Marching Band

What is it about ceremonies like this that seem to attract parents? Like ants around spilled jelly, overnight they begin to swarm. No sooner does society pronounce you a new kind of person than your family (or their memory) shows up. Here you are, finally licensed to break free from earth orbit and they bring out your parents. My God, These are the last people you want around. If you let them they’ll probably put your doctoral dissertation on the refrigerator. What’s going on?

As it turns out, the scriptural lection assigned for this Sabbath—arguably one of the most boring in the entire Pentateuch—alludes to this same situation. (I’m not making this up.) It’s from the Book of Numbers and begins with what sounds suspiciously like the half-time marching band instructions for the children of Israel in the wilderness: This is who is supposed to be there; this is where everyone is supposed to stand, etc. etc.

Numbers 1:52

“And the Lord spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai… after they left the land of Egypt, saying: Take a census of… the people…” And then, get this, in verse 52, almost as if the text were describing some kind of early Nabatean, proto-college-graduation ceremony: “And the people shall pitch their tents, each person by his or her own family camp, each person v’ish al diglo and each person under his or her own flag.”
Right there, in that one verse, you get the whole kazoo. There are the two pre-conditions that must obtain for each person: Stand with your family and stand under your own flag. Unfortunately, as any one over the age of seven has begun to suspect, if these conditions are not mutually exclusive, they are routinely in diametric opposition. Frankly, I cannot imagine a more disjunctive situation: You can either be who your parents want you to be or you can be who you want to be but no one has yet figured out a way to be both. I mean, if you be exactly whom your parents want, then you are heading for a humongo mid-life crisis and probably worse. But, if you ignore your parents and their dreams for you, then give it up, you’re just Peter Pan, maybe worse. (Although personally right now I cannot imagine anything worse.)

**GER and KARLIN**

This tension has not gone unnoticed by commentators.

Isaac Meir Rothenberg Alter of Ger, a nineteenth century Hasidic master, in his *Hiddushei haRim*, first notes that these chapters from the Book of Numbers are always read in the synagogue on the Sabbath preceding the festival of *Shavuot*. *Shavuot* celebrates the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai. This receiving of the Torah or, as some of you might know it, *The Five Books of Moses*, is easily the defining moment for Judaism. You may substitute here instead your own spiritual tradition’s ultimate experience. It can be attaining a state of grace, satori, achieving nirvana. And, if you don’t have (or want) a spiritual tradition, then receiving Torah can simply mean a time when life makes sense and you understand why you were created. For our purposes here this morning, they are all pretty much the same thing.

The rabbi of Ger then goes on to explain that you cannot receive the divine voice, you cannot have that ultimate experience, unless you are standing in your given family place. (*Itturay Torah* V:7b) Revelation, enlightenment, satori begins, in other words, with knowing how your parents have shaped you and placed you and launched you. (Yuchh!)

The Hasidic master Aaron Perlow of Karlin, writing a few generations earlier, on the other hand, in his *Bet Aharon*, focuses instead on the next few words and reads our verse one hundred eighty degrees in the opposite direction. For him, revelation, grace, fulfillment are only attainable once you first realize your essential uniqueness: “You are obligated,” he teaches, “to understand that you are unique in the world. There has never been anyone like you because, if there were, there would be no need for you to exist. You are an utterly new thing in creation. Your life goal is to realize this uniqueness. And, only when everyone figures this out, will the world be repaired.” (*Itturay Torah* V:21x)
So there you have it. One guy reads the first half of the verse and says: Stand with your parents, the other guy reads the second half and says: Be your own person.

The TWO Questions

Most of us, of course, don’t use the language of family encampments and standing under flags. For us today, standing with parents usually gets translated into: Why on earth do I have my parents? Of all the people in the world who might have cohabited to make a child, why did God pick my parents to make me? What in the name of God was God thinking anyway?

And the second half of our verse, standing under your own flag, becomes: What is my flag? Why am I the way I am? Of all the cockamamie combinations of talents and defects, gifts and disabilities, hopes and fears, did I get issued the combo package I got?

Now that I think about it, maybe it’s no accident that both questions are contained in the same verse. Maybe, like so many things that seem to be opposite in our world, they are intimately related, even interdependent.

Hey, it’s not just kids who worry about their parents. Your parents have also begun to suspect that you might be from another galaxy and have been delivered to their home as a cosmic prank. Unfortunately the warranty period is up and it’s too late to send you back. They whisper among themselves, “Who is this kid anyway? How could he have come from us?” Don’t get me wrong. Of course they love you very much and are very proud of you. It’s just that they were sort of expecting somebody else.

(Now, all together: All the parents smile at your kids. Now, all the kids smile at your parents.) Stand with you parents; stand under your own flag. Why does this happen to the generations?

Zella

Let me tell you a story about my two and half year old granddaughter, Zella. She has an amazing vocabulary and surprises us daily with new words and the inflective patterns she’s picked up. (These, you understand, are the unmistakable signs of genius.) A month ago, she was playing on the floor in her room when my daughter stuck her head in the door to check on her. But, before her mother could say anything, Zella only looked up and said, “Oh, good to see you, mom.” Of course it’s adorable; she’s my granddaughter. But it’s also a very simple example of learning. The baby has learned to mimic her mother, down to the subtlest, adult linguistic pattern. Parents don’t set
out to teach their children how to talk. Kids just pick it up. In this way, parents become a part of their progenies.

Sometimes it’s not as adorable. A few weeks ago, Zella was trying to carry four stuffed animals all at the same time and dropped them all over the floor. She surveyed the mess before her, put her hands on her little hips and said: “Oh, shick!”

My point is: Kids get it all, the good and the bad. And a lot of the stuff, maybe even most of the stuff, that gets transmitted from one generation to the next seems to happen below the radar of certainly the receiver and maybe even of the sender too. We are all recipients of life-messages we don’t even know we got—personality traits, dreams, social styles, fears, senses of humor, affections, tastes in music, fantasies, you name it.

**Accidental INSTRUCTIONS**

As far as I can tell, there are three primary modes of generational transmission. The first is by simple explication: Mom or dad just says it outright. “That’s disgusting; don’t ever do that again.” Or, “I would be so proud if you became a doctor.”

The second is by example: Parents act it out. Dad loves watching ball games; “Hey, maybe I’ll become an athlete.” Mom seems to become more radiant when she’s at the art museum. “Someday I’ll be a patron.”

The third mode, though, is the most powerful and mysterious. We get stuff from our parents by what I can only call unconscious accident. And, here’s the kicker: Because the parents don’t even know they’ve sent it, they’re surprised, secretly delighted but sometimes also horrified when they see it in their children. They say in honest disbelief, “I don’t know where on earth she got that from.” And then they try to persuade you to change.

A story: A friend of mine worked at a high tech company on Boston’s route 128. It turns out that there was one particular guy in his work group with whom he constantly sparked. Their mutual dislike, he confessed, became so potent that it was impossible to conceal. His supervisor finally asked him to meet with the company psychologist. “I was scared to death,” he said, “When I walked into his office, the shrink set down my file, looked up at me and asked, ‘So tell me, just what is it about this other guy that reminds you of yourself?’” My friend said, “I saw a blazing flash of light, thanked the psychologist, left his office, and never had another problem with the other guy again.”

We have the hardest time, other words, with the parts of people that we fear are also part of ourselves. And, if we are also uncomfortable with those parts in ourselves and try to conceal them, how much the more so when we
encounter them in others—especially if that other person is someone who has watched us in our most unguarded moments, learning how to mimic us to perfection—you know, like your children. To be sure, it doesn’t have to be a part of you that you dislike, indeed, it could just be a part of you like but, for one reason or another, it’s a part of you that you have chosen not to realize or even tell yourself about.

Usually it’s noble. You figure out, for instance, that dad wanted to be an artist but had to go to work because you were born and one thing led to another and now he’s a prominent executive instead. So you become an artist. Sometimes it’s fraught with tension. Mom wanted to become a Bohemian but she didn’t have the nerve and persuaded herself that being one was socially derelict. So, when you show up in tattered Levis, mom goes off the wall. And, alas, sometimes it is a source of ongoing conflict. Dad had a thing with authority figures, they made him nuts. So he structured his life around being the only authority figure. But now you need some room to spread your own wings and that inadvertently undermines your father. So you quarrel a lot and wind up doing things you know will get in his face—not because you want to but because he doesn’t want you to. And so it goes. But make no mistake, whether noble, fraught with tension or filled with shouting, it all comes from love.

This is not, in other words, a pathological situation; this is the way of the world.

**YOU are Your PARENTS**

All this only raises a more disturbing problem. If parents give kids stuff they didn’t know they were giving and kids pick it up stuff without knowing it, then there is a lot more of our parents in us than anyone wants to admit, a whole lot more.

It also means that it’s probably a waste of time to bother trying to distil and identify some original, unique you apart from your parents. They, and all their *meshuggas*, (that’s Yiddish for nutsey-cuckoos) are an intrinsic part of your essential nature. You were not raised in a Skinner box. Fate or karma or random chance or (here he goes!) God made you to be their kid or to be adopted by them. And the “you” inside, yearning to go free from them is pretty much an illusion. There is only the you who you are because of and in spite of their fantasies, abuse, neglect, trickery, dreams and, of course, their great love. That is who we all are. I’m sorry, deal with it. And, to ask who might you have become without your parents is like saying that if grandma had wheels, she’d be a cocktail table. You is who you is. Period. And your best shot at becoming more of who you’d like to be is by trying to under-
stand them. (This, it occurs to me, may be the real meaning of the commandment to honor one’s parents.) And remember, it’s not just you and your folks. Your grandparents made your parents just like your parents made you and, some day, God willing, just like you will make your own children. Yes, Virginia, that’s correct, it goes way back, all the way back to the first parents. And the part of you that your parents claim they don’t understand is probably not as much you as it is them. You and I, all of us, like it or not, know it or not, are busy completing what our parents often did not even know they began.

Resolution

And that is how it gets resolved. They have come today to see how the project is turning out and check up on their investment. Something deep, archaic, primal, spiritual led them into making you, something even beyond their love for one another and beyond their love for you. It was not so that you could merely exist but so that they could be further realized through you. In this way, the parents in each generation are instruments of this great yearning to be better, wiser, kinder, gooder. It is eternal: Kids trying to figure out what to put on their own flags so they can become who they think they really are; Parents trying to get their kids to stand within the family encampment so they can get them to finish the work they didn’t realize that they were unable to complete.

Hey, I doubt it ever gets completely resolved. I’m sixty years old and, I still can’t sort it all out. Every few years I discover yet another dimension of my parents inside me. Sometimes I like it; sometimes I don’t. Sometimes my mother seems to understand; sometimes she doesn’t. We’re talking here, in other words, about an unending, life-long project. (Look at George Bush’s invasion of Iraq. Is that in any way related to something his father did?) We pick up where they left off. We get the messages explicitly, by example but probably most of the time by accident. But we all get the messages and weave them into ourselves. We embroider them onto our very own flags. Then we wonder, “why do I have these parents?” and the parents wonder, “why do we have this kid?”

Yehiel of Alexander

Let me conclude with one final story. The Hasidic master, Yehiel of Alexander, comments on an apparent contradiction in Genesis 25:19. There
the text reads: “THIS IS THE FAMILY LINE OF ISAAC SON OF ABRAHAM: ABRAHAM FATHERED ISAAC…” (Itturay I.204b)

The Rabbi of Alexander wants to know why the redundancy? If we are told that it is the family line of Isaac son of Abraham, why are we then also told that Abraham fathered Isaac? He answers his own question.

Isaac never thought of himself as amounting to much at all, other than being the son of Abraham. For him, everything depended only on the merit of his dad. He was “Isaac, son of Abraham.”

Abraham, for his part, never thought that he had accomplished very much in the service of God either or that he was deserving of any particular merit except for only one thing: He had raised up a worthy son. “Abraham fathered Isaac.”

Such a holy way, says Rabbi Yehiel: Neither one saw himself as worthwhile in his own eyes. Instead his merit came either through his parent or his child.

Self-Realization

Oh yes, I almost forgot to tell you the most important thing. The intersection of the notion of how to realize your uniqueness and the often unconscious yearning to fulfill your parents’ secret dreams—that is the scene self-realization. That is certainly why we are all standing here today—in the words of the biblical verse, EACH PERSON WITH HIS OWN FAMILY CAMP; EACH PERSON UNDER HER OWN FLAG.