

Abraham must have been a seriously stressed out Dad to get to the point where he was ready to, as our daughter Eliza put it the other day, take a knife and chop up his son.

Was he simply psychotic, hearing a voice calling him to do something as stupid as burning a Koran or giving up American values to breed hatred?

Had he simply had it with Isaac who, while he seems like a mild-mannered, compliant child, perhaps had been infected by his older half brother Ishamel, the wild child who mocked everyone and everything and got kicked out of the house?

Or was he giving in to peer pressure, surrounded as he was by followers of the god Moloch, who believed that they needed to offer their first born child up on the altar to show their devotion and were taunting him that he wasn't man enough to sacrifice his only remaining son.

No matter what our analysis of the proximate causes, it seems that there's another deeper reason why he ended up following this path to the point of imperiling the life of Isaac. Abraham was fundamentally alone. He had broken away from the culture of his father, trying to establish a non-idolatrous way of life; he travelled to a place where he was a stranger, he parted with his nephew, sent off his older son to prevent fighting, and he had no peers, intellectually or spiritually, and the only village raising a child killed the first one to come along.

He snapped. Whether he was convinced he was right and ready to give up his son for something greater, or whether he was made at Isaac and/or the whole family

situation, or whether he got exhausted from trying to be different without any other buddies to help him out, he didn't have any male companions, other dads, with whom he could check in, get away from the stress, get some perspective, get some support for the right kind of values.

We parents today are seriously stressed too. Even if you are fortunate enough to have a well-behaved and compliant child, the demands of contemporary life, the fears for safety, the exponential increase in information, technology and pace, the absurd lengths a kid has to go to to try to get into a good college, not to mention the lack of jobs once one has finished college, the 39 year olds moving back in with parents now living in retirement villages, all of this adds up to the realization that stress is a constant companion. The rabbi discussing the question of when does life begin with the priest and the minister, saying, no, it doesn't begin at conception or birth, life begins when the kids go to college and the dog dies, well, that just doesn't hold anymore. As the Talmud says, little children won't let you sleep, big children won't let you live. Or, as Fran Lebowitz put it, Ask your child what he wants for dinner only if he is buying.

It is impossible to get through parenthood without a serious case of kishke twisting, mind-bending, soul steaming, hair-raising angst. Still, I feel about being a parent like Woody Allen does about life in the beginning of Annie Hall: It is difficult and brutish, and much too short.

And so it was that this summer, I picked up a book called The Council of Dads. Bruce Feiler, author of Walking the Bible and a number of other books based on a career of walking and reporting, found that he might never walk on his own two legs again, much less survive to see his three year old twin girls grow up.

“As you know, I have learned that I have a seven-inch cancerous tumor in my left femur. The afternoon I first heard the diagnosis I was standing on York Avenue in Manhattan. I sat on a stoop, telephoned Linda, called my parents, and wept. I went to get some crutches, stumbled home, lay down on my bed, and stared at the sky for several hours imagining all the ways my life would change.”

Then his girls came into the room, danced around, tumbling and laughing, and he crumbled. “I kept imagining all the walks I might not take with them, the ballet recitals I might not see, the art projects I might not mess up, the boyfriends I might not scowl at, the aisles I might not walk down.”

A few days later, Bruce came up with a way to deal with the possibility that the girls might lose their dad. He made a list of men from different parts of his life, who know him, share his values, taught him and traveled with him, who could help be, as a team, a council that would in effect, be the girls dad. He started composing the letter that opens the book:

“Will you help be their dad? Will you listen in on them? Will you answer their questions? Will you take them out to lunch every now and then? Will you go to a soccer game if you’re in town? Will you watch their ballet moves for the umpteenth time? When they get older, will you indulge them in a new pair of shoes? Or buy them a new cell phone, or some other gadget I can’t even imagine right now? Will you give them advice? Will you be tough as I would be? Will you help them out in a crisis? Will you introduce them to somebody who might help one of their dreams come true? Will you tell them what I would be thinking? Will you tell them how proud I would be? Will you be my voice?”

I sincerely hope that none of us will be in a situation like his, but even without being in such a dire situation, it seems like many men feel isolated and alone, especially in their parenting challenges. So the idea of beginning a Congregation Beth Shalom Council of Dads has come to the fore, for the following reasons, which I'll describe in greater detail below.

- A) None of us has all the answers; we need the wisdom of a collective
- B) None of us can handle every situation; we need the comfort of a collective
- C) None of us can be there all the time; we need the presence of a collective

Before articulating these issues further, I just want to say to the women and to those who are not parents, first of all, when the council of dads meets, G-d willing on a monthly basis during Sunday school, Kit Kirkpatrick, who has been teaching Enneagram and Kabbalah at the synagogue, will hold sessions for women to examine family and relationships. Those who are not parents are also part of the process, part of the village, part of the community – when we all look back at the teachers, coaches, family friends, aunts and uncles who have been essential for us in our lives, we know this isn't just about parents. It is really about all of us feeling connected and supported, about our congregation as the community within which no one need ever walk alone.

None of us has all the answers – Abraham thought he did. Whether it's about faith, as with Abraham, or about philosophies or ideas of what a child should do with their lives, we have to be careful about imposing our will and threatening the core of our children. When desire blinds us to the needs or integrity of our individual children, something is off. At the same time, there are values we insist

on our children following, and the need for discipline and boundaries is essential. Sometimes, when a great deal of rigor is needed, the relationship can become strained. Isaac did not return home with Abraham after this incident – but he wasn't alone, because an angel of God intervened. Angel also means messenger, and in our community, each of us has the capacity to step in and support both parent and child, to be an angel and a messenger when things get rough.

Additionally, it's been 200 years since it was even theoretically possible for one person to know everything about all the major fields of human knowledge, and the information explosion continues to expand exponentially. We need each other and we need our children to be exposed to many facets of life, and within our community we are messengers for each other regarding areas of interest we don't necessarily have. As the traditional proverb goes, don't limit a child to your own learning, for he was born in another time.

None of us can handle every situation – Isaac wasn't able to. Isaac, was literally blind to who his children were and ended up raising Esau, who didn't have the foresight nor piety to inherit the legacy of Abraham and Isaac. How could it be that one of Isaac's sons, Esau, went off the proper path? After all, both parents, Rebecca and Isaac, were righteous, and the home environment was a proper Jewish one?

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch answers that a clue is provided by the verse (Genesis 25:27) that says that the brothers Esau and Jacob grew up, and only then it indicates that Esau was a hunter while Jacob dwelt in the tent (of study [according to a rabbinic story]). It is clear, according to Hirsch, based on this verse, that both Esau and Jacob, born as twins, were raised in precisely the same environment and with the same methodology.

Rebecca and Isaac raised both of their children identically, and that was their mistake. They did not take into account that Esau possessed a different personality from Jacob and needed his own special environment in order to be raised to become a righteous human being. Esau rebelled against this upbringing, which did not suit his personality and temperament and turned to the evil path. Had Isaac and Rebecca realized Esau's unique personality traits early on, they could have raised him differently and he could also have become righteous like Jacob.

So Isaac, despite the evidence to the contrary, still wanted to give Esau the blessing because Esau could hunt down meat and Isaac liked the taste of game. How often do we see our kids as who we need them to be instead of who they really are? How often do we value our kids because of what they do for us instead of how they become who they most need to be? One need go no further than any junior athletic league to get the painful answer to that question. I saw in the Bee last week a letter to the advice columnist from a 16 year old who was burned out from gymnastics, but her mother said, I didn't get up all those early mornings and give up weekends for you to quit when you are in sight of a college scholarship.

If Abraham surrendered too much to God, then Isaac surrendered too much to himself. And while that might have been a healthy corrective for him, given how he was raised, it didn't create the best experience for his sons and their subsequent relationship. So if we want kids who love both themselves and their siblings, we need to love them for who they are, not how for much they fulfill our own needs.

None of us can be there all the time – Jacob's sons head out into the fields to tend to the flocks, and he's not always there to observe. Of course, he helped bring the

art of sibling rivalry to a new level and created the conditions in which the rivalry plays out, but the point is, you can't always watch what the kids are doing.

Moreover, we all know from our own lives that there were times when we had to rebel and separate from our parents in order to become our own persons; and yet if we were lucky there were other adults in our lives who could listen and give constructive guidance.

There's another reason why we need a council, and it has to do with resisting the influences of popular culture. While I love America and being American, I also love Judaism and being Jewish. We are such a small number and the presence of the Jewish values Rabbi Nancy was discussing last night, humility, modesty, restraint, are hardly the messages our kids are getting. While peers play a larger role in influencing behavior as children grow, we also know that if we surrender our children to whatever happens to be popular in American culture, we won't be happy either. Yet we cannot do it alone. How many times have we heard, but so and so's mom let's them eat ice cream three times a day and go to any movies they can get into and play video games all day long and talk about the opposite gender any way they want, etc., etc. When we can create a sense of shared values that we can help each other reinforce, we can resist the tide and raise mensches, not just kids running after the crowd to do whatever.

So in the end, Abraham finds a ram and sacrifices it instead of Isaac. An angel, a messenger shows up so that he's not alone. We can show up for each other and not be alone. If you're interested in helping to create the Council of Dads, email me, rabbidavid@cshalom.org, and/or let's talk on Sunday during Religious School and find a time to talk further.

We can support our children in being unique, finding, as the Talmud says, the blessing they are meant to bring into the world, and a path that is full of meaning and good values. Someone once wrote: I once complained to my father that I didn't seem to be able to do things the same way other people did. Dad's advice? "Don't be a sheep. People hate sheep. They eat sheep." We don't want our children sacrificed for our needs, and we don't want them entangled in the thicket of peer pressure. Let's join forces and help them find the path to success and joy together.