



***Parshat Shmini — Shabbat Parah***  
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**Helicopters, Teacups, and Swimmers**  
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Help me finish this sentence. You cannot be any happier than...your least happy child.

The emotional life of a parent is deeply connected to the emotional life of their child.

Perhaps that is why there is such a thing as a helicopter parent. This is the dictionary definition:

A helicopter parent is a parent who pays extremely close attention to a child's...experiences and problems, particularly at educational institutions. Helicopter parents are so named because, like helicopters, they "hover overhead", overseeing every aspect of their child's life constantly.

Helicopter parenting is real.

College professors have told me that they have received calls from helicopter parents. I don't like my son's grade. We are big donors to this university. Is there any way to reread, or regrade, his essay?

Partners at law firms have told me that they have received calls from parents of young associates complaining about the realities of their *adult child's* life in the law firm, the hours are too long, partners are too uncaring.

The recent college admissions scandal is a particularly florid example of helicopter parenting gone amuck.

We all know where helicopter parenting leads. Not to mix a metaphor, but it leads to children who are teacups--fragile, lacking resilience, lacking the ability to fall down, get up, and keep on moving.

How do we *not* do that? A writer named Malinda Carlson describes herself as a helicopter parent who is trying to stop. She writes that she is trying to internalize the wisdom of

Atticus Finch in To Kill a Mockingbird who tells his son: “There’s a lot of ugly things in this world, son. I wish I could keep ‘em all away from you...*That’s never possible.*”

Atticus Finch is right. As parents what we want most in the world is to protect our children from harm. But what we can do least in the world is to protect our children from harm. We love, infinitely. We care, infinitely. But we can control so little. Often we control nothing. We can’t control what their third grade teacher says or does, let alone their college professor, let alone their boss. We can’t control what their friends say or do. We can’t control if others harm them. We can’t control their health, whether they are thriving physically or struggling. We can’t control their mazal, whether they find a life partner or are ever looking. We can’t control whether they find their path in life, know what they want to do for work and are doing it, or are ever meandering. We can’t control whether they take Judaism seriously. Parenthood is an ongoing graduate seminar in humility. How do we make our peace with the fact that we care so much and control so little?

Two parents named Kayode and Oluwatoyin Adewumi know only too well that we care so much and control so little. Living as Christians in Nigeria, they could not control the fact that they and their two young sons were persecuted by Boko Haram. They could not control that to escape imminent peril they had to flee to America, beginning again as penniless asylum seekers. They could not control that they were homeless, living in a shelter in New York City. They could not control that the father had to work two jobs and the mother had to retrain to get certified as a health care aide, to try to just barely eke out a modest living.

There was so much they could not control. But they could control what they did about it. They created a warm home, albeit in a homeless shelter, where their sons felt safe and loved and

protected. They role modeled hard work and learning and growing. They taught their children that faith, and church, are hugely important.

Their story became a national news story because, against all odds, against much better resourced and trained competitors, their 8-year old son Tani won the New York State chess championship. New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof shared a poignant image of an 8-year old boy lugging a chess trophy that is as big as he is to his homeless shelter.

Tani is a chess champion. But Tani's parents, Kayode and Oluwatoyin, are, as Kristof pointed out, an antidote to helicopter parenting.

They did not select his extracurricular activities. They did not pick his clubs that would pad his resume. They were not in the office of the chess club trying to make him take their child. They did not pester Tani, did you practice your chess today? When Tani expressed his interest in chess, they supported him, taking him to tournaments and making their laptop available for him to deepen his skills. Tani's passion for chess was about him, not about his parents.

Tani's parents are the antidote to helicopter parenting not only because they gave Tani space, but also because of their values. Kristof's column prompted a massive outpouring of love and generosity. Suddenly this penniless asylum-seeking family had options and choices. It is easy to imagine how differently helicopter parents would have responded to the way his actual parents responded.

For example, Tani received offers for a free education at the best private schools. It is easy to imagine helicopter parents saying yes to this. Get our son the best. The best teachers. The best resources. The best chances at getting into the best high schools that would then get him into the best colleges. But Tani's parents said no to the best private schools. They kept him in PS

116, the public school that first educated him, exposed him to chess and that waived the 35 dollar chess fees when his parents did not have it.

Then there were the offers of homes. Kristof describes that the family received offers of palatial homes. That must have been tempting for a family that had been living in a homeless shelter to catapult from that shelter to a palace. But Tani's parents said no to the palace, and yes to a nice but humble two bedroom apartment a few blocks away from the public school.

Then there was the money that was raised by the gofundme page that ensued after Kristof's column. \$200,000 came in. Can you imagine how helicopter parents might have spent that money? Use some for tutors, some for fancy camps, some for a trip to Thailand to save the elephants. Tani's parents spent zero on Tani or on their own family. They tithed 10 percent to their church, and they are devoting the remainder to help other immigrants from Africa who are struggling to make it in America.

Tani's chess genius is a gift from God. That is how he was born.

But Tani's growing moral compass is a gift from his parents. Menschen are made not born, and they are made by parents who have good values.

Now it is true that most of our children are not like Tani. Most of our children are not prodigies. Most of our children do not know what their great passion in life is by the age of 8. What do we do for our children who are ordinary, not exceptional; who are wandering, not focused; who are struggling, not thriving?

That is when we *most* need decent parenting. That is when we *most* need parents who are the opposite of helicopter parents. That is when we most need what the Talmud has to teach. In the tractate Kiddushin, the Talmud teaches that one of the most important things a parent can teach a child is how to swim. This teaching is on the wall of our JCC pool. But the teaching is

meant not only literally. How do we teach our children to swim *in life*?

How do we teach them to swim when they are struggling? When they are wandering? When they are experiencing disappointments?

I don't know the answer to that. There is no one answer to that. But I do know this much. The wrong answer to that is that the parent somehow can make it right. The wrong answer to that is that the parent is going to swoop down and protect. The wrong answer to that is that the parent throws their weight around, sends out emails, makes phone calls, writes checks, arranges things. Instead the Talmud's wisdom is teach your child resilience so that your adult child can figure it out on his or her own.

There is no how to manual that applies to the infinite variety of dilemmas that will confront our children.

But we can role model the resilience that will allow our children to figure it out for themselves. We cannot do more than that. But if we can do that, we are doing our job.

Resilience isn't easy. Resilience takes work. May what we do here—prayer, learning, community, mitzvah, Shabbat, Pesach—enable us to tap into our own resilience. May we transmit that resilience, which takes ongoing work, to our children so that we are not helicopters, and our children are not teacups. May we all become better swimmers. Shabbat shalom.