

Misphatim 5771 - Torah Tiger Mother
Rabbi David Lerner

Shabbat Shalom.

There has been much in the media in the last two weeks about Amy Chua's new book: *The Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*. As you may know, Ms. Chua, a Yale Law professor, believes that American and Western parenting are too soft and focused too much on self-esteem and not enough on building skills and hard work.

As she wrote in the *Wall St. Journal* a few weeks ago, "Western parents try to respect their children's individuality, encouraging them to pursue their true passions, supporting their choices, and providing positive reinforcement and a nurturing environment. By contrast, the Chinese believe that the best way to protect their children is by preparing them for the future, letting them see what they're capable of, and arming them with skills, work habits and inner confidence that no one can ever take away."
(<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704111504576059713528698754.html>)

Eastern and Western parents want the same for their children – the best, but, she claims, they simply take different routes to get there. One a more lax, permissive parenting style that is dominant in the US today and the other, an extreme, disciplined and highly demanding style that she claims is the norm for parents from the East. She calls this a "Chinese mother" style; for which you don't have to be Chinese.

I am not sure that all parents have the same the definition of success for their children: there is a difference between wanting your child to be the most accomplished in terms of academic achievement, financial achievement or happiness. Sometimes, they go hand-in-hand; sometimes, they do not.

So, how does Ms. Chua's approach work?

"A lot of people wonder how Chinese parents raise such stereotypically successful kids. [...] Well, I can tell them, because I've done it. Here are some things my daughters, Sophia and Louisa, were never allowed to do:



Erin Patrice O'Brien for The Wall Street Journal Amy Chua with her daughters, Louisa and Sophia, at their home in New Haven, CT.

- attend a sleepover
- have a play-date
- be in a school play
- watch TV or play computer games
- get any grade less than an A
- not be the No. 1 student in every subject except gym and drama
- not play the piano or violin.”



There is a striking vignette in the book: her daughters make a birthday card, which she rejects, claiming it is not good enough. Ms. Chua complains, “I spend *half my salary* on stupid sticker and eraser party favors” for their birthday parties; “*I deserve better than this.*”

Ultimately, Chua believes that she knows what’s best for her daughters and she demands excellence. Reading the book reviews and blogs about her book this week, I was struck by the strong backlash. Many Asian parents claim that this is an unfair

portrait of them and their parenting approach. Many “Western” parents point out the flaws; there is not enough love and gentleness, the freedom to let the world unfold around you.

In his blog, Dr. Jim Taylor, a psychologist, pointed out what he liked about Dr. Chua’s approach. (<http://drjimtaylor.com/about/index.php>)

“Amy Chua knows what she values and lives those values.” Dr Taylor sees “too many parents who either don’t know what they value, don’t have the courage of their convictions to live their values, or are just plain too lazy or selfish to raise their children in accordance with their values.”

Now, Professor Chua’s approach has clear problems: it borders on being abusive; she is narcissistic and too harsh with her girls when they don’t live up to her standards. That said, there is something intriguing about her approach.

Ms. Chua overemphasizes outstanding performance as the key to self-esteem. No doubt it plays a role, but there are many other pieces to this puzzle. The verbal abuse is clearly destructive; at one point she throws her three-year-old out of the house and into the cold: “You can’t stay in the house if you don’t listen to Mommy.” Yikes!

This overly intense focus on perfection can lead to self-criticism and the lack of joyful experiences where one can enjoy success.

The harsh words when the girls fail can lead to a variety of disorders including anxiety, depression, cheating, eating disorders, low self-esteem, neurotic perfectionism, profound fear of failure, repressed rage and resentment toward their parents, and over-all unhappiness. This could lead to the feeling that they are not loved enough by their parents.

The Tiger Mom also omits many other skills that are vital to our modern world – emotional intelligence and social and group competence. It is precisely through navigating the complex emotional landscape like on a sleepover with a group of 10-year-old girls that her daughters could develop the complex skills required for group dynamics.

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As I was reading these articles this week, I was also reading *Parashat Mishpatim*, reviewing these laws from the ancient book of the Covenant. Scholars teach us that *Parashat Mishpatim* and its numerous laws from how to treat a stranger (which Becca insightfully expounded on) to how to treat slaves to what to do about an ox that gores you – is a very ancient part of the Torah.

It is called *Sefer Habrit* and Moshe reads it to the Israelites while they are still standing at Sinai. They are impressed, reciting the now famous words: “*Na’aseh V’nishma* – we support You.” We are behind you God 100%!”

Some of the laws come fast and furious. One section from chapter 21 reads: “He who strikes his father or his mother shall be put to death. [...] He who insults his father or mother shall be put to death.” (Exodus 21: 15, 17)

No messing around with Western parenting styles here! If you physically harm your parents or treat them with contempt, you have written yourself out of the community and even, out of your life.

This is the flip-side of what we read in the Torah last week in the Ten Commandments: “*Kabeid et aveikha v’et imekha* - honor your father and mother.”

This sounds a bit like Chua’s Tiger Mother. It feels like an extreme approach to parenting. But Judaism’s approach to being a parent does not lie in those few verses; Judaism is not simply the Torah, it is the thousands of years of interpretations and new understandings.

Written 1800 years ago, the basic law code of rabbinic Judaism, the Mishnah presents us with a fascinating set of obligations: Parents (here just fathers) have obligations toward their children and children have obligations to their parents. Judaism opens the conversation about parenting with concrete obligations, as is its wont.

What does a father have to do for his son? Well beyond food, clothing and shelter, there is *brit milah* – a Jewish religious circumcision, redeeming him (if he is a first born), teaching him Torah, teaching him an occupation so he can be self-sufficient, getting him married, and teaching him to swim.

An interesting list no doubt and it does not include perfecting the piano or getting straight As. The Mishnah also present us with a list of children’s obligations toward their parents: holding them in a sense of awe, respecting them, avoiding sitting in your parent’s seat (one I wish I could get onto my kids’ radar!), refuting a parent’s statement (one I have done a few times), honor, and when they need it (as they get older or ill): providing them with sustenance, clothing, covering, and bringing them in and out. (Mishnah Kiddushin 1:7)

In Judaism, parents and children have specific obligations that require serious amounts of work. But that is not the whole story either – the rhythms of Jewish life infuse values into the parent-child relationship. Think of this example: the blessing of the child by the parent at the onset of the Friday night Shabbat dinner. This moment is laden with emotion and depth.

Sharon and I place our hands upon our children’s heads one at a time, invoking the names of our ancient matriarchs or Jacob’s grandsons. Then we continue with the

Birkat Kohanim, the Priestly benediction – a three fold prayer for peace that dates back thousands of the years. Archeologists have found the *birkat kohanim* on a pottery shard in the City of David (just south of the Old City) from the year 900 BCE – almost 3000 years ago. In our last Israel trip, we stood right there.

Recalling such ancient words, this blessing reverberates through the generations. As I utter the words, I can hear and feel my ancestors' presence, their love and values coursing through my fingers and hopefully, into Talya, Ari and Matan's heads and souls.

That blessing speaks to what it means to be a Jewish parent: it is about being strict with our values and mitzvot for that is what has preserved us for millennia, but imbuing it with love. With a kiss on the *keppe*, on the head.

Like Asians, Jews were demanding parents – my paternal grandparents on my father's side were immigrants; they expected excellence from my dad and his brother and they achieved. The next generation continued that.

But now, like Ms. Chua, we are worried about decline – will our children be the first not to exceed their parents in terms of being a good Jew, *menshlikhkeit*, academic achievement and financial success? (Due to the economy, the latter is quite vulnerable.) Will our children be able to compete in this increasingly complex and competitive world without losing their ability for fun and joy?

Thankfully, Judaism's structure and approach is a moderate one. Children are expected to work hard – prepare their Bat-Mitzvah and do well!

But we place it within a package containing many other experiences. It is not enough to know how to *leyn* Torah or play the piano (if that is important to you), our young people must know how to be a *mensh*. They must be able to navigate groups and ideally, be creative, know how to experience joy and how to accept and reciprocate love.

That requires more than straight As, playing piano at Carnegie Hall (which Amy Chua's daughter Sophie did) and being "perfect." It needs a more subtle approach to parenting; one more along the lines of Wendy Mogul's ideas in her book: *The Blessings of a Skinned Knee*."

Like many of us, Sharon and I do not have all the answers as parents. We are constantly learning from them and trying to find balance – having our kids learn some sports, but they don't have to be the best. They have learned some music, but now we have taken a break from that. Teaching Torah and Judaism are central and our strict approach to Shabbat provides a framework where we can connect to each other without our cars on a walk, without TV over a board game, without the Wii or our Angry Bird cell phones, but with a good book. Singing, davening, community and experiencing each other and God's presence ideally round out the experience.

As Maimonides teaches: everything in moderation. We must find ways to teach our children seriously, understanding the value of hard work and discipline, of gaining skills, but at the same time, be supple enough to open their minds and hearts to the nuances of life, developing many other life skills that cannot be drilled in through practice or rote memorization.

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I watched a video where Ms. Chua (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E_GdZFyIE_Q) emphasized the end of her book where she admits her short-comings as a parent and backs off from some of her positions. She is right that parents in our society as whole, are too indulgent with their children overall (look at the average TV watching – almost 30 hours a week per child!).

But children also need the freedom to discover some of what they want within parental guidelines. I have heard in our community parents ask their kindergartener: do you want to go to Religious School? That is too much. Parents make decisions and collectively as a community, we must insist of our children’s Jewish education in Preschool through High School.

Ultimately, we all have to find the right balance. There can be too much piano, math, soccer, ballet and ice skating and there can be too little down time and too little Jewish learning and Jewish experiences. From what I have learned, there seems never to be enough quality time for parents and children. Thank God for Shabbat and for Judaism’s rituals like the parental blessing on Friday night and the deeply embedded obligations that parents and children have.

A father once came to the Baal Shem Tov, the great rabbi and founder of *Hasidism* in the 18th Century, with a problem concerning his son. He complained that the son was forsaking Judaism and morality and asked the rabbi what he could do. The Ba’al Shem Tov answered: ‘Love him more.’”

May we all strive to be balanced parents and even when setting limits and guidelines with our children, love them more.

Shabbat Shalom.