

Rabbi Young's commentary reveals a thorny dilemma. How can children feel accepted if they sense that their life choices go against their parents' desires? Perhaps it is not enough to bless or accept our gay or intermarried children, or our non-white grandchildren. We need to ask ourselves, why is it that I wish my child was different, or made other choices? The step beyond acceptance requires looking deeply within.

When my African-American children entered our family, I knew I would have challenges to face. What I couldn't quite foresee was how becoming an interracial family was a magnificent gift. Now when I see people of other races on the street, I feel like I am looking at family. I no longer feel as disconnected from the rest of the human community.

When we become parents everything changes inside of us, like a vast churning cauldron of feelings and desires. Our children take us on a journey with blinding turns and unexpected hurdles. Sometimes they take us where we need to go.

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The striking image of children as coins brings to mind an equally striking passage in the Talmud (BT Bava Kamma 97b) describing an ancient coin with the image of Abraham and Sarah. The Talmud asks what the coin of "our father Abraham" looked like and concluded that it depicted an old man and old woman on one side and a youth and maiden on the reverse side.

Why a coin? Naturally, in the ancient Jewish imagination, a patriarch and matriarch of such standing would have engraved portraits gracing our currency. A coin moves from hand to hand and enters and exits the daily lives of those who use it. Like the message "In God We Trust," a coin imprints upon us an image and a message. Rebecca Goldstein's fictive children shine like a pocketful of new coins. While the engraved image may tarnish or fade over time, the monetary "worth of these strange coins" remains. And, as we learn from the image of Abraham and Sarah, the character of the portrait on a coin matures and achieves, with time, the patina of wisdom.

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Where do parents find the wisdom to do right by their children? Choices are seldom clear, the direction never mapped out in yellow highlighter: *Ah, this is the way!* The questions start immediately. Feed on demand or by schedule? Insist on a protein and two vegetables, or let them live on pasta and chocolate pudding? Enforce a curfew, or allow your teenager to decide, hoping trust will lead to responsibility?

There is no shortage of so-called parental wisdom books on the market. There is even now a new book analyzing all those books. That author's conclusion? No one knows the answers.

Communities, too, prescribe behavior. The Jewish community is no exception. We parents can find ourselves swept along, pushing our reluctant children to attend a certain camp, a certain school, to sit through synagogue services a requisite half-hour. We tell ourselves it's for their own good, that we are being dutiful parents. Meanwhile we risk driving a wedge between us, and breaking our own hearts.

Joan Leegant's collection of stories, *An Hour in Paradise*, will be published by W. W. Norton & Co. in August.

**"Each child, like a purse bursting with bright coins, some of foreign mint, with strange words and images engraved, so that a mother could only gaze and wonder: What is it that I have here? What is the worth of these strange coins? God grant me the wisdom to do right by them."** Rebecca Goldstein, *Mazel*

There is beauty in this image of the purse laden with coins. It suggests potential just waiting to be enacted by children minted in our image or by children so different from us that their actions are a strange currency.

There is also danger in this image of the purse. It suggests children as an investment, a receptacle into which we pour our money and strength in the hope of a return.

The task of the parent and the teacher is to embrace the beauty but avoid the danger. We must build homes and schools where potential can flourish and yet give children the freedom to walk their own paths toward God. Will we bless our children, say, if their Judaism is different from ours? Will we bless our children, say, if their happiness is found in the loving arms of one of the same sex? We must, if we are to honor their individual humanity. We hope their lives will reflect our values, but Judaism teaches us that the 5th commandment is not fulfilled by following a parent's every desire. In the Talmud (*Brakhot* 64a) the rabbis comment on these lines of Isaiah (54:13): "When all your children [Hebrew: *banayikh*] are taught of God, great will be the peace of your children." They instruct us to read the second "*banayikh*" as "*bonayikh*," meaning "your builders." So they remind us that children are not just receptacles of learning but are also builders of the future. We can provide the tools and the blueprints, but our children must build magnificent structures of their own choice.

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I too am moved by the image of a mother's wonder as she gazes at the beautiful foreign coins that are her children. And yet, this image of coins troubles me because it portrays children as fixed and fully formed. Fundamental to the joy and wonder of human beings is that we grow and change in relationships; that we mold and shape and remold and reshape each other in vibrant and dynamic interaction.

In Torah, Moses wants to know God's name, and God responds, "Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh," "I will be what I will be .... This is my name forever. This is my memorial unto all generations" (Exodus 3:14, 3:15). Our God is the God who Will Be, and thus the God of transformation, the God of possibility, the God that is ever evolving. And we are made in the image of that God. We are in a far more vibrant, complicated, and awesome relationship with each other than the image of strange coins allows. When we ask God to grant us the wisdom to do right by our children, we recognize that in order for our children to grow, change, and transform, we need to do the same. We need to be touched by them, changed through relationship with them, transformed by our experience with them. And they, valuable but not coins, also are changed and transformed through the blessing of relationship.

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\*NiSh'ma is the Hebrew word for "let us hear."