Unit 1: Giving Support and Giving Space

Parenting is an eternal balance between supporting our children – caring for them, and nurturing them – while at the same time giving them space to become their own people – to learn for themselves, to take risks, and eventually to live in the world independently.

In this session we will ask the questions:
• How do I know I am offering enough support?
• How do I decide when it is time to step back, and give my child space?
• When should I push them?
• When should I hold them tight?

The Torah tells a story of a Jewish baby born in a particularly vulnerable moment. It is the story of baby Moses, born in Egypt to enslaved parents. This passage from Exodus 2:1-3 tells of the birth and early life of Moses:

Exodus 2:1-3

1 A certain man of the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman.

2 The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw how beautiful he was, she hid him for three months.

3 When she could hide him no longer, she got a wicker basket for him and caulked it with bitumen and pitch. She put the child into it and placed it among the reeds by the bank of the Nile.

In just three verses, the book of Exodus tells a story of parenthood. A couple marries, conceives, has a child, sees the beauty of the child, holds him close for three months, and then prepares to send him off into a dangerous world. It is the story of a particular child, but it in many ways, it reflects the universal experience of the bravery needed to bring a baby into the world.

Do you see your own parenting journey in this story? How is your story the same, and different?

במה אתהี่ קיימים לمؤשים את מסע הורחת שלם לסיפור הזה?
The text says that Moses’ mother “saw how beautiful he was.” Do you think this is a universal experience? Is there a moment from your baby’s early days when you really saw their beauty?

What are a baby’s needs in the first three months of life? Why do you think the story specifies that baby Moses stayed with his mother for three months?

Verse three describes a mother’s process of preparing to separate from her baby for the first time. She acknowledges that she can’t hold onto him forever, and does what she can to protect him and keep him safe. Finally, she takes the brave and terrifying step of letting the Nile carry him away from her.

The text says, “When she could hide him no longer” – having a newborn baby can feel like you are “hiding” together at home. How do you decide when you need to re-enter the world?

What does Moses’ mother do to prepare for her baby’s journey? When was the first time you separated from your baby? Was the moment scary? Was it exciting? What did you do to prepare for that separation? Were you able to trust that your baby would be safe?

Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki, 1040-1105), one of the most important rabbinic commentators on the Torah, makes a comment about “bitumen and pitch,” the materials used to prepare the basket. He wonders why the Torah specified the use of two materials, rather than just one.

Rashi on Exodus 2:3

Bitumen and pitch – with pitch outside, but with bitumen inside, in order that the righteous child would not smell the disagreeable odour of the pitch.
Moses’ mother seeks to provide him with both safety and comfort. What do you do to protect your child’s safety? How do you ensure their comfort? When might these goals be in conflict?

The baby in this story faces real danger – Pharaoh has decreed that all Jewish babies be killed. How do you distinguish between real danger to the child, and fear driven by your own anxieties?

Separating from a little baby is a notoriously hard moment for a parent, but supporting older children can be equally challenging, and sometimes even more complicated.

The Megillah of Esther, a book of the bible read on the Jewish holiday of Purim, tells the story of an unconventional family. Mordecai is a foster father to Esther, who we are told has no living biological parents. Esther has become queen, and is in a unique position to attempt to save the Jewish people from a royal decree to kill all the Jews in the Persian empire.

From afar, Mordecai sends Esther a message that is equal parts support and challenge:

Esther 4:13-14

13Mordecai had this message delivered to Esther: “Do not imagine that you, of all the Jews, will escape with your life by being in the king’s palace. 14On the contrary, if you keep silent in this crisis, relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another quarter, while you and your father’s house will perish. And who knows, perhaps you have attained your royal position for just such a moment.”

Mordecai essentially tells Esther three things:
1. You are not above this,
2. This is not on your shoulders alone,
3. This is your moment.

What do you think of Mordecai’s message? Is he encouraging Esther to be her best self, or putting too much pressure on her?
The last phrase “who knows, perhaps you have attained your royal position for just such a moment” has been used by later Jewish sources as expression of encouragement. Do you find this message to be encouraging? What would you have said?

When have you, as a parent, struggled to know whether to push your child to take a risk? Share a story with your havruta.

(For younger kids this might mean attempting the bigger slide, singing in front of people or jumping in the pool. For older kids – think: heading off to camp, learning to drive, or taking a first real job.)

How do other modern Jewish parents think about the balance of support and space? You can continue the discussion with these articles from Kveller’s blog:

- As My Daughter Starts Kindergarten, My Own Mom’s Advice Rings True:

- I Was Frustrated By My Daughter’s Separation Anxiety Until I Realized This:
  [http://www.kveller.com/i-was-frustrated-by-my-daughters-separation-anxiety-until-i-realized-this/](http://www.kveller.com/i-was-frustrated-by-my-daughters-separation-anxiety-until-i-realized-this/)

- Getting Over My Fear of Sending My Daughter With Special Needs to Sleepaway Camp: