

My Mother Was Right
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Last month the whole family celebrated my mother Bella's 80th birthday. I took many photographs. The ones that stand out include a photograph of my daughter Jennifer helping my son Brandon use his speaking device to say "I love you grandma," the one of my mother hugging her 5 year old great granddaughter, Samantha, who is already nearly her height, and the shot of the look on my mother's face as her grandson, Brett, played "*Have I Told You Lately That I Love You?*" on the piano.

Each of her children, grandchildren and even a great grandchild related a special story about my mother and then lit a candle. I was too busy taking pictures to hear the exact words of the tributes, but I know what my mother said. She said "We as a family must stick together. Through thick or thin, good or bad, sickness or health, feast or famine, we must be there for each other." To my siblings and to me this lesson is nothing new, because my mother reminds us of it every day – maybe twice a day – sometimes even three times a day.

But as I look out at my extended family and friends of the family, I see another dynamic. Family members and friends who no longer speak with each other – siblings and cousins, parents and children, all estranged.

I was puzzled as to how our extended family had drifted apart when my mother was so focused upon keeping the family together. So I drew upon my background as a forensic CPA. I put on my forensic hat, and began an

investigation. To do this I embarked upon a journey and visited many extended family members that I hadn't seen for years.

One of my first visits, about a decade ago, was to my cousin Jack, whom I had neither seen nor spoken with in at least 20 years. We met for lunch at a restaurant on the river in Chicago. As we waited for our lunch, I said "Jack, one thing that I miss since I have been living in LA is a good Chicago hot dog." Jack responded "Let's cut to the chase, Michael. How much money do you need?" I said "What!" He said "Michael, after all of these years, I could only conclude that the reason you came to see me is for money. In fact, the people in my office started a pool as to what you wanted, and money was at the top of the list." I said "Jack – I'm not here for money. I am here to reconnect with the family." Since then I have reestablished a relationship with Jack and have visited with him and his family many times.

Last week I was in Chicago and had dinner with him. I told him the topic of my Yom Kippur address. And – wow – did I get him going. It was like the dam broke.

Jack first told me how when he was a child, his mother, Mollie, limited his contact with his father's side of the family because of some events that happened years earlier. After some persistence, I learned that his mother always believed that she married down and that the Kaplans were not as good as her family. He said to me "Michael, I wish she would have considered the feelings of her loved ones – her children - when she cut these people off. He went on to say "I longed to get to know the Kaplans better, and when I finally had the opportunity to meet

them, I found that even though the Kaplans included a policeman, a junk yard owner and a service station operator, they were wonderful people.”

My mother was right. Get past the trivial stuff. Give your children the gift of family.

Last December, when I was in Ft. Lauderdale, I had dinner with my mother’s first cousin, Rachel. Rachel is 89 years old. We reminisced about years gone by, and we spoke of family members, including Cousin Howard. I said, “Rachel, I can get Howard on the phone so that you can say hello to him.” Rachel said “Please don’t call him. He won’t like hearing from me and I would rather not speak with him.” After some investigation, I learned what the disagreement was about. It wasn’t even a dispute between Rachel and Howard; it was a dispute between their parents - about money. Many years ago, 1921 to be exact (actually my mother corrected me – it was 1920), Rachel’s father, Morris, loaned money to Howard’s mother, Esther, to bring the family by ship from the old country to America. When they arrived from Romania, Esther told Morris “I will pay back the \$375 as soon as I get a job.” Morris responded “Esther, I sent you \$400 not \$375, I expect you to pay me back \$400.” Esther said “You are a meshugenah, Morris. You only sent \$375.” What neither of them knew was that the exchange broker skimmed a \$25 gratuity and didn’t tell anyone about it. As a result, Morris no longer spoke with Esther, Rachel rarely spoke with Howard, and

of course - Rachel's children and Howard's children – who live in the very same city, have had no family connection at all.

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And that reminded me of my colleague, David, who recently told me that his father does not speak with him. Why? His father doesn't speak with him because – instead of calling him “dad” or “father,” he calls his father by his first name, Max. Now when he and his father were in business together, his father didn't mind being called Max, but now that they are no longer in business together Max wants to be called “dad.” I suspect that if this situation continues, David's son will lose all contact with his grandfather.

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And then there is a family friend, Rose, who recently lost her daughter to cancer. Rose's sister, Judith, wasn't there to comfort her. It seems that many years ago, Rose and Judith ceased speaking with each other because of a disagreement over which senior citizen's home was most appropriate for their parents. And yes, a byproduct is that Rose's children have had no contact with Judith's family.

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We as Jews see ourselves as charitable givers. As I look at our Congregation Or Ami family, I see the wonderful things that we do for each other and our community through our commitment to Henaynu and Social Action programs. I am so proud of the way our members act like a family should. I am so proud of how our members support other congregants who are struggling with illness and loss. And I am so proud of how our members have reached out and helped strangers in need, how we adopt abused children in foster homes and how a group of our members traveled to Vietnam to bring medical and dental services to children in orphanages and wheelchairs to the needy. How on Mitzvah Day we packed 300 duffel bags of supplies for children removed from their homes and how we provided sacks of clothing and sundries for the homeless downtown. We don't even know these people, yet we help them because they are much less fortunate than we are. But if we got to know some of them, would there be a risk that occasionally one might offend us. Perhaps one may fail to thank us appropriately for a gift – fail to invite us to a graduation – or neglect to send us a card on our birthday. Would we still continue to support them or would we – as we sometimes do with our family members - discontinue our contact with them - because we believe we are right?

At Or Ami, we value the study of Torah, a process which revolves around discussion and debate. But so many of us – including me - who embrace a religion that is founded upon study, discussion and debate, become so entrenched when dealing with our own families. On one hand we spend hours discussing the difference between “remembering the Shabbat” and “keeping the

Shabbat.” But on the other hand it takes only seconds to acknowledge that Sylvia and Harold seated us at a table too close to the kitchen at their son’s Bar Mitzvah reception, and in return we will never speak to them ever again let alone invite them to our simchas.

Of course, sometimes there are family dynamics – hurts that run so deep - that cannot be healed.

Yom Kippur is the time of the year when Jewish tradition calls upon us to contact those with whom we have had misunderstandings or disputes, and ask for forgiveness. Perhaps this Yom Kippur each of us can embrace this tradition in - Or Ami style - and reach out to our own families. Perhaps this Yom Kippur each of us can contact one – just one family member with whom we have lost touch because of some disagreement or misunderstanding. Perhaps this Yom Kippur each of us can let go of just one dispute – and phone one family member and reestablish contact. Perhaps this Yom Kippur each of us can give our children the gift of introduction to a branch of the extended family that they have not had the opportunity to know.

I know that some of you are going to extend a Mazel Tov to my mother for the celebration of her 80th birthday. But the biggest Mazel Tov should be for the lesson that she taught and continues to teach her children. Keep the family together and give your children the gift of a loving family.

May we all be inscribed in the book of life for a sensational year.