

“Why the Silent Treatment Really Doesn’t Work”
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Last week my daughter gave me the silent treatment. Although I did appreciate the quiet time, the silent treatment is really no fun for either party and in fact, it is actually quite stressful. Living in the same home makes it nearly impossible to maintain the silent treatment. At some point, your paths cross, or there is a request to drive your child somewhere. There is nothing that this child can do so getting to the store, the mall or school begins to weigh more heavily. This always leads to the next conversation. As we drive to Suburban Square, life has returned to whatever we have grown to feel is normal, a smile is being suppressed as much as possible and then my daughter will say, “You know, I’m still not talking to you.” To which I always respond, “When you tell me that you are actually talking to me.” To which they usually grow silent once again. Then they start trying to talk to me without speaking, a grand game of charades – but we will get back to that later.

The climax of this week’s reading is not about Abraham raising his hand to slaughter his son. That is a distraction. The climax and most painful moment in this portion is not that he is about to kill his son, that sacrifice has already taken place. No, the most important event of this week’s parasha goes unnoticed because essentially it is a non-event. Nothing happens, so it is so easy to miss it. Abraham and Isaac leave separately, never to speak to each other again. Just as the story of Cain killing Abel sets the scene, imploring us with the message, “You are responsible for one another, you can’t kill each other.” The binding of the Isaac Story begs us to just listen to each other. If the story of Cain and Abel says, “*Hashomer Achi anochi*,” We must care for each other, the Akeidah teaches a refinement, “*Shema yisrael, listen.*” Just listen. Just talk and just listen. This can be so very powerful.

There is more to the story. Abraham was not a good listener, or maybe the issue was that all he did was listen. When it came to his family he simply refused to engage. He did battle in the outside world, he negotiated deals in the outside world, but when it came to his family he simply couldn’t engage and he couldn’t talk. The spokesperson for monotheism, becomes mute.

In last week’s reading there was a conflict over land. Abraham says, “Let’s not fight. You go your way, I will go mine. Let’s not allow material possessions to come between us.” However, that is literally what happens. Abraham says, “Rather than working this out, let’s just not have a relationship with each other. It is easier to go our separate ways.” While this may be true, not working it out is always easiest in the short term, but it isn’t always the best. Real adult relationships take work, energy, and commitment.

In last week’s parasha and again in this week’s parasha, Abraham says to Sarah, “Make believe you are my sister. If Pharaoh knows you are my wife, he will certainly kill me in order to take you.” Instead of saying, “We can work this out. You are beautiful and I am insecure, he says, “Let’s take the easy way out.” Instead of saying, “I am powerful and the King will have to engage in a difficult conversation,” Abraham says, Let’s just make believe you are my sister.”

Instead of taking the risk, Abraham says, “Let’s pretend.” However, a real adult relationship takes risk, dispensing with make-believe.

In this week’s parasha, Issac is born and Sarah is jealous, maybe even afraid. She demands Abraham to banish Hagar and Ishmael. Instead of talking about it, Abraham just concedes. Instead of saying “Let’s talk this through. I imagine your insecurity, as I too, have been insecure in my life,” he chooses to avoid the difficult conversation. Instead of Sarah and Abraham revealing their perceived weaker side, they choose to avoid the difficult conversation. Real relationships require vulnerability. Real relationships require difficult conversations in which we are committed, in which we take risks and in which we are prepared to be vulnerable. Families argue, they don’t ignore it and they certainly don’t give up on each other.

On the bottom of page 121, it is Menachem Mendle of Kotze’s comment that is most instructive. We live in a real world, a world of arguments and disagreements. We live in a world in which two reasonable people will have to agree to disagree, however, that is not what happened with Abraham and Isaac. Abraham binds his son to the altar and is prepared to kill him. This isn’t two adult children fighting over their father’s kiddush cup, this is a father who raises a knife to his son’s throat. The Kotzer Rebbe gets it right. He taught that although it was hard for Abraham to bind Isaac to the altar, it was just as hard to release him because he realized that Isaac, for the rest of his life, would remember that his father almost killed him.”

What a pity it was that Abraham didn’t see that from the beginning. I prefer to understand Abraham as not realizing the damage he was doing. I can’t tolerate the idea that Abraham, knowing the repercussions, would still have followed through to that end. We all do that. We all want to think our parents, our siblings or our children are people who just don’t see how their behavior is truly affecting others. Abraham didn’t see the pain of Hagar and Ishmael because if he had, he would have never sent them off. Abraham didn’t see the pain of Sarah as he repeatedly offers her to other men. If he had, he would have never sent her away.

There are arguments and then there is crossing the line. Abraham, time and time again, crosses the line and finally there is no going back. Finally there is no reconciliation. The stakes are that high. This isn’t some nice fantasy where “all’s well that ends well.” This is a Grimm’s fairy tale of children abused and a family torn apart by more than indiscretion. The stakes are high because people’s lives are in the balance. A child’s self-esteem and self-image are at risk. It really doesn’t seem odd that Isaac never becomes as great as his father or his son because he has been robbed of his own sense of worth. How could he possibly think enough of himself to think he has a contribution to make? There are lives held in the balance and in the hands of the most powerful people – parents, children, siblings and family, and the damage isn’t only immediate, it is life-long.

So, let me go back to my children and their silent treatment. I grew up in a very different home than the one my wife and I are creating and I tell you that it is a 22-year experiment in which we are truly not sure how it will turn out. So, let me tell you this. I grew up in a home where there were only two types of communication, either loud screaming or silence. You have heard me tell the story a thousand times of the time I stole the rubber ball from our local department store. I was caught and brought to the security office where my father was called. Then the real panic set

in. My father, though loving, is not a calm man. My father does believe in volume as a way to get a message across. His voice could instill fear. So, I fully expected a full-throated scolding. While the minutes ticked away and I was waiting for his arrival, my anxiety grew. Then he arrived and said nothing so I thought he might be reserving himself until we were no longer in the company of the security officers. But then we got into the car and still nothing. Maybe he was waiting until we got home, but nothing. Then into the house we went and still nothing. Finally I couldn't take it anymore and I broke saying, "Come on Dad, let me have it already. What is the punishment, where is the yelling? To which he said words I will never forget. "This is so bad. You have brought such shame on our family that there is nothing I can say," and he walked away.

Of course there is the other side. Silence and yelling are one approach that doesn't really work but neither does obsessive evaluation and re-evaluation or analysis and talking ad nauseam. While I grew up in the former, I am well acquainted with the other, where every situation has to be combed over, picked at and every interaction fodder for further discussion. That too, isn't the most productive, it is simply exhausting. However, there is a middle ground.

Some circumstances require talking it through while others necessitate letting it go. Some require desperate holding on and some require taking leave. However, every relationship worthy of benefits requires commitment, they demand taking some risk and they insist on deep honest vulnerability. We deserve this, we are worthy and capable of this, and nothing less.