carmel: It will be so hard for you to honor your past when you come to know how we have treated your natural world. It will be so hard for you to honor us—

Because we are making the world warmer and warmer. Like when you cry because the bath is too warm. That's what's happening to the world. We're turning up the faucet on the world; we're making it hotter.

We drive cars that eat up the earth and poison the sky.

We eat way too many animals – our beef consumption in particular is taking such a toll on nature.

Your brother loves to draw green forests, but we are chopping them down.

We waste way too much water.

We waste way too much of everything, really.

How will you honor us if we don't love your future? Plant a garden, and you, like Caleb, will understand enough to ask: Why do we make shadows?

My dear Carmel, you will meet a great many people who don't want to ask that question, why do we make shadows. They want to play make believe, that we only make light. A recent PEW study showed that most Americans distrust climate scientists. They think that the data boils down to whether you see the glass half full or half empty. But whether you see the glass half full or half empty doesn't change the reality that the glass has a certain amount of water and a certain amount of air—breathe the air, and drink the water while you can.

Denial of climate change, or indifference to it, is a sin that would have tormented our Prophets. Three weeks after you entered the world, Carmel, a great man died, a modern day prophet named Elie Wiesel. I had the honor of studying with him once, and the one thing he taught time and again was that indifference is the very opposite of what it means to love. So I cannot love you without planting a garden and telling you the truth.

This is the truth:

The Planet is as hot as its been in 115,000 years. To put that in perspective, in India, an increase in 1.8 degrees will lead to a 10% increase in mortality rate.

The amount of Carbon Dioxide in our atmosphere is as high as it's been since 3-5 million years ago. This is mostly due to burning fossil fuels, and most of the damage has been since 1980, the year that I was born.

I'm 36 now. When you're 36, you'll probably have at least 25% fewer kinds of living things around you.

Study after study show that as it gets hotter, society becomes more violent, diseases spread more rapidly, water rises, and extreme weather events will destroy more and more lives and cultures.

California's experienced its worst drought in more than 1,000 years.

Right now we are witnessing the aftermath of a Hurricane that took 1,000 lives in Haiti.

We cannot call these disasters altogether natural—they are increasingly manmade, and the first victims of the worst disasters are the most vulnerable among us—the poor, the elderly, racial and ethnic minorities. We planted a garden, and I cannot understand for the life of me: Why do we cast shadows upon our future? WHY?

It's not because we care more about creating a healthy economy—as Joseph did in those dark days of Egypt. We can't blame fiscal conservatism because our children will spend trillions of dollars protecting themselves, with upcoming ventures like erecting a huge wall to keep the fish out of lower Manhattan.

And it's not because we're too busy fixing other problems – because all other problems are enmeshed in this crisis. There is no social injustice that is removed from our ecosystem. We are a part nature, and nature is a part of our future. So why is it? Why do we cast shadows upon our future? Why we refuse to love our children?

It is as if we are reenacting the story of the binding of Isaac, playing the role of Abraham, with Isaac beneath us on the altar, staring into our eyes. But our eyes are glazed over. God's angel has been written out of the narrative. There's no ram in the thicket. There's just the shadow of a raised knife cast upon Isaac's innocent face.

This cannot be our story! If it is then we have dishonored the generations past who loved us enough to put the Torah in our arms. If this is our story, what right do we have to bless the Torah? Who are we to bless the Tree of Life? Our book of Promise, our book of Hope?

My dear Carmel, as my colleagues know, I am at times quick to admonish rabbis for preaching about themselves, for getting “too personal.” I really only share our family stories when they’re as much about the community as they are about us.

But I have to share this letter, and not just because we cannot wait for you to grow old enough to read it. I have to share this letter because your name, Carmel, means “God’s Orchard.” Your name is an image of Nature as we dream it to be. Your name belongs to the entire community of Israel: Our dear Carmel is our age-old dream of a place where life just grows, sprouting forth from the earth! Our Divine Orchard is an Edenic ecosystem, a natural world redeemed, transformed from the way it is now into the way that it has to be. Our Dear Carmel is our greatest hope.

Hope in Hebrew is “tikvah,” meaning a tense anticipation for something to come. But every word, like a tree, has a root. The root for tikvah means a cord or a thread. To hope is to stand at one end of the thread of time, believing that at the other end of the thread is a future that is not pre-determined but that we determine. To hope is to hold onto this thread and never let go.

I don’t know why we make shadows. But when the Prophet Micah imagined a world redeemed, he spoke of every human being sitting under his or her own vine and fig tree. When we sit under the shade of a tree, we don’t make shadows. The tree’s leaves absorb the sun’s light. We sit in shade. We breathe fresh air. We taste the sweetness of fruit. If we are to honor the past, if we are to love the future, we can never lose this dream—we can never lose hope.

Our world is hanging by a thread and human beings are the only ones who can save it. If. We. Change. T’shuvah, if we turn away, if we make things right. Naaseh v’nishma, you plant a garden, and you understand the value proposition of the High Holy Days: the reality that we still have a say in the story of our lives and the story of our future. The power of Yom Kippur is knowing that we can write ourselves into the Book of Life! The dread of Yom Kippur, is knowing how much really depends on teshuva, on change—on spiritual climate change.

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My Dear Carmel, it’s now the end of gardening season. We’ve harvested all our cucumbers, our tomatoes—and our baseballs. And looking at our garden, you might think it looks bleak. But those old plants that have died—they don’t get thrown away. We are going to mix them back into the earth. They’ll make the soil richer, and they become a part of next year’s garden. That’s their innate way of loving the future.

Maybe next year, you’ll be old enough to plant, water, and tend our garden with us. We have so much more to learn, and you have so much to teach.

May we plant a garden together. May it change us. And may its fruits sustain us for years to come.

Faithfully and Forever Yours, Dad