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The Sayings of Our Mothers, 1960.

THE SAYINGS OF THE MOTHERS

The Temple
May 8, 1960

Rabbi Daniel Jeremy Silver

Teachers expect the unexpected, and the class seldom disappoints. With age we become creatures of habit. Like Pavlov's dogs, our responses are conditioned. But the child retains an originality, a creativity of spirit, a refreshing unpredictability.

I am thinking now of a Confirmation examination of several years ago. The question required an explanation of each of the Ten Commandments. Most of the answers were correct and straightforward, but one paper explained the Fifth Commandment, "Honor thy father and thy mother", in this fashion: This means that we are to be grateful to our parents for raising us ^{according} to the best of our abilities." And we are amused, but I was also impressed, because I think that, intentionally or not, this young person put his finger on a truth which our age has all too often, and to its hurt, forgotten.

We think of the child-parent relationship in terms of the responsibilities of the parent. We think of child development in terms of child engineering. We speak of child-rearing, but very seldom of a child's growing up of himself. We think that there is a right way to raise our children, a right way which is equally applicable to all parents, and that any failing of our child to achieve in maturity the goals and the standards that we have set for him in our dreams is a failure on our part. For today we not only accept the responsibility of bearing children, but we bear the responsibility of their

adult achievement throughout our lives.

Indeed, I sometimes think that our factory civilization has borrowed the terms of mass production and attempted to apply these to the parent-child relationship. When we have a child we immediately consult the management experts, the firm of Gesell and Spock, and they tell us how we are to establish the production line which will take the raw material, a baby, and transform this raw material into the finished product, a competent, fine adult. We have our own form of quality control, the various diagnostic tests, the intelligence tests, the vocational tests which counsellors in the school systems give for us. We attend executive management training courses sponsored by child guidance centers and parent-teacher discussion groups. We receive quarterly and semi-annual statements -- report cards, they're called -- which enable us to check up on the profit and loss, the movement and growth of our child toward becoming the finished product which we expect.

And when there is some breakdown in this system, when there are discipline problems or school problems or emotional problems we rush to the experts; we tinker with a program of discipline here or there, and we presume that all is well. And if it is not, well, the experts have an expertese of psychological jargon which can always rationalize and explain any failing, and the failure is always ours, the parents' -- never the philosophies, never the system, never the psychology which we presumed to be following.

Professor Jacques , the very capable critic of American life, said very succinctly a few weeks ago that American parents are suffering from fitters. Now, parenthood is always a traumatic experience. The Talmud already speaks of the , the heartache of raising children. There is no easy way to raise a child. But I believe firmly that we in America, because we presume too much, because we presume that our children are infinitely plastic and malleable, that they are clay in the hands

of parent-sculptors. Because we assume this we take upon ourselves an added responsibility, a responsibility we cannot discharge, a responsibility we cannot discharge because God has not covenanted with any mother and father that if they invest so much time, so much intelligence, so much tenderness in their child, their child will become a fine adult. It simply is not so. It is one of the vagaries -- the unfortunate vagaries -- of life which an adult must learn to accept.

The apple does fall sometimes very far from the tree.

We are standing here on Mothers' Day. The relationship of a mother to a child is of the most intimate of natures, intimate more than that of the father to the child. Why so? Largely because a mother is with the child from waking into sleep. A mother understands instinctively, through her intimate experience in relationship, the emotional subtleties of her child, her child's uniqueness, his personality, that which makes him different from every other child, the reason that all the generalizations of pedagogues and psychologists fail in the immediate instance of raising her child. And knowing this, she tailors, she chooses, she adapts the psychology, philosophy, the religion of her day for the benefit of her child.

Recently, an Auckland, New Zealand newspaper polled a series of mothers as to their teachings, their experience in child raising. How are we to train our children to steer past the dangers of this day? -- this was the question. And the best answer, the answer of every good mother: We must not stuff their ears with the wad of our convictions nor tie them to the masts of our principles. Each child's soul is a thing apart and must realize itself. To force it into certain channels, however good, is to impoverish it and to impede its growth. It is ours to teach it to be strong, to choose the best. It is ours to advise, to warn, to guide, and to encourage. We cannot expect

to hand down our accumulated worldly wisdom and to have it accepted by our young people without question or without test. We must not stuff their ears with the wads of our convictions.

Abraham Lincoln's mother was an indifferent mother. His father was temperamental and autocratic. They did not follow any of the tried and true philosophies of child rearing.

A young mother came to me recently and complained that she had followed every maxim of the book -- and by the book she meant some family life manual, not the Bible -- she had followed every maxim of the book, and her child was still sucking his thumb and having nightmares in his sleep. And each and every one of us, my friends, knows of conscientious, good, intelligent parents, loving parents, dedicated parents, who have had children who have exhibited none of their fine qualities of character.

This being so, let us at least relax in our parenthood. Let us at least cease to have the jitters, to gorge ourselves on that plethora of advice and counsel which streams into every newspaper and magazine, telling us exactly the right way to raise our child. In raising a child the important thing is not amassing knowledge about child psychology but in amassing knowledge about your child, his personality, his needs, his sensitivities, his talents and his limitations. Perhaps I can illustrate this truth in another way. We read together this morning from the "Sayings of the Fathers", that wonderful book of good advice, that anthology of rabbinic wisdom which is contained in our Mishnah. A teacher was reading in one of our classes the "Sayings of the Fathers", and she commented on the compactness of the work -- so much in six slender chapters, so much wisdom, so much knowledge, and so much insight. And from the back of the room, the epichorus, the inevitable skeptic and cynic in every class, piped up, "You know, I bet if they ever collected the sayings of the mothers the printing presses would still be running."

I cannot deny that our women are voluble, and sometimes garrulous, but a strange fact emerges if we search out our tradition. Look through your Bible; look through your Talmud and your Midrash and your musar literature, the great ethical literature of the Middle Ages, and excise from it all the didactic literature, all the advice on pedagogy and child rearing attributed to mothers, and you will not be able to fill a single chapter equal in length to one chapter of the "Sayings of the Fathers".

Indeed, I searched out our Bible, and I found only nine verses of its many tens of thousands, dealing even indirectly with a mother's heart to heart talk with her child, the arched eyebrow and the pointed finger of guilt. These nine verses emerge in the last chapter of the Book of Proverbs. They are attributed to the mother of a certain King Lemuel, who is otherwise unknown to us. A tradition has it that King Lemuel is none other than King Solomon, that the mother here is Bathsheba, and that the occasion for this mother's lecture on dereliction and on duty is this: Solomon married, rather late in his life, the beautiful daughter of the Egyptian Pharaoh. He brought her to Jerusalem, and after the wedding festivities he spent the night in carousal and merriment, and as might be expected, not unnaturally, he slept long the next morning. There was only one difficulty -- in those early, primitive days the only key to the sanctuary in which the morning sacrifices and the morning prayers were offered hung in the bedchamber of the king, and none was willing to rouse the king from his sleep on this, his wedding night. And so that day the sacrifices went unoffered and the prayers were not celebrated. It became a matter then of public scandal, this sleeping late of the king, and his mother, as mothers will, not wasting the opportunity, hastened to his side with these words of advice:

O my son, give not thy strength unto women,
Nor thy ways to that which destroyeth kings.
It is not for kings to drink wine:
Nor for princes to say: 'Where is strong drink?'
Lest they drink, and forget that which is decreed,
And pervert the justice due any petitioner.
Leave strong drink for him that is mortally ill,
Leave wine for the bitter of soul;
Let them drink, let them forget their misery
And remember their poverty no more.
Rather, O king, open thy mouth for the dumb,
In the cause of all such as are appointed to destruction.
Open thy mouth, judge righteously,
Plead the cause of the poor and the needy.

Now you will find in our Bible, my friends, many noble women, women of great virtue, women of great courage, women of profound, selfless love, a Miriam devoting her days to the protection of the infant Moses, a Hannah pouring out in song her gratitude for her infant son, a Deborah encouraging the weak-hearted men of her day to fight against the venging enemy, a Ruth speaking perhaps the greatest words of love and loyalty spoken in all literature. You will find great women, women of valor, in our Bible. But you will not find that these women felt it necessary to set down their techniques of child raising, their philosophies of child pedagogy and child development.

Why so? Is it that the status of women was so low in those primitive times that no one bothered to listen to them. Not so. In the beginning of the Book of Proverbs we read that the wise son is advised by his father to heed his instruction, but to give ear equally to the teachings of his mother, "for these are a chaplet of grace around his head and a pendant of beauty around his neck". Is it that the women of those days were inferior people, that they spoke nonsense not worth listening to? Again in the poem of the woman of valor we read that "she opens her mouth with wisdom; the law of kindness is always on her tongue." Our mothers -- the mothers of Israel were,

as our contemporary mothers, women of intelligence, women of insight, women who knew how to raise sons and raise daughters.

I suspect that the silence of the mothers is due to a profound insight, to understanding. The woman knew her son. She was aware of the total personality of her daughter. She sensed every emotional reaction of her child. She knew her child's limitations and his capacities. She spoke to the child -- to the child directly, and what she spoke was intimate, intimately related to the inner secrets of the child's life. Her words were treasured up by her sons and by her daughters, but they were never intended to be generalizations on standards as to how to raise a child. A father must set down words. The press of business, the necessity of earning a living forces us out of the house during most of the waking hours of our children. Our hopes, our standards, our experience can be communicated to them only through the medium of words -- the heart to heart talk, the ethical will, the letter. But not so with the mother. A man may have the highest standards of probity in his business, but his son will not see his father in his business relationships. But a son will see his mother -- all of her housewifely beauty -- for they are together, they are one. A mother teaches charity when she is great-hearted to all those in her house. A mother teaches love by giving love. A mother teaches gentleness by the quality of her speech. A mother teaches understanding by the clearness of her sight. A mother teaches self-discipline by the manner in which she conducts herself. A mother teaches by example, directly, immediately, effectively. And more than this -- a mother knows what must be taught to the child, because a mother knows her child.

There is an old Yiddish proverb to the effect that there is no good death and no bad mother, and if we except those women who bear children but do not mother them, I think ~~that~~ there is a great deal of truth in this proverb,

because the mother, knowing her child, knows better than any expert outside the home what that child needs -- to be pushed, to be left alone; to be disciplined strictly, to be given a great deal of freedom and responsibility; to be handled frequently, or to be allowed to go his own way; to be exposed to all the cultural opportunities of life, or to be allowed to set his own pace of growth and of learning. Some children must be pushed, others must not. Some children must be handled, others must not. Some children have great gifts, qualities of genius which must be developed, and others do not. And this the mother uniquely knows. This the mother is uniquely qualified to develop in the child.

Silence of the mothers is born of profound wisdom, and if we reverse this and look to the inability of the modern mother often to trust her own common sense, the need for the modern mother to write article after article and book after book on how she raises her children and how others should raise their children, perhaps we can understand this need by understanding our age. For technology, the automobile, labor saving devices, prosperity have broken the age old quarantine which immobilized the woman in her home. The modern woman is a free agent; not so her grandmother or her great-grandmother. She determines how her time is to be allocated, whether she will work outside the home, how much of civic activity she will engage in outside the home, what social activities will be hers outside the home. And many modern mothers no longer know their children. They no longer have this intimate relationship which allows them to sense, to know the uniqueness of their child, because you cannot accept when your child is young every bridge, luncheon, and afternoon tea, every golf date, every bowling league match, and be with your child when your child needs you and know your child as your child needs to be known.

No one would put our mothers back into their homes. But the pathetic urgency with which our mothers are turning to the child experts for guidance

testifies, it seems to me, to only one truth, the truth that they no longer know their children. They are no longer one with them. And many children will grow up to be fine adults despite neglect, but many children have not the emotional balance instinctive to them. And the child neglected, even if he grows into a competent adult, will go his way alone, and will not return love for love not given, time for time not spent.

If there is any secret to the raising of children it is time, not technique. It is patience, not psychology. It is knowing your child, not knowing all that the world knows about child psychology and child development. It is being a mother, not an expert. It is being the mother, father of your child.

Where there is love and where there is devotion, where there is good sense and where there is sensitivity there is a good parent. Several decades ago there was a very popular Armenian philosopher and poet, Kahlil Gibran, who said much of what I have been trying to say this morning:

Your children are not your children.
They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself.
They come through you but not from you,
And though they are with you yet they belong not to you.

You may give them your love but not your thoughts,
For they have their own thoughts.
You may house their bodies but not their souls,
For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow, which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams.
You may strive to be like them, but seek not to make them like you.
For life goes not backward nor tarries with yesterday.
You are the bows from which your children as living arrows are sent forth.

The Archer sees the mark upon the path of the infinite, and He bends you with His might that His arrows may go swift and far.
Let your bending in the Archer's hand be for gladness;
Even as He loves the arrow that flies, so He loves also the bow that is stable.

Be a stable bow to your children. Invest your time and your good sense in them. Be natural, not studied, toward them. Understand them -- their needs, their personalities, and their hopes. For in such understanding lies the secret of being a good parent, the secret of the fulfillment of the hopes and prayers that on such a day as this each of us carries deep in his own heart.

Amen.



~~And a woman who held a babe against her bosom said, Speak to us of children.~~

~~And he said:~~

Your children are not your children.

They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself.

They come through you but not from you,

And though they are with you yet they belong not to you.

You may give them your love but not your thoughts,

For they have their own thoughts.

You may house their bodies but not their souls,

For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow, which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams.

You may strive to be like them, but seek not to make them like you.

For life goes not backward nor tarries with yesterday.

You are the bows from which your children as living arrows are sent forth.

The Archer sees the mark upon the path of the infinite, and He bends you with His might that His arrows may go swift and far.

Let your bending in the Archer's hand be for gladness;

~~For~~ even as he loves the arrows that flies,

so He loves also the bow that is stable.

Proverbs

31

~~What, my son? and what, O son
of my womb?~~

~~And what, O son of my vows?~~

O, my son,
Give not thy strength unto

~~somen,~~

Nor thy ways to that which de-
stroyeth kings.

~~It is not for kings, O Lemuel, It is
not for kings to drink wine:~~

Nor for princes to say: 'Where is
strong drink?'

Lest they drink, and forget that
which is decreed,

And pervert the justice due to any *petitioner*
~~that is afflicted.~~

Please
Give strong drink ~~unto~~ *for* him that is *mortally ill,*

~~ready to perish,~~

Please
And wine ~~unto~~ *for* the bitter in of

soul;

Let ~~him~~ *them* drink, ~~and~~ *let them* forget ~~his~~ *their* ~~poverty,~~ *miserly*

And remember ~~his~~ *their* ~~miserly~~ *poverty* no

more.

Rather, O king,
Open thy mouth for the dumb,

In the cause of all such as are appointed to destruction.

Open thy mouth, judge righteously,

~~and~~ plead the cause of the poor and *the* needy.



"How are we to train our children to steer past all the dangers of their hour? We must not stuff their ears with the wads of our convictions, nor tie them to the masts of our principles--each child's soul is a thing apart and must realize itself. To force it into certain channels, however good, is to impoverish it at least and to impede its growth. It is ours to teach it to be strong, to choose the best. It is ours to advise, to warn, to guide and encourage. We cannot expect to hand on our accumulated worldly wisdom and have it accepted by our young people without question or test."



I am thinking more of a confirmation examination soon. I
 think, a question requested an explanation of the 100 commandment
 most of the papers were turned forward, one was not, as explanation
 of some of the commandments "Honor thy father & mother" that
 definition was offered "that means that you should always
 be grateful to your parents for having raised you to be best of your
 ability."

~~2nd imp~~

[illegible][illegible]

Education is unique. Each parent child relationship is unique. Every home is unique. There are no universal laws which can take into account all these variables. Enjoining by children's uncertainty is all. Every father & mother knows what the concrete motives & the passions moved without they generally

A good parent concerns himself more with learning all he can about his child than concerning the philosophy of how well that he has brought to act toward his child. There is an old Jewish proverb to the effect that "There is no bad matter & no good deed" - a reflection of the fact that every man who says that one - matter has been sudden and does not matter then - that person too may well be a saint of truth - a matter which shows itself by a person's attitude toward his child - knows he child - he knows his individuality - he personally - which matter must be kept & which matter must be broken to help him grow strong & straight. Between a mother & a child there is no barrier of philosophy
Let me illustrate this from one condition:



The whole body of Proverbs can be considered as a manual of family living and it is good advice - as well as a measure of our own ~~family~~ ^{family life} - but I feel that the relative silence of our nation - and ourselves to ourselves - shows perhaps a higher wisdom.

Oh how perhaps a higher order
A modern matter put at rest within an answer to an interior
also observed

2. second
"We must not shy away from the fact that we are given a commission,
not to them to the work of a principle - and that's what
is a thing of spirit and must really stay. To put it into
action, however, means good, it is a principle of all laws
and to include the principle, it is even to be a thing
to show the heart, it is even to admit, to win, to gain,
& encourage. We can not expect to have a much more
solidly established it cannot be a matter of sufficient question or
best.

[Handwritten signature]

It has been argued that the silence of Jewish mothers is a reflection on their lack of identity - not so - It is not an identity which the women lack. It is a lack of the mother's role of her father - the lack of any of her mother for her mother is a chapel of ignorance which has been and a great pendant which has been.

Others have suggested that the silence of Jewish nations reflect their ancient alienation, especially Jewish as suggested even to me. I would not reduce the silence to simply not listening to - but a withdrawal from the world, a refusal to participate in the world. I would like to see the Jewish people, whose names were on the wall of Jerusalem, to be the ones who were the first to open their eyes and see the world as it is. I would like to see the Jewish people, who were the first to see the world as it is, to be the ones who were the first to see the world as it is.

They know that the teacher is to complete a unit, and that the teacher is to be a guide, not a dictator. They know that the teacher is to be a guide, not a dictator. They know that the teacher is to be a guide, not a dictator.

Think for a moment on this

For the first time motherhood has come to seem an unconnected relationship to some measure. Why not? Is it not true to say the average American mother spends less time with her child than any other mother in history. 12% of our mother have full time employment. Modern technology - refrigerators, the microwave kitchen, & the automobile have freed ourselves the ~~house~~ ^{household} ~~quantities~~ ^{quantities} needed kept grandmother & her mother-in-laws, & know of no statistics - but they seem self-evident - a modern mother knows her own children less well than a mother known by her mother.

She knows to dispute and accept when a child is because she has not learned to her offspring & because she is not alone enough to learn to recognize their differing personalities - whether generalization of the spirit can not be avoided. When your children are young you can not be shy or easily out of your house & at the same time intensely involved in your children's lives, married and the advice piled up about child's welfare can not make up for the knowledge learned by experience.



