

TEN COMMANDMENTS FOR PARENTING TODAY'S JEWISH CHILDREN....IT'S NOT WRITTEN IN STONE!

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Let me tell you about myself. I grew up in Newton, graduated from Newton South High School, Trinity College and attended law school. My husband, Michael, and I have been married for over 27 years and have two children. Our daughter, Alexis, is 25 and a CPA in Boston, and our son, Ian, is a senior Finance Major at Penn State.

Writing has always interested me, and I became involved with it in a more serious way when my son went to college. I am working on a novel set in World War II Austria. I have written for a lot of Jewish publications and websites, and I am the Parenting Columnist for The Jewish Advocate. When the editor of The Jewish Advocate asked me to be the Parenting Columnist, I told him I did not consider myself a parenting expert even though I had written many parenting articles. His response? "But I like how you write!" so I took the job.

This writing journey has allowed me to meet fascinating, wonderful people and re-learn and discover so much about Judaism. It's encouraged me to think about parenting in different ways. What I hope to do today is share some of my own thoughts on raising kids, drawing upon lessons from Jewish holidays, Jewish wisdom, a few of my articles from The Advocate and stories from my own family.

It helps I have a colorful family.

Before I say anything else, let me emphasize two points. First, there is no such thing as a black and white commandment when it comes to bringing up kids. Nothing is set in stone, no pun intended, and no parenting professional, expert or columnist knows it all. And second, perfect parents and perfect one-size-fits all parenting advice are non-existent.

FIRST COMMANDMENT:

Raising a Happy, Successful Child Means Encouraging Self-Reliance

Given the title of this talk, it is appropriate that several of my "commandments" are inspired by the book of Exodus. I want to start with a story about my Nana Evelyn who was born in Russia in the late 1800's during the "year of the big snowstorm." Nana Evelyn was known for her cooking and her sayings.

Some were easy to understand. Others were not, and I used to wonder if a "Nana Evelyn to English Dictionary" might be helpful. On occasion, Nana Evelyn explained the meaning of her

words when asked; other times she said: "Get on with you!" One of her favorite sayings was "Moses went up the mountain." I eventually figured out she used this expression when someone was making a poor choice, couldn't decide at all, was mindlessly going along with a crowd, or wanted another person to make the decision.

So what did Nana Evelyn mean? That *Moses* was a bad decision maker? That the person she was discussing *looked* like Moses (or, to my youthful mind, like Charlton Heston in "The Ten Commandments"?)

One day when I was in my teens, I went to my grandmother's for a light lunch (in other words, five courses instead of ten) and pressed her to explain the Moses saying. Nana Evelyn put it like this.

"When the Israelites were slaves, they were told what to do. When they fled Egypt, they listened to Moses. But when Moses went up the mountain and stayed away too long, they were lost. They ran around like chickens without heads and made that silly cow. I mean, calf! The Israelites did not know how to think for themselves."

As parents, we must make sure our children can stand on their own two feet. Obviously when our kids are really young, we make most decisions for them. But as they grow older, we need to gradually allow them to make choices and take responsibility for the outcome. Jewish teaching emphasizes the importance of personal responsibility, but this "letting go" can be difficult for a parent. Moving from "manager" to "managerial consultant" is a tough transition for a parent to make.

Of course it's tough! We love our kids and want the best. Why should we stand by and watch them make a mistake when *we* can decide for them? Choosing for them can also be a time-saver because we don't have to waste our energy explaining why our way is better. And, if they do things our way (which is the "correct" way), they don't risk embarrassment meaning *we* don't risk embarrassment.

It is particularly hard to refrain from rushing in and making all the decisions when our child is having a tough time. Consider the Israelites. They were not in the best shape. But difficult experiences often cause us to grow the most. There are no short cuts to maturity, spiritual or otherwise. If we look for shortcuts -- or encourage our children to look for them -- our kids will pay a price. That price might not be paid for some time to come, but one day our children will be out in the world and called upon to make their own choices, and they will be unprepared if they are used to their parents calling the shots.

So try to grow comfortable with the idea that sooner or later you have to give children freedom to choose. Let's provide our kids the confidence to spread their wings and develop their own decision-making skills so that even when Moses goes up that mountain, personal strength can allow our kids to truly fly.

**SECOND COMMANDMENT:
Encourage your children to have inquiring minds**

Part of raising children who are self-reliant means encouraging them to question. I learned this from my grandfather.

During the summers, my mother's parents came over every Sunday for dinner and they brought mocha almond ice cream and hot fudge from Brighams. We ate the ice cream out on the porch, and amid the clink of spoons and sounds of early evening, my grandparents brought up the sermon they heard that weekend at their own synagogue. A lively discussion followed. I ate my ice cream, content to listen.

I was only seven years old when my grandfather turned to me during one of these spirited conversations and said: "Well, what do *you* think?"

What did *I* think? What did I know? How could I add anything of value? I finally replied: "Well, Papa, the rabbi said that - " My grandfather cut me off.

"Yes, but what do *you* think?"

Papa Harry was my only grandparent to attend college and one of the first Jews to graduate MIT. I was flattered he included me although I'm sure my responses were far from scholarly. In the months and years which followed until his death, my grandfather continued to ask my opinion and encourage my questions. He used to smile and tap me on the head. "You have a good brain. A good cabbage."

Papa Harry's goal was not to make me contradictory. He wished to promote a love of exploration and wonder.

Some religions applaud thinking only "inside the box." But Judaism takes a different approach, and this is one of the *great* joys of our faith. The "box" is important. The "script" is crucial. But we go beyond. We study and examine, evaluate and re-evaluate. Judaism continues to flower as long as we follow tradition while growing our minds. Questioning is not a rejection of our roots; it is renewal and expansion. We build upon our faith by learning, and in the process, we learn about ourselves.

Back to the Exodus. When the Passover Seder meal concludes, how many of us say: "I'm stuffed! I can't eat another bite!" Our stomachs run out of room. But our *minds* never do. There is beauty in The Four Questions, especially when a child says them for the first time. But we should urge our children to *continually* question, and not just at Passover. This is not about thinking it's cute when our kids interrupt and are rude. It's about raising them to use their brains actively and politely.

I love mocha almond ice cream to this day. And whenever I eat it, I am reminded of the sounds of twilight and the wisdom of my grandfather.

THIRD COMMANDMENT:

Don't forget there is a world beyond the comfort zone.

I spoke about how important it is to get children to expand their minds. A related point is the value of rousing our kids to step outside their comfort zones. This brings me to another family story: The Uncle's Debate.

My great uncles, Joseph Ford and Abraham Shapiro, used the fruits of their success in this country to support many Jewish causes. Although neither of my uncles had much schooling, they recognized the importance of higher learning. They also understood how anti-Semitism made it difficult for Jewish students to get an excellent education, and they worked with other like-minded Jews to establish Brandeis University. Uncle Joe and Uncle Abe believed it *crucial* that the first president of this new school be someone brilliant and world-renowned.

Who better than Albert Einstein?

So these two remarkable men headed for New York to meet with Albert Einstein and ask him to be the first president of Brandeis University. He was flattered and immensely supportive of what they were trying to achieve.

But he turned them down.

My uncles' version was that Albert Einstein said with reluctance: "I do great with Mathematics. With people? not so much."

Uncle Joe and Uncle Abe had contrasting views of Einstein's response. Uncle Joe appreciated Einstein's honesty. After all, if Einstein was not comfortable dealing with people, better he not become president of Brandeis University and stick to what he was good at. Uncle Abe had a different take. Since Einstein recognized he was not skilled with people, why not work to *improve* this weakness instead of just shrugging it off? My great-uncles' perspectives led to a long-running discussion in my family which we called "The Uncles' Debate."

Should a person focus on his strengths and develop those or should he figure out his weak areas and work toward strengthening them? In addition, what are the advantages of plunging in and trying something new?

Following Uncle Joe's line of thought, I believe we *should* encourage our children to develop what they are good at, particularly if they are strong in an area they enjoy. Uncle Joe would have said: that is enough. After all, would Einstein have come up with The Theory of Relativity if he was always trying to be the life of the party? Developing one's strengths leads to achievement and confidence.

But I also agree with Uncle Abe in the sense that parents should help kids recognize the importance of expanding their horizons.

Success isn't always about doing what we know we are good at. Success often has more to do with the *journey* and what we learn along the way. Part of everyone's journey should be the creation of a self-awareness which allows us to understand our own strengths and weaknesses. Obviously, not all weaknesses can be changed or improved. But how do we know unless we try?

It is by trying - and possibly failing - that kids learn valuable coping skills. The world won't end if they make a mistake. And if they succeed, they will prove to themselves they can overcome a new obstacle. The most contented people are those who put in their best efforts and view obstacles as challenges.

We can set a strong example for our kids by showing them a willingness to step out of our *own* comfort zones and try something new like learning a new language or computer skill, or improving a personal weakness like social anxiety or a tendency to procrastinate.

What would Uncle Joe and Uncle Abe have achieved if they had allowed themselves to be constrained by their perilous start in life? Would anyone observing these two young boys getting off the boat at Ellis Island *ever* have imagined they would create a university and speak to someone as world-famous as Albert Einstein? Exploration takes courage. Let's urge our children to move in this direction and show them that we, ourselves, are willing to take risks along that same path.

FOURTH COMMANDMENT:

Kids will be okay if they think *you* think they will be okay.

That is a mouthful, so let me explain what I mean.

My daughter was born with a visual impairment. This is the main reason I became a full time mom. At one of the many doctors' appointments when Alexis was a toddler, a nurse pulled me aside. She explained that most children with visual impairments become very withdrawn not simply because of their visual issues but because their parents are very over-protective. The nurse said: "Your daughter will be okay if she thinks *you* think she'll be okay."

I discussed this with my husband that night and we talked for hours. How does one instill confidence in a child with a real problem? We decided adopting the pretense of "it's not a big deal" in front of Alexis was a poor strategy. Alexis would figure out she saw "differently." What would be gained by minimizing the situation and telling her not to worry about it?

The opposite approach was the one the nurse warned me about: We could be overly protective and nervous in front of Alexis. But we wanted our daughter to grow up with confidence and without fear. Where was the middle ground for *us*?

We decided honesty was the best policy. Well, honesty with a twist. My daughter did not need to know about all the hours I spent crying in private over her condition. But my husband and I were not going to whitewash her impairment. When Alexis grew older and complained about her vision, we didn't tell her to stop complaining or say: "There are a lot of kids with worse problems." What we told her is this. "Alexis, you have a problem with your vision. And you are right. It isn't fair and in some ways this will make life more difficult. But you have *so* much else going for you. You are smart and quick and resilient. We know you will be just fine."

That last line--"we know you will be just fine"-- was not based on fact, because we really did not know how it would all play out. Those words arose from hope and a leap of faith. But Alexis' takeaway was always this: We acknowledged her condition, but let her know we believed she would be all right because of all the other gifts God had given her.

Alexis received special accommodations throughout school and she has a daylight only license. But she had great academic success, passed all parts of the CPA exam on the first try and is a feisty, determined young woman with many friends. I am not claiming good parenting was the sole cause of this wonderful outcome. But Alexis had faith in her ability to deal with her disability because she believed we believed in her.

This isn't about being fake and going around with a stupid grin. It's about the power of positive thinking which is *essential* to the Jewish people. Jews have been subjected to endless persecution. And yet Jews are still here. We still believe. We have hope, and as parents, we need to pass a positive attitude down to our children, not so they will paint the world and their lives with a Pollyanna-type brush, but because positive thinking can accomplish wonders.

Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav was born in Poland in the 1770's and became revered as a great Hasidic teacher. He said: "If you believe that you can ruin, then believe that you can fix." In other words, put your efforts and energies into positive thinking. Kids learn from how they see us behave. And if we stay positive, raise our children with strong Jewish values and demonstrate these values in our own lives, our kids will approach difficulties with the same "can do" attitude Jews have had for thousands of years. One of the most wonderful aspects of our faith is the idea we have choice. We can *change*. We can *fix*. Obviously, we can't fix everything, but if we take positive thinking into our hearts, our children will, too.

**FIFTH COMMANDMENT:
A Win/Lose Mentality is never helpful**

I talked about how important it is to develop strong self-esteem in our children. Unfortunately, some people believe the best way to help kids develop this is to never

correct their children, to always have their children think they are the best and to emphasize the importance of *winning*.

The idea of winning is nothing new, but the definition of winning has changed over the years and not, I fear, for the better. I want to reflect back at the view my grandparents had toward winning. They immigrated for the reasons most European Jews did: they hoped to educate their children, help their families and create a Jewish community. My grandparents didn't come here *to win*.

For my grandparents, being a winner was not nearly as important as *behaving* like a winner. Success came from developing a good character, pursuing Jewish learning, and finding joy in small things. In addition, standing up for the other guy was more important than *beating* the other guy.

The current presidential campaign is loaded with speeches which state the way to make America great again is *to win*. We are bombarded with how crucial it is to be the best, the most, the greatest.

As a parent, this is concerning, for children receive the message that if they are not first, then they are nothing. What kind of pressure does this place on our kids? What kind of pressure does this put on *us*? We should promote confidence and a healthy sense of competition in our children. But every time we applaud the view that winning is everything, we set a poor example for our kids and move further away from our core Jewish values.

We limit our children's focus when we insist they must be the best. But if a child grows into an adult determined to develop his or her *best self*? That's what my grandparents would have called a winner.

**SIXTH COMMANDMENT:
Keep your children off the path of self-absorption**

There is another potential pitfall which exists alongside the modern day interpretation of winning.

Self-absorption.

The Jewish faith emphasizes not only the importance of treating everyone with dignity, but how critical it is to connect with others. One of the best ways to connect is to simply listen. Unfortunately, conversation has become a lost art and too many people are interested only in talking about themselves. I call these people The Great I Ams, and they are creating a generation of mini Great I Ams who are extremely self-absorbed.

Great I Ams don't talk with people, they talk at them and provide *way* too much information. They might ask a question only out of a thinly veiled courtesy, but the minute the other person takes a breath, the Great I Am jumps right back in with a soliloquy.

Hillel wrote:

*"If I am not for myself, who will be for me?
If I am only for myself, what am I?"*

Parents should examine how our children see us behave and what they hear us discuss. Are we showing interest in others and asking questions out of a sincere desire to learn? Hopefully that is the case. But if our children observe us in social situations only talking about ourselves and our lives, and if we act as if other people should be *honored* to hear about us, and if conversation around our dinner table only revolves around our own little family group because no one else really matters, then we will create more Great I Ams.

And never forget, a mini Great I Am and a child with great self-esteem are *not the same thing*.

SEVENTH COMMANDMENT: Remove the Parenting Judgment Hat

Although my daughter was born with a visual impairment, my children were fairly easy when they were little. They slept through the night within a few months and were extremely sweet-tempered. During those years, if I saw other parents having problems with their own kids--even minor problems--two thoughts popped into my head.

First, "If I had that child to raise for even a week, I could get that kid into shape."

Second: "Well, that child is poorly behaved *because the parents screwed up*."

In other words, I put on the Parenting Judgment Hat and was convinced that because my husband and I were such good parents, we would never have a single problem with our own children.

Didn't quite work out that way.

Hillel said:

"Don't judge your fellow human being until you have reached that person's place."

I love that quote, particularly when it comes to parenting. Hillel isn't simply telling us to avoid wearing the Parenting Judgment Hat. He is asking us to put ourselves in another's shoes. The problem is, we can't *ever* put ourselves in another's shoes. We can sympathize and empathize, learn details about the situation and struggle to understand, but we can never be that other person in full. So Hillel is saying: don't judge your fellow human being, period the end.

Not only is being in full judgment mode contrary to Jewish teachings, it can backfire. If we set ourselves up as judge and jury for everyone else, what happens when *we* have a

problem with a child? If we admit to our problem still wearing The Parenting Judgment Hat, we rush to think we are failures. If we are still stuck in the "I'm the best parent in the world" mode, then we ignore the problematic issues and don't fix them. At the High Holy days, we reflect inwardly on our failings and make a renewed determination to improve ourselves. But if we are stuck in that rigid world of judgment, how can we possibly improve?

Like life, parenting is about taking a few steps forward and a few steps back. It is essential to remain open-minded. Not every parenting strategy works. There might be a strategy that has worked in the past but it doesn't work anymore. Or there might be a strategy that works with one child and not another. What do we do then? We need to come up with a new strategy, and this requires *flexibility*.

When God gave the Israelites the Ten Commandments, he gave this glorious gift once. Parenting isn't like that. We don't bring a baby home from the hospital, perch him on the kitchen table in his infant car seat and say: "Okay, little buddy. Here are the rules. You got that? Great. Now we are done."

The role of parents changes based on many factors including age, personality and circumstance. This requires flexibility and the willingness to try a new approach. But if we are too busy judging everyone else, and by default, *ourselves*, we get stuck in a rut which keeps us from making effective parenting decisions.

So take off that hat.

EIGHTH COMMANDMENT:

Honor the Jewish Tradition of Community Outreach, but remember the value of reaching out

The Jewish faith recognizes our obligation to the community at large.

Just as we give to the community, sometimes, as *parents*, we need to reach out for ourselves and our children. As I stated earlier, there is no such thing as a perfect parent. We also know there is no such thing as a perfect child. Unfortunately, too many of us sweep problems with our children under the rug because we are in denial or wearing the Parenting Judgment Hat or get overwhelmed. Certainly there are problems we can handle within our own families. But sometimes the problems are just too big, and if you feel in your heart that something isn't quite right, never be afraid to get help whether it's from your rabbi, a teacher, a guidance counselor, a psychologist or a medical doctor. I've never known a single family who ignored a serious issue with a child and was better off for it.

I am not suggesting we fly in a team from Switzerland every time something goes wrong. This isn't about airing our dirty linen or posting all our woes on Facebook. It's about understanding that sometimes to achieve a solution, we need to go beyond our four walls to obtain it.

There is another important point here. When a child bottles up feelings and is reluctant to communicate, this can cause great harm to a child, especially as he grows older. If our children see *us* reaching out, they will be more likely to reach out themselves. They will learn there are people and resources outside the family that can help in times of need, and there is no shame in admitting you need help.

So give to your community. Give to those around you. But remember to reach out and take advantage of available resources when you or your child needs a helping hand.

NINTH COMMANDMENT:

Pass on the Joys of Judaism to the next Generation

It is a challenge to raise Jewish children when most of the people around us are not Jewish and the world is filled with so much anti-Semitism. It can also be stressful not just for us, but for our kids. They finish a long day at school before heading over to religious school in the late afternoon when they are tired and crabby and probably want to be somewhere else. When they get ready for their bar or bat mitzvahs, there is tutoring and endless practice and a lot of rules. And if this is all our children get out of Judaism -- do this, don't do that, get up to your room and practice your Hebrew -- they will miss out on the joys of our faith.

My children had, for the most part, wonderful Jewish educators and terrific rabbis. But when raising a Jewish child, it is not enough to depend on others. Parents have to set an example. I'm not talking about becoming the most pious, perfect Jew on the block. It is more important our children see us actively involved in our faith. This doesn't mean we have to run to temple every second (although it can), this means incorporating Judaism into our lives in a way which gives us joy. It might be as simple as trying out new holiday recipes with your kids, or reading a book on Jewish thought and sharing some of what you learn with your children. Tell them stories from their own family history such as the experiences of their grandparents and great-grandparents. Visit Jewish sites when you are on vacation.

I loved to tell my kids Jewish stories, and sometimes, we acted them out. When my daughter was in second grade, the religious school teacher asked if anyone knew what Purim was all about. My daughter's hand shot up. The teacher called me later to say she never heard a student tell the story with such detail and excitement. Now, Alexis got a bit confused and called "Mordecai" "Mortimer" but she was close enough. I was so thrilled to get that call because I didn't want my children to just know about Judaism, I wanted them to *feel* it.

Judaism stays alive as long as the Jewish community stays vibrant. But never underestimate how much influence we have as parents. Share what you know and love. Learn some more and share that. Of course it's not all fun and games. There are rules and laws we should follow. But make sure our children know the reasons behind those rules

and laws. Have them understand Judaism isn't some words written in a book a million years ago. It is not a burden. It is a living, breathing entity that continues to grow only if we as parents set an example and encourage our children to add their own experiences to the Jewish journey.

TENTH COMMANDMENT:

Look up through your own Sukkah and See the Stars

I started this talk with Passover, and now I want to conclude with thoughts about Sukkot which begins today.

Sukkot not only celebrates the harvest, it takes us back to Passover and commemorates the time the Israelites wandered through the desert during the Exodus. The Israelites lived in temporary dwellings, and we build our own temporary dwelling, the sukkah. The roof has openings so we can see the sky.

The temporary nature of the sukkah serves as a reminder that life itself is temporary. Sukkot encourages us to remember 'this too shall pass.' When there are struggles and disappointments with our children -- notice I said when and not if--circumstances can always improve. And if we are in a good place, Sukkot reminds us that because of the fleeting nature of life, we must treasure those times. When we have a wonderful moment with our child, whether it be a great conversation, a simple walk outside, a special date at Papa Gino's, or if we see our child developing in a positive, menschkeit way, never take any of that for granted.

On Sukkot, we turn to Ecclesiastes and read some of King Solomon's words. We know King Solomon was wise. We also know he was a busy guy, for he had hundreds of wives and girlfriends. (Imagine trying to keep all of *those* birthdays and anniversaries straight!) We are not sure how many children he had, but there is wonderful saying of his in the book of Proverbs that speaks to me as a parent, and I want to quote part of it now:

"For a righteous man can fall seven times and rise..." Proverbs 24:16.

Fall seven times and rise.

We are not always going to get it right. But no matter how many heartaches we have, how many mistakes we make, we have to *get up and keep going*. Let's not beat ourselves up when matters don't go as planned. We can't always be saying "if only, I coulda, woulda, shoulda" when we parent, or we will never get out of bed. Raising children is *so* difficult. But if we use our Jewish faith and traditions as paving stones on that winding road of parenting, we can make it through.

And in low moments, we can remind ourselves we are only human by looking up through the roof of our own personal parenting sukkah so we can see the stars.