

THE MIDDLE CLASS DREAM

A High Holiday Sermon - 5744-1983
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The middle-class suburbs of Dallas are typical of middle-class suburbs rapidly developing in the burgeoning cities of America. Dallas, unlike places like Detroit and Pittsburgh, is a prosperous city with new businesses coming in every day. In spite of the recession, hundreds of families move into new jobs and new houses every day in the Dallas area. These families are coming to participate in the American Dream. That dream is to move up on the economic ladder, to get a better job, to make more money, to live in a bigger home, to buy a better car, to be able to send one's children to the best college. Most Americans know that this dream is not realized all at once. While climbing up the ladder of success, it may well be that the family will have to move from one town to another with some frequency. The statistics tell us that in a middle-class suburb, one house in every three will be sold in a given year. Moving out and moving up is part of the experience of the average middle-class family, but it can take a certain toll on our children and on everyone in the family.

The new middle-class suburb near Dallas is the object of our special reference tonight, because it has recently been smitten by a rash of teen-age suicides. Parents there have been shocked to discover that in their little paradise their teen-agers have serious problems. These parents have begun to ask themselves questions like, "How could this tragedy happen when our family is in the process of fulfilling the American dream? How could our children be unhappy when they live in such a beautiful home?" Some more sensitive parents are asking, "Were we unmindful of our children's need for their friends back home? Is it possible that our children are suffering because both parents are working and away from home? Is it possible that a better job is not the only factor to consider before moving to another city?"

We middle-class parents, following the American pattern, are prepared to give our children many things, a better Hi-Fi, a better TV, a car as soon as they can drive, a multi-degree college education; but the evidence indicates that these are not the things our children need most. At the top of the list of the things they really need is a parent who is available to be both a guide and a friend. They need a role model at home and understanding from a caring parent.

In generations past parents were not trained to be a child's friend. The distance between the generations was too great. The child was trained to respect and to give deference to a person of the older generation; but the parent knew that he/she had to be a role model to the child. The parent knew that he had to set a standard by which the child had to live.

In modern times, the parental role has shifted to that of friend. The dominant psychological school of just a few decades back insisted that we should let our children get their own knowledge by trial and error. Parents were encouraged to

be permissive. I don't think I will ever forget that TV special on a major network in which a doctor's widow from a New York suburb was interviewed along with her daughter who was in her young 20's. The daughter, who was working on her master's degree, was questioned about her liberal sex orientation, and she described how she slept with numerous people of various sexual genders at the same time. The mother was somewhat overwhelmed by what her daughter was saying on national TV, but the mother kept saying, "Well, it's your life. And you know that I love you no matter what you do". The mother obviously had swallowed the prevailing attitude which assigned the parent to the sidelines. Her job, as she understood it, was not to educate and to lead but passively to say, "but you know that I love you." The climax of this family's interview came at the end of the program, when the reporter, a middle aged woman, asked the young lady, "Just a few years ago, you would have been called a slut. What makes you different from a slut". The girl allowed that she hadn't thought about that, and she was not prepared to answer the question.

Young people need something more than approving parents. They need a parent with the guts to advise them how to keep from ruining their life. And most of all they need parents who live in such a way that the child is provided with a positive model to follow. We teach better by what we do than by what we say.

I seem to be discovering more and more parents today who don't worry about being a positive role model. They want, on the contrary, to be children themselves. An adult might be defined as one who has substantially mastered the art of discipline and is able to make choices that will enhance his/her character and will act in such a way as to strengthen his family and society. Fewer adults today seem to be concerned with self-discipline and responsibility. The husband who carries on an affair with his secretary and is shocked when his wife accuses him of betrayal is acting like a child. Such a husband is teaching his children, "When you get married, this is the way to act". The mother who does not have to work and is not home when her young children come home from school is teaching her children, "When you are a parent, you don't have to be there when your children need you".

Listen to this story that a Rabbi friend tells about some of his members. The Rabbi had a young lady in his confirmation class. Her parents brought her regularly to Sunday School for ten years. Just before her confirmation year, her parents got divorced, and each of them, within a year was involved with a new sexual partner who was committed to another faith. Within a year, then, the girl had acquired two new pseudo-parents, neither of whom was committed to Judaism. "Tell me", the bewildered girl said to her Sunday School teacher, "why am I being confirmed in Judaism, if it is so unimportant to my parents?". And then the child said to the teacher, "Well I guess this is where my parents are at at the present time, and this is what they need at the present time." Obviously the parents have taught the child the psychological jargon of the current social scene. Jerry Rubin is apparently the guru of these parents. The title of his sagacious book a few decades back was simply, "Do it". It is interesting that most of the Ten Commandments begin with injunctions that tell us what we can't do, if family and society are to endure.

A teen-ager needs a role model; he needs understanding from a caring parent, and he needs - to be needed.

What is there that the child of a middle-class family can do by way of contributing to the family's well-being? Unfortunately, we don't need him/her to contribute to the family's income. I say unfortunately, because one of the ways a child was welded to the family of generations ago was because he was needed to help the family make it economically. He would work in the fields alongside his parents and siblings, or he would go out into the city and bring home a pay check which helped to buy the food for the table. One of the greatest joys of my life was knowing that the few pennies I earned selling newspapers on the street were necessary for my family to eat during the great depression. What a joy to know that one is needed and is carrying one's weight! Women who have joined the work force know what a positive feeling this can be, but still we want to spare our children the need to work. Why on earth should we deprive them of this great privilege?

Last year the son of Ft. Lauderdale's richest tycoon met an untimely death from an overdose of drugs. This young man had everything to live for, we would say. He had a huge bank account, for example, and yet, he was in many ways a very deprived young man. He had never been challenged to develop the inner resources to stand up to the real problems of life. He had never known the pleasure of starting with a menial job and working his way up to the top. He started at the top, and so he never learned to compromise with people or to get along with them. His main labor in life was writing out checks, and in time, he found that boring. He was the classic example of the poor little rich boy, who never had to make friends, and therefore never had any real friends. The children in the middle-class suburbs of America are not quite in the same category as this young man, but they suffer from some of the same problems, on a lower scale.

Most of us in the middle-class tell our children, "All you have to do is get good grades. Your grades will be your reward to us." "If only you are successful academically," we tell them, "that will be our reward." And by successful, we mean they should get a higher degree and become a doctor or a lawyer or a business executive.

Frequently when our children are out of college and they have made it in their chosen vocation, we find that we are not happy with what we have created. We have created highly selfish individuals who think only of their own welfare and have little concern for the rest of the family. How can they be other than selfish, I ask you, when we have always told them that all we want from them is for them to be successful? How can they be other than selfish, when they have never had to lift a finger to help themselves to pay for their extended education? When one does nothing but receive, one does not learn to give! The American middle-class has done very well in creating several generations of narcissistic children.

Narcissistic children can get into a great deal of trouble as they grow older. When you have learned to live only for your own pleasure all your life, it becomes difficult at a later age to learn how to share with others. When two narcissistic people get married, the chances of that marriage enduring are small, and the chances of their having children are few. Many a young couple says to me in the pre-marriage meeting, "Rabbi, leave out that part of the ceremony that talks about how precious Jewish children are. We are not going to have children. They will cramp our life-style." With one swoop this couple condemns the Jewish people to death, as far as they are concerned.

Narcissistic children can be the more lonely, as they get older. If you haven't been taught to share and to live with others, you can become more desparate as you discover that self-gratification is unfulfilling. A foreshadowing of this problem is manifest amongst the teenagers of Dallas and other American cities, but the problem doesn't reach its peak in the lives of these youngsters until years later when they discover that academic success by itself is no assurance of enduring happiness.

Of course, not all of our children become narcissistic. Some of them, because of a positive family chemistry, will turn out to be warm and caring people. Still another segment of our children are early victims of the dynamics of the American middle-class family. I am speaking now of the children who for one reason or another cannot get the good grades and are not destined to be great accomplishers. Some of our families are embarrassed by these children, because we don't know how they fit into our highly competitive society. Some parents consider these children to be failures, a blot on the family pride.

The most important thing I have to say tonight is this - it is precisely in how we treat these children who are not the greatest accomplishers that we reflect our true humanity and our true Judaism. Very often these children are the most sensitive, the most capable of love, the most capable of family loyalty, the most loveable, if we give them half a chance. In our society, the greatest joy of a child is to know that he/she is loved, even if the child doesn't make "A's" or "B's". In no generation has it been true or required that all children in the family be academically motivated. In the American middle-class, the child who is only an average student lives in the shadow of the child who happens to find studying easy. The less academically oriented child may have other talents which are completely ignored or depreciated.

The teen-agers in the suburbs of Dallas, like the teen-agers of South Dade, have an extra load to carry. That load is the extreme success of their parents, vocationally and economically. Most of us do not realize that our earnings are in the upper 10% of incomes in the United States, the richest country on earth. Most of our parents did not earn that kind of money (and they were pretty good people), and some of our children won't. That is not a crime, and it is not a failure! Some of our children look at all their parents have done, education-wise and money-wise and are overwhelmed by it. "How can I ever hope to accomplish all that?", they ask; and if they have a poor year in school, the goal seems all the more overwhelming. It becomes very easy for such a child to become down on himself, to think that he's failed his parents, to think that he's unworthy.

Many of the Jewish youngsters who find their way into cults are those who don't achieve the best grades and who were made to feel that they are a failure. When a child experiences this kind of negative vibes from his parents, he can react in any one of several ways. He can become sullen and isolate himself; he can become violent and strike out in anger or desperation; or he can find another kind of family which will give him the approval he so desperately needs. That is what the cult family provides. The cult missionaries can spot an unhappy child a mile away. They walk up to him at school, in Dadeland, or in the college cafeteria, and they say, "Hey, you're a nice guy, how about coming to a party of friends." At the party everybody tells him what a wonderful person he is, and he is invited to a weekend vacation with them. The vacation turns out to be a 48 hour binge of propaganda work-shops and study in behalf of the "cause", a cause in which the young person can become an essential cog, a meaningful contributor. In a short time, the youngster is at the airport or standing on a street corner trying to raise money for his new found family and "charity".

A child wants to belong, wants to be needed, wants to be loved for what he is. This is true also of an adult. We need to be a little less demanding of one another, a little less goal oriented, a little more accepting of human differences and imperfections.

Now having said all this, I want to add a strong word of caution about your building up a big load of guilt. Most of us are pretty good parents. We are not perfect parents, because we are human. We get angry sometimes. We are selfish sometimes. We give bad advice sometimes, but most of us are pretty good parents. Many of us are better parents than our parents were. In spite of this, we may still have problems with our children. I would venture to say that in our permissive society, almost every family has a problem with at least one child. The chances are that even if we were perfect parents, our children would have serious problems in this wildly open society. It does no good for us, as parents, to get depressed about what is happening to our children. All we can do is our best. I know personally that some of the best parents in this congregation have had some of the most difficult problems with their children. I have talked to Rabbis and ministers around the country and everyone tells the same story. We all have to get together to see that our society becomes less permissive and less violent, but while we are working on society's problems, there is something we can do for ourselves as adults. We can make certain that we don't lower our personal standards and that we act responsibly. If we keep a hold on ourselves, our children will be able to see that there is a lighthouse in the storm, and that there is someone who is dependable and faithful. Then, if they are wounded in the fray, they will at least have us as a consoling and loving friend.

Just as we want to be open to our children, let us not forget to be open to each other as adults, for adults too are being battered in our society. We need to support one another and to encourage each other. The more each of us holds the line on elementary decency, the sooner the tide will change and the sooner we can all hope for a return to reason.

One of the most compelling facts that teaches us that there is something wrong with the American dream is that so many families who achieve considerable economic success soon break apart. When the family has made it financially, and the compelling need to work onward and upward is no longer there, many a husband and wife first take a good look at their affluence and ask with Peggy Lee, "Is this really all there is?! Haven't we forgotten a few things along the way?"

The high holidays are intended to be a period when we can detach ourselves from our regular routine and try to measure objectively what we are doing with our life. Do we, like the moth, want to continue to fly around the dangerous but alluring flames, or do we want to back off and look for a more lasting, if perhaps less glamorous, way of life.

The high holidays are the perfect time for parents and children to sit down to talk about their hopes and fears. If you can put your child at ease in a non-threatening environment, he might tell you what he is really afraid of or what he really needs from you. It would help, of course, to be as candid with your spouse, if you are both strong enough to handle an honest exchange of feeling.

The High Holiday period is the time to resolve to make some changes in the way you live your life, especially as you relate to members of your family.

In this atmosphere of acceptance and forgiveness, new beginnings are really possible.