



*Parshat Yitro*  
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**Kvell**  
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Once upon a time there was a woman named Olivia who was married to her husband Lee. They lived in Los Angeles in a neighborhood known as Pacific Palisades. They were blessed to have two sons. The family joined a Conservative synagogue in west L.A. named Adat Shalom. Both boys went to the religious school, and they both celebrated their Bar Mitzvah there. There is a picture of the pious young lads, both wearing tallesim, flanked by their proud parents, in front of the *aron kodesh*, the holy ark. Both boys have Hebrew names. The older brother is Gedalia Yitzchak, the younger brother is Mendel.

In their middle school years, these young lads asked their parents: Mom, Dad, can we play tackle football? The parents said you can't, it will interfere with your Bar Mitzvah lessons. The boys persisted: after our Bar Mitzvah, can we please play tackle football? The parents said, we'll see.

After their Bnei Mitzvah, both sons played tackle football for the Pacific Palisades Dolphins.

At first, Olivia was concerned that her boys would get hurt. But "then I realized it was the other players I should be worrying about." Both boys were well over 6 feet, bigger, stronger, sturdier by far than any other players on the field. Their mother observed: "They were like trucks hitting small cars. And I started to kind of feel like maybe this was their destiny."

Roll the film forward, both sons, Geoff and Mitch Schwartz, become offensive linemen in the NFL. When Mitchell Schwartz was drafted by the Cleveland Browns with the 37<sup>th</sup> overall

pick, the Browns' second round draft choice, Cleveland fans were skeptical. Mitchell Schwartz? Sounds like a CPA, not a football player.

But Mitchell Schwartz turned out to be not only a football player, but a football star. While his brother Geoff had a journeyman career, Mitchell Schwartz starts for the Kansas City Chiefs. He protects their star quarterback Patrick Mahomes. He opens up holes for their running backs. In a brutal sport where injury is a constant reality, he has never missed a game. In this past year's playoffs, including their victory in the Super Bowl, Mitchell Schwartz, Mendel from Adat Shalom, was the single highest rated NFL player, even rated above their star quarterback.

Mitch's father Lee was asked: what do you think when you see your sons play football? His answer was perfect. He said, "I just kvell."

The Oxford dictionary definition of kvell is to be extraordinarily pleased, to be bursting with pride.

Now it is easy to kvell if your son is 6'5", 320 pounds, and just starred in the Super Bowl, which his team won. But there are few Temple Emanuel families whose children are offensive linemen in the NFL. How do the rest of us kvell? It turns out that the secret sauce for kvelling is a complex recipe with two ingredients that are in creative tension with one another. Both of these ingredients are brought out in our reading this morning about God giving us the Torah at Sinai.

The first ingredient is the celebration of diversity, the affirmation of multiple types of talent and personality. In his classic *The Healer of Shattered Hearts*, David Wolpe cites a rabbinic teaching that all who stood at Sinai understood the meaning of revelation each in their own different way. Intellectuals got ideas. Spiritual people got feeling. Musical people got

music. Mellow people got mellow. Intense people got intensity. God spoke to every person in a way they could understand and act on.

One size does not fit all for revelation, and one size does not fit all for parenting. In his classic Far From the Tree, about the differences between parents and children, Andrew Solomon famously begins his book with the observation that there is no such thing as reproduction, only production. When parents bring children into the world, or adopt children, they are not bringing into the world a clone but an independent person with a mind of their own. The first ingredient in kvelling is being able to be truly happy that your child has found their thing, even if their thing is most definitely not your thing.

Shira and I recently finished watching the Netflix series Cheer, about the cheer team of Navarro Junior College in Texas. Navarro is a dynasty. Its team wins the national junior college cheer competition year after year. The series shows what it looks and feels like to be on an intense, and intensely successful, cheer squad. The sport demands amazing athleticism and profound trust among teammates who whirl and twirl and throw and catch each other. Cheer is physically dangerous as teammates can accidentally not catch one of the tumblers on their way down. Broken bones, and more, are not uncommon.

Why am I bringing up Cheer now? Because nobody who does cheer at Navarro, nobody, came from a family that did cheer. Every person found it on their own. It was their thing, not their parents' thing.

So the first part of kvelling is to see our children the way God saw the Children of Israel at the time of revelation. There is no one right way. There are multiple intelligences, infinite talents, and we celebrate our children figuring out who they want to be.

And yet, the kvell recipe is complex because it cannot only be about being happy for our children when they find their thing. For all of God's openness to diversity, the bottom line was that Sinai was about transmitting a tradition to the next generation with the hope and expectation that they would receive and live it.

Is it possible to do both? Is it possible to celebrate diversity? To be bursting with pride that our children turn out to be whoever they turn out to be? And also to affirm transmission of ideals that are important to you as a parent?

Just this week, a wonderful man in our community, Herb Epstein, was laid to his eternal rest at the age of 94. He was born in the United States to immigrant parents from Ukraine. He celebrated his Bar Mitzvah in 1939, in the shadow of Hitler, on the eve of World War II and the Shoah. Remarkably, when his adult children were going through his effects this week, they found a copy of his Bar Mitzvah sermon. And what he talked about, as a 13-year old, was that his parents are alive because America let them in. He is here and alive because our country welcomed his own family as refugees and gave them a home. And he says, at 13, in 1939, *I want to devote my life to doing the same thing for others*. Roll the film forward. He gets married. He has four children. He did not have the luxury of picking a career that fulfilled his passion. He worked for 40 years as a corporate attorney. He provided for his family even though the work did not advance ideals that were intrinsically compelling to him. When he retired, he wanted to devote the rest of his life to work that would be intrinsically compelling. And so for the last 30 years he devoted the entirety of his retirement to volunteering his legal expertise to help asylum seekers find a home here. At his funeral, one of his legal aide colleagues said that Herb Epstein, in retirement, had personally saved the lives and families of well over 1,000 people, all pro bono, all for free, all from the heart.

His four children are all different. Each entered their own field. One is an architect, a second is a professional theatre director, a third is a mathematics professor at Penn, a fourth is a professional musician. There is no such thing as reproduction, only production. Each person became who they were meant to become, which is the way it should be.

But at the same time, each of the four children observed that there was a through line, a consistent theme or motif, that united their father's life from the day of his Bar Mitzvah at age of 13 to the day he died at age 94. He devoted his life to this high ideal of taking care of the stranger and of paying forward the kindness that had saved his own family. All four children, all the grandchildren, are inspired to continue their father and grandfather's sacred work in their own way.

Yes to individuality. And yes to receiving, owning and living out sacred values from generation to generation.

When that happens, we can *all* kvell. Shabbat shalom.