

I once attended a dramatic telling of the Noah's Ark story at a theater that frequently produces enormous productions with a biblical theme. There were many live animals - a colossal ark and a vast cast. One genuinely felt like they were witnessing the Ark narrative in real time and real life. As expected, the show's most intense part was the flood's start. The effects made it seem like water was rushing from every corner of the globe, falling from the sky and emerging from the ground. There was complete chaos on the stage.

Those live animals were producing many sounds, the people yelling and trembling, and the ark itself started to shake. This brought to life the intensity of this very moment. It helped one imagine what the experience was like for this family and these animals—and it was extreme. The only protection that Noah and his family had was the ark, in which they traveled through dangerous waters to reach safety and dry land eventually.

To say we live in a dark and stormy time is an understatement. At times, we feel like we are just floating on the surface; at other times, we feel like we are at risk of sinking. So, where do we find safety? Where do we find comfort? What will protect us? I want to offer an answer to these questions from the perspective of our tradition. Namely, our families are our arks in this dark and stormy world.

Within Jewish thought, the family is at the very core of our personal identities. For example, in Jewish practice, a person is recognized in the context of their family members. When one is called to the Torah, they are called not only by their first names but also by the name or names of their parent(s). We are who we are concerning our family members.

That is because family is a place of continuity. It is how our people's traditions and identities are passed on. We say *l'dor vador - from generation to generation*. And our Jewish traditions communicate this, such as at the Passover seder. One cannot begin to tell the Passover story until they are asked by the youngest person at the gathering why we do what we do as a part of our Passover observances. It is as if the rabbinic thought leaders understood that the story is most impactful for continuity when the older generation transmits the narrative and precepts to the next generation of their family.

Everyone has a role to play at the seder, and much of the older generation's role is to instruct the younger generation, which corresponds with the concept of a parent as an educator. The Shema instructs us to teach our tradition to the next generation when we recite, "*V'shinantam l'vanecha—and you shall teach them to your children.*"

The Talmud, the primary text of the rabbinic period, teaches that a parent has certain obligations to their children, most of which involve education—for example, teaching the younger generation a trade. A parent ought to help their child to evolve into people who can offer respect and honor to a potential partner. A parent must also teach their child our history, belief system, and basic tenets of Judaism. And a parent is even obligated to teach their child how to swim - to survive in the face of challenge and danger. As you can see from the Talmudic perspective, this is relevant and true not only for Jewish education but also for secular education.¹

¹ B. Talmud Kiddushin 29a

The Talmud states, "Denying a child knowledge robs the child of an inheritance."²

Parents are encouraged to construct the ark for their families, one of comfort, safety, trust, continuity, and education, where everyone has a role to play.

"What do you think makes a happy family?" asked a young teenager's teacher.

"A happy family," the teenager replied, "reminds me of a major league baseball team, with a parent or parents pitching and catching, and a child or children fielding, and everyone takes a turn at bat."

The arks we construct and on which we travel are essential to us, so our investment in our family dynamics is crucial to establishing arks that can withstand almost any storm. So, how do we construct and maintain?

Evelyn Mills Duval, author and family life counselor, writes: "Our families are built much as a good orchestra is built, not with every member playing the same instrument or the same notes, but with every family member knowing their instrument and blending it with the others, achieving a harmony that is based upon difference. This is the kind of harmony that is our crying need today in the modern world.

Many of us are familiar with the concept of harmony, or as we call it, *sh'lom bayit - peace within the home*. However, pursuing *sh'lom bayit* is not just a nice sentiment but a commandment. A relevant example is that Jewish law teaches that siblings should pursue peace together, not always making peace but pursuing peace for the sake of their parents. In fact, this is connected with the commandment from the Ten Commandments to honor one's parents. It is a mitzvah to pursue establishing a relationship of harmony and respect with family members. Because those are the foundations on which the ark is constructed.

One legend explains why the mezuzah on our doorposts is set at an angle: to teach us a critical lesson.

Rashi and his grandson, Rabbeinu Tam, debated the placement of the mezuzah. Rashi believed it should be placed vertically, while Rabbeinu Tam thought it should be placed horizontally. Rabbi Jacob Ben Asher suggested the compromise solution of slanting the mezuzah to teach all families the importance of compromise in establishing *sh'lom bayit*.

A helpful approach to forming an ark with *sh'lom bayit* is to ask the essential questions: what makes you feel safe in our family ark? Perhaps that is a question we can ask of any family member with whom we need and want to endure this stormy world.

So, what makes us feel safe, loved, comforted, supported, and at home? Each family must answer in its own way. Each family must build in its own way. We are the only ones who can answer those questions for ourselves, but fortunately, we have a rich and enriching tradition to guide us through these seas on our arks to reach safety and security on dry land.

² *ibid.*

