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Gift to Mothers on Mother's Day

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It was a dull afternoon at the pool in Miami, so three Yiddishe mamas decided to liven things up a little bit by boasting about their sons. Each tried to out do the others in her exaggerated praise. "Let me tell you about my Theodore," began the first. "What a son! Every week he goes out with a different woman. "You think that's something? My Henry is now in love. And not just with anyone, with a woman surgeon!" Amid oohs and ahhs, the third woman spoke up. "So, what!" she said. "No question. You both have nice boys who like nice girls. But my Seymour and me, we have a relationship. Every week he goes to a man and pays him \$95 an hour. And for what? Just so he can lay down on the couch and talk. But who is he talking about at such fancy prices, my Seymour? Me!"

And so it goes. The source of our admiration, and the source of all our psychological neurosis. She has been called possessive, over-involved, over-identified with her husband and children; guilt-ridden and guilt-producing. She has been blamed as the root of all our adult problems. Because of her smothering love we claim we are impotent, unable to have healthy relationships, unable to compete or excel, unable to fail, or be independent, or be attached. She seems a shrill irritation to us; we laugh and sneer at her in her mink, sitting at the pool in Miami, kvelling over us. On Mother's Day weekend, we make a national fuss over her; we try to appease her with a day all her own, a day on which we deem her more than acceptable, even lovable. Flowers and candy, we lay on the sacrificial alter of our own ambivalent feelings for her. A guilt-offering with ourselves as High Priests. Schmaltz and sentimental lyrics we will sing to her as the psalmists of old. We will celebrate her; we will hope she forgives our little iniquities. We will celebrate her; we will hope she forgives our little iniquities. We will bring her nostalgic cards and pictures the kids drew, and we will love her very much. But on Monday, we will be Seymour on the couch again, seemingly innocently jibing at the women who birthed us and nurtured us and sustained us.

Author Erica Dunnean writes, "Too well we know the Jewish mother our writers have given us, the all-engulfing nurturer who devours the very soul with every spoonful of hot chicken soup she give, with every shakerful of salt contains a curse. Too well we know the feeder whose heart-wrung offerings are imbedded with poisons."

The very words “Jewish mother” seem to conjure up double-edged images, a love/hate mixture of wistful memories and downright hostility. She is at one moment a hardworking balaboosta in apron, making the house shine for Shabbat, turning a few potatoes and water into a meal fit for a king, the one who bandages our wounds and kisses away our tears. But the next moment she is Sophie Portnoy, Phillip Roths’ gift to the Jewish world, an obscenity we are supposed to find funny, a caricature of both Judaism and womanhood. “A Jewish man with his parents alive,” Alex Portnoy whines to his psychiatrist, “is half the time a helpless infant.” “Listen, come to my aid,” he says...” spring me from this role I play of the smothered son in the Jewish joke!” Portnoy’s complaint and Freud’s science – blame it on the mother.

But this year, in honor of Mother’s Day, I, a rabbi, a Jew, a son, a brother, and a husband – propose to announce to the Jewish community that the joke is no longer amusing. It mocks us, it taunts us, and it jests at our pain and our love and our giving. As girls grow up, it robs them of their natural role model. For they know that to marry and love and have children is praiseworthy; and they are taught that the family is central in Judaism. The mother is the queen of a peaceful Jewish home. Yet who are they supposed to emulate publicly and proudly? These clichés, are these to be their inheritance? We know the reality of our mother’s love, but then we smugly repeat these blasts at them. “How many Jewish mothers does it take to change a light bulb? None—they would rather sit in the dark and suffer.” Silly, controlling, masochistic – these are the characters daughters expect to become. We are their daughters and sons. What do these supposedly comical punch lines tell us about ourselves and about the way others view us? What are we to say? We are the sons and daughters of Jewish mothers. A man once told me, “Look at the mother if you want to see the daughter in 20 years.” It’s a sneering jab at us, too. The Jewish mother stereotyped gives birth to an even uglier inheritance: The Jap stereotype. Like our mothers, our daughters are accused of being materialistic, pampered, and sexually repressed; or the Jewish prince; he is accused of being spoiled, immature, made to believe [by his mother, of course] that he is the center of the universe. Such epithets are driving a wedge between Jewish men and Jewish women.

We could, on the one hand, giggle and say, “Well, it’s true, you know, about Jewish women in general...” or we could say, “It’s not that serious; it’s harmless, little banter.” Or, on the other hand, we could stop fooling ourselves.

We could do what Rabbi Jeff Salkin did in his excellent article in Moment magazine and call these jokes exactly what they are: self-hating Judaism and “kosher” sexism. Self-hating Judaism, he says, because we imply that there is something inherent in Judaism that creates princesses or guilt-grabbing mothers. Self-hating Judaism, Salkin continues, because we ourselves recast the old Gentile anti-Semitism of the greedy money-minded Jew into the [bedecked], status-conscience, upwardly mobile Jew. Then we become defensive about ourselves. “Oh, no, not me, I wouldn’t be an overbearing Jewish mother...” “Oh, don’t worry, I am not a Jap” ...we think we are laughing at ourselves. We are simply playing a game – trying to pretend that we are not really ashamed of what we are. And, ultimately, our insistence upon laughing at our mothers is not only self-hating Judaism, but socially acceptable sexism as well. It is a cliché of all that is feared in women – drive, ambition, intense emotionality, fierce loyalty, and the ability to give selfless love.

In How To Be a Jewish Mother, Dan Greenberg tells us that guilt is a Jewish mother’s main method of social control. She gets her “payoffs” though, in the attention – albeit negative – that she receives from depressive collapses and hysterical outbursts. So, we have learned, because Jewish women are, in reality, roughly twice as likely to be diagnosed depressed as non-Jewish, according to an article by psychologist Pauline Bart. It’s interesting that we buy the stereotype. It is our model, it is fed to us and we have eaten it up, learning to laugh along – to find it farcical. But underneath it all, women wonder if they are profoundly good. In the book Psychoanalysis and Women, I found the following citation: “Being a decent model for a child is a most worthy objective, but one can become a worthwhile model for a child only if one feels oneself worthwhile. There must be some confirmation of “worthiness” from other people...” How do we foster this confirmation of worth upon Jewish mothers? We turn a private relationship, with all its ups and downs and intimacies and problems into a community jest along. Yes, we should be able to laugh at ourselves, to make fun of ourselves, to even scold ourselves through humor. Yes, we should not deny that families have their own dynamics, that no mother is perfect, that all of us have psychological grievances against one or both of our parents. But where do we draw the line? When do we say enough, it is no longer funny? Now, which is it to be, the Yiddishe mama or the women in the mink at the pool in Miami who we mock and at whom we point the accusing finger?

When do we ask Don Greenberg to write a book praising the Jewish women in his life for loving him in spite of his own idiosyncrasies? When do we reject Philip Roth's own neuroses being heaped on the most convenient scapegoat and then calling it "modern Jewish literature?" Perhaps that should be the gift we Jewish daughters and sons give on Sunday, freeing our mothers from the stereotypes we have not only imposed upon them but have also, consciously, or unconsciously, aided and abetted others in perpetuating. Therefore, on this Sabbath, Erev Mother's Day, if you will, I offer this sermon as a gift to my own mother, and the mothers here tonight, and to all the other mothers whom we have made the butt of our jokes, the objects of our ridicule, and the recipient of our nervous struggle to accept who we are and from where we have come. Let each return to her rightful inheritance, not of candy or cards or flowers, but of deeper respect, gentleness, admiration and caring. Amen.