



*Parshat Ekev*  
**Nachus: A Reinterpretation**  
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by Rabbi Wesley Gardenswartz  
Temple Emanuel, Newton, MA

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Rabbi Joseph Telushkin authored a book called *Jewish Humor: What the Best Jewish Jokes Say About the Jews*. In a section about parents and children, he shares the following:

*Two Jewish women who haven't see each other in twenty years run into each other on the street.*

*"How's your daughter Deborah?" the first woman asks, "the one who married that lawyer."*

*"They were divorced," the second woman answers.*

*"Oh, I'm so sorry."*

*"But she got married a second time, this time to a surgeon."*

*"Mazal Tov!"*

*"They were also divorced."*

*At this point the first woman decides to keep her mouth shut. "But now everything is all right," her friend goes on. "She's married a third time, now to an architect—and he's very successful."*

*The first woman shakes her head from side to side.*

*"Mmmm, mmmm, So much nachus from one daughter!"*

Now in some ways this joke is obviously dated. The gender norms, the premise that the job of a daughter is to get married off to a successful professional, is not only dated but offensive. And yet, for all that, there are two truths about this joke that are not dated. Two truths that are timeless.

The first is how much parents care. We care infinitely. This mother wants her daughter to be married, and to be married happily. Our deepest prayers are for our children. Lord, help

our children find love. Enjoy good health. Find meaningful work. Have enough resources to live the life they want to live. Please guide our children to help them make healthy choices. If they get married and want to start a family, please bless them with children whom they will love as much as we love them.

And yet, for as much as we care, and as much as we pray, the second truth that emerges from this joke is how little parents can control. We often control nothing. This mother might have prayed for her daughter to get married, but she had no control over whether her daughter wanted to marry and whether her daughter's choices were good choices. She had no control over whether her daughter had *mazal*.

Parenthood often involves this painful asymmetry. We care so much. We control so little.

Usually when we care about something, there is something we can do about it.

We wish we were more fit. We *join* a gym. Maybe, occasionally, we even *go* to the gym.

We wish we ate healthier. Time for fish and vegetables.

We wish our finances were better. We can spend less.

We wish we were in better touch with old friends. We can call more.

By contrast, we cannot control what our children do. Who they are. Or what happens to them. A metaphor that I once heard, I did not invent it, I heard it from somebody else, is that parenthood is like bowling. Once you release the bowling ball, it is out of your hands. You can shake this way, shake that way, urge, plead and pray, but that ball, and your adult children, have an energy of their own, which we cannot control.

We care so much. We control so little. How shall we deal with this fact of parenthood?

The Book of Deuteronomy offers us two different models, each of which is true, each of which is beautiful. But the two are in obvious creative tension with one another.

One model is the shema.

*V'shinantam levanecka v'dibarta bam b'shivtecha b'veitecha u'velechtacha vaderek u'veshachbecha u'vekumecha.*

Teach these words to your children, and recite them, when you are at home or away on a journey, when you go to sleep and when you wake up.

The shema's command is that parents should always be teaching. Transmitting our values is a 24-7 project. There is a fundamental optimism and hopefulness here. We can do this. Shape, shape, shape. Mold, mold, mold. Educate, educate, educate. As a result, our children are shaped, molded, and educated, as we would want them to be. Torah is transmitted *m'dor l'dor*, from generation to generation. If this optimism is born out in your family, if parental values are transmitted, received and lived out by the next generation, that is a blessing. That is nachus, traditionally understood.

But what happens when it does not work out that way? We shaped, but they came out a different shape. We molded, but they came out a different mold. We taught, but what we taught was not exactly their thing. Is there a way to find genuine nachus in this picture too? Is it possible to *reinterpret* what nachus means?

The shema is the text for traditional nachus. What is the text for nachus reinterpreted?

That text comes from the last page of the Torah. It is not talking about a parent-child relationship. But it is talking about the longest and strongest relationship in the Torah, the most tender and poignant relationship in the Torah--the love of God and Moses. In describing this rich and deep love, the Torah, on the very last page, uses the most beautiful phrase. It says that God and Moses saw one another, loved one another, *panim el panim*, face to face. Face to face

love means I see you, and I love you, for who *you* are. Not for who I want you to be. I see you for who you are, and I love you anyway. God sees Moses for who he is, with his anger problem, and loves him anyway. Moses sees God for who God is, sometimes remote, sometimes mercurial, and loves God anyway.

The Shema says teach, shape, mold. The last page of the Torah says see and love for who the other person is, not for who you want them to be. Parenthood is such a rich blessing because we need to hold onto both ideas of how to love.

This year the Times profiled a man named Robert Khuzami who grew up in Brooklyn in a bohemian family. His parents are ballroom-dancers. His sister is a muralist. His brother is a drummer. The family vibe is towards the arts. That is how they raised him. To be an artist. But that was not who he wanted to be. He became, according to the family joke, the “white sheep” in the family.

Something in him yearned to be a prosecutor. That meant law school. Nobody in his family had ever gone to law school. Since he did not come from money, he went to school supporting himself with multiple jobs, a dishwasher, a bartender, and dockworker. After attending BU Law School, he ended up as a prosecutor in the Southern District of New York where he has earned a reputation for tenacity, ferocity and integrity. A prosecutor. Not a dancer. A prosecutor. Not a drummer. A prosecutor. Not a painter. To love Robert Khuzami was to love a person who found his own path—a path different from that of his parents.

Many of us have our own version of this. We live our truth. We teach our truth. We shape, mold and educate our truth. But our adult child is their own person with *their* own truth. That is why the Torah is generous enough to give us not one but two models.

There is traditional nachus. They are like me. *My* values live on in the next generation.

And there is nachus reinterpreted. They have found *their* own path. *Their* values live on in the next generation.

May all of our children be healthy, happy and whole, and talking to us. And may we all know nachus, traditional nachus or nachus reinterpreted, that flows from the adults that our beloved children grow to become. *Shabbat shalom.*