

Dvar Torah by Rabbi Baum

Mother's Day: Even from a Distance

The imminent arrival of Mother's Day reminds us of how this day will be so different from past Mother's Days. Children living in with their mothers, but rarely leaving their homes, will have to be even more creative this year in finding gifts for their mothers. Forbes magazine reports that according to its annual Mother's Day spending survey, the National Retail Federation (NRF) reports that two thirds of consumers expect to be celebrating this Mother's Day virtually. Those not living with their mothers, grandmothers or great-grandmothers will have to remain socially distant from them. No hugs, kisses or intimate family dinners. We can face this challenge, as we did on Pesach. Anyone not following this approach, as well-intentioned as they may be, is being reckless. Love is shown in many ways, and ironically, we express our love this year through physical separation. My own mother, who been home alone for almost two months, has reminded her children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren of this value many times throughout this crisis. As she, the only living grandmother of my children, often reminds us: 'We must stay apart this year so that we can be together again next year.'

Whether our mothers are alive or have already passed away, this weekend is a good opportunity to think about how our mothers continue to influence us. This is true even when we are not in their physical presence. While Mother's Day is not an inherently Jewish holiday, the impact of a mother should always be on our minds. Mother's Day becomes an instrument for this thought process. In what seems on the surface to be one of most peculiar Talmudic praises given to a person, Rabbi Yochannan ben Zakkai paid tribute to his student Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chanania by declaring "happy is the woman who gave birth to him" (Avot 2:8). The Rambam explains that, because Rabbi Yehoshua's fine character traits were nurtured by his exceptionally refined mother, she is forever linked with her son. Rabbi Ovadiah MeBartanura teaches that Rabbi Yehoshua's mother would visit study halls while she was pregnant with him to imbue him *in utero* with the love of Torah and the desire for knowledge. These trips and what they represented were clearly worthwhile, and she is therefore celebrated for this achievement. Both of these views are describing and prescribing ideal roles of a Jewish mother, raising a child with a sense of purpose, both in thinking and behavior.

There is an additional perspective on the ongoing influence that a Jewish mother has on her children. This influence goes well beyond physical proximity between parent and child. For example, at a moment of vulnerability, the lonely Yosef faced the possibility of slipping from his holy status by sinning with the wife of Potiphar. According to the often-quoted version of this story (Sota 36b), he was restrained by seeing the image of his father, Yaakov. However, there is an alternative version (Midrash Rabba Vayechi 95:20), stating that he was rescued by the image of his mother, Rachel, which was imbedded in his memory. Our mothers not only inspire and motivate us but are a continuous presence in our consciousness; in the language of the Midrash, "the rock" of Yaakov. They remind us to "stay out of trouble" and that they are always watching us. This may sound intimidating, but it is simultaneously empowering, as we strive to make them proud and are ashamed of disappointing them.

This Mother's Day, whether we are or are not with our mothers, we should pause to express gratitude for their gifts to us and aspire to be the greatest inspirations for our children and descendants, even when we are not physically with them.

Shabbat Shalom