



Rosh Hashanah, Day Two
2 Tishri 5775—September 26, 2014
When the Apple Falls Far From the Tree
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Usually, when we think of a 13-year old Jewish boy celebrating a religious milestone, we think of a Bar Mitzvah.

But that is not what happened to a Jewish boy named Aaron Lustiger, the son of Polish Jewish immigrants who had moved to France. At the age of 13 Aaron Lustiger converted to Catholicism, baptized by the Bishop of Orleans as Aaron Jean-Marie Lustiger. Why did he do it?

It was 1940. He was living in Vichy France. It was in part about survival. While his parents had to wear the badge, the newly Catholic Jean-Marie was able to hide. While his mother Gisele was deported to Auschwitz, where she died, Jean-Marie was able to live.

But, it was about more than just physical survival. Converting was something he had been thinking about for a few years. Between the ages of 10 and 12 he came across a Protestant Bible and felt drawn to it. He went into churches and found a deep peace and serenity.

So for his own complicated reasons, physical survival, his own spiritual quest, this young Jewish boy becomes a Catholic. His father Charles survives, irretrievably wounded, his wife perished, and his son converted. Not only is his son a Catholic, but he becomes a frum Catholic. He studies for the priesthood and becomes a priest. Then a vicar. Then the Bishop of Orleans, returning to the place and to the position that enabled his Catholic journey to begin. He comes to the attention of Pope John Paul II, who promotes him to the Archbishop of Paris, and then finally a Cardinal. The son of Polish Jewish immigrants to France became the head of the

Catholic church in France—the leader of France’s 45 million Catholics—a position he holds *for 25 years*.

And what did his Jewish father think about all this?

It’s complicated. The implausible but true story of the Jewish Cardinal is related in a movie called “The Jewish Cardinal,” a snippet of which we will be watching tonight at Selichot services. Jewish father and Catholic son were still in relationship. The father never could accept his son’s Catholicism. He tried to have the conversion annulled, to no avail. As his son kept getting promoted, the father would go to the ceremonies and observe from the back row, and then would not stay for Kiddush. He was there, but not there. He did what he could to be supportive, but what he could do was limited and a source of pain and not joy.

The latent tensions come into sharp relief as the father lay dying. He asks his son to come to his bedside. He says to his son. I named you Aaron, not Jean Marie. Your mother died in Auschwitz. To me you will always be Jewish. I have one request for you. When I die, I would like you to say Kaddish at my grave. Kaddish. *Yitgadal v'iytkadash shmah rabbah*. Say those words. It matters to me.

Meanwhile, Cardinal Lustiger is told by his Catholic colleagues, fellow archbishops and Cardinals, that a shepherd cannot be too unlike his flock. Since his Catholic flock does not say Kaddish, how can the leader of the Catholic Church in France say Kaddish?

At last his father dies, the son is at the gravesite, and the moment of truth arrives. The contradictory truths of his life are clashing in his head. His father: You are Jewish. Say *Yitgadal v'iytkadash*. His fellow Catholic Archbishops. You are Catholic. How can you say Jewish prayers?

The story of Aaron Lustiger who grows up to become Cardinal Jean-Marie Aaron Lustiger is extreme in so many ways. The historical circumstances—Nazi Germany and Vichy France—are extreme. The choice that the young boy made to convert is extreme. The fact that his mother died in Auschwitz is extreme. His meteoric ascent within the Church, his friendship with Pope John Paul II, all extreme.

And yet, this story embodies in extreme form a conundrum that is common if not universal. There is the old expression that the apple does not fall far from the tree. We all know that that is not true. *What happens when the apple falls far from the tree?*

Generations divide on politics. The parents are strong Democrats, and the child is Republican. The parents are strong Republicans, and the child is Democratic.

Generations divide on Israel. The parents have a bedrock love for and intuitive sympathy with Israel that is in their bones. 48 is in their bones. 67 is in their bones. But their children see a messy and all too often depressing complexity and want to check out. They don't get Israel in the same way.

Generations divide on observance level. Shabbat and kashrut and active engagement in synagogue may be foundational for the parents. Perhaps less so for the children. One day Rosh Hashanah, one day Yom Kippur, we're good. Thank you. And the divergence works in the other direction as well. Parents are happy Conservative Jews, attending services from time to time, ordering tuna and salmon at Legal Sea Foods. The kids go off to Israel, they study at a yeshiva, they frum out, and they won't eat on their parents' dishes anymore.

Generations may divide on work. A family that has had doctors for the generations now has a child that does not want to be a doctor. A family that has had a family business for generations may have children who want to do something else with their lives.

What does our tradition have to say about the apple falling far from the tree? It's complicated.

On the one hand, our sources are broadly sympathetic to a parent's desire to transmit their finest values from generation to generation. That is what parents are supposed to do.

V'shinantem levaneckha v'dibarta bam, teach Jewish values to our children, speak about those values, embody them at home and on the road. Set an example, and hope your kids emulate it.

That aspiration is encapsulated in the optimistic rabbinic teaching *maaseh avot siman levanim*, Parents live. Children learn.

On the other hand, some of our wisest sources are also broadly sympathetic to individual variability. Each of us has a right to become our own person. We need not become a replica of our parents. Abraham Joshua Heschel famously asked why does the Amidah begin *elohei Avraham, elohei Yitzchak, velohei Yaakov*, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob? Why doesn't it just say the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, since there is only one God. Heschel's answer was there is only one God, but each of us has a different relationship with that God. Abraham's relationship with God was different from Isaac's relationship with God which was different from Jacob's relationship with God. Each of us must evolve our own relationship with our Creator.

So where does this leave us? When we are a strong Republican or Democrat and our child is not; when we see Israel one way and our child sees things differently; when our child charts his or her own course, living God knows where, doing God knows what, far from home and far from what we taught and role modeled, when our tree is here, and their apple is there, far from the tree, how should parent and child regard the difference between them?

Over the summer Donniel Hartman shared an insight that is the best kind of Torah. It is simple, clear and true. But I had at least had never seen it before. It was hidden in plain sight.

He pointed out that God not only tells us what to do, but is very explicit about the consequences if we don't do it. Twice the Torah goes on and on about threats and punishments that are so severe—the dreaded *tochechah*, castigation—that the Torah reader whispers them rather than chanting them out loud. That much I knew.

But what he pointed out that I had never appreciated before was that all of these threats *never work*. God threatens, and the children of Israel do their own thing anyway. God threatens, and we disobey. The Babylonians destroy the first temple. God threatens, and we disobey. The Romans destroy the second temple. Only after God had finally stopped threatening, after the exile, after the destruction of the Temple, only after we were able to come to our own truth, in our own time, in our own way, did we start to find the Judaism of the Torah meaningful. We need the threats to stop, we need love not judgment, to make Judaism our own.

In a deep sense, that is what our Torah reading today, the binding of Isaac, is all about. Isaac cannot be sacrificed on the altar of his father's convictions. That is why the Torah twice records that on the way to the mountain, *vayelchu shneihem yachdav*, father and son walked together. But when the binding was over, Abraham walks back alone, while Isaac is left to live his own life. In the next scene in which Isaac appears, he marries and loves Rebekah, and they start their family, bringing Esau and Jacob into the world. Isaac makes his own choices. While Abraham was peripatetic, moving from Mesopotamia to Israel to Egypt back to Israel again, Isaac never leaves Israel. He's born there. He lives there his whole life. He dies there. Isaac's life cannot be about his father. Isaac's life must be about Isaac.

Donniel Hartman's insight, and Isaac's independence after the binding, made me think about a book called Far From the Tree by Andrew Solomon. The whole book is about apples who fall far from the tree. Solomon frames the book by pointing out that "There is no such thing as reproduction, only production." Once we bring children into the world, they have a mind of their own. We teach them. We set an example. And then we need to let them be who they are, live their own lives, and love them for who they are. To love an apple that falls far from the tree is, in Solomon's beautiful phrase, "to witness a shimmering humanity."

When his Jewish father died, Cardinal Jean Marie Aaron Lustiger could not say Kaddish for him.

But when Cardinal Jean Marie Aaron Lustiger himself died, and priests and bishops and cardinals in all their ceremonial finery were there, he insisted that the first thing to happen at his own funeral was the recitation of Mourner's Kaddish.

When apples fall far from the tree, they need space and grace so that they can figure out in their own time and in their own way when and where they are going to land. Shabbat shalom.