

MIXED BLESSINGS

Jewish mothers and daughters and eating disorders

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A Jewish mother instructs a daughter in prayer, shows her how to fold the dough for rugalach, or the way to run a business. Other lessons are more subtle. Daughters take their mothers in like food, and slowly they become a part of them. But the relationship is not as unfettered as a facile song from Fiddler on the Roof might suggest. While the enduring connection between mothers and daughters is, indeed, a blessing, Jews know that blessings are always mixed. Pain and suffering are also transmitted from mother to daughter from generation to generation.

Sometimes the pain and trauma of persecution, war, and displacement are passed down ineffably, or the more insidious violence of poverty leaves scares that linger. Sometimes a family struggles with its own unique history of mental or physical illness. The “secret” may even be a history of eating disorders in a mother or a grandmother.

And why is this dark side of a mother’s past a problem? That it has been hard to be a Jew is well known, and many would argue that hardship and pain deepen faith and understanding, and galvanize Jews as individuals and as a people. The problem is not that histories may be dark, but that the darkness remains a secret. Eating disordered families are often consciously unaware, or choose not to attend to the pain of the past. More often than not these mothers have had the same relationship with their mothers, who hid their traumas from their daughters, or were themselves unable to acknowledge the fullness of the emotional pain that they experienced. Yet suppressing, forgetting, or avoiding what seems too painful or threatening to know does not make it go away. Instead, emotions fester and spread, and daughters are left with some ineffable upset that lacks form or narrative. And this is when the body enters, where remnants or glimmers of psychological experience are turned into physical preoccupations and sensation.

Even then, such psychosomatic misuse of food and eating are done in secret. Covering the emaciated frame in layers of clothing, eating alone late at night in a closet, or purging in the bathroom with the shower running are behaviors that both defend against, but also express the pain.

And why in secret? Two important factors must be considered here. Firstly, an absence of awareness is what defines an event or situation as traumatic. That is, the upset is so overwhelming that the individual cannot process or organize it in any clear or useful way.

And then there is the Jewish community, full with support and empathy and, alas, judgment. Yet again, intimacy is a mixed blessing. In a tight knit, well-defined culture much is given and much is expected. The pressure to perform or to live up to communal expectation can at times breed shame regarding anything that is considered less than exemplary, or even less than ordinary. This pressure in the community may be overt- to return when one strays from her religious duty or identity, for instance.

More often it is less obvious. The same pride and hope upon which Jewish mothers nurture their daughters can sometimes contain rigid and unrealistic expectations that preclude any struggle or conflict between the pair, or within the child. Even the most loving mothers worry about how they will be perceived in synagogue or on the street should any difficulty be exposed, any imperfection sully the picture. Such shame-ridden fear breeds secrets, for it demands an unrealistic seamlessness and reality must be at least partially hidden. Secret food rituals or compulsions that allow the daughter to appear thin and “beautiful” may be veiled expressions of this pressure, while such behavior also expresses the underlying pain that is not acknowledged, psychic pain made concrete in starvation, purging, and malnutrition.

How can such secrets yield to more open, and less destructive communication and self-expression? Psychotherapy can be a process in which the eating disordered person is encouraged to examine their history, including the experiences or history of their family. Sometimes, if both parties agree, mother-daughter sessions are indicated, a safe place to share what has been avoided or even unformulated between the pair. The feelings that emerge are not treated as alien invaders that visit themselves on members of a close family and risk its demise, despite the shock, pain and conflict they may provoke. Instead such emotions are identified as important signals that aid in communication and understanding. The sufferer is also reminded that feelings and fantasies are distinct from action. While it may seem counter intuitive, an individual is reminded that the best defense against destructive action is awareness and expression of affect. In fact, making sense of a family’s pain and a daughter’s symptoms through exploration and expression diminishes the impulsive and compulsive misuse of food as a means to hide and covertly express what has felt too dangerous and ineffable. Even, or especially if painful revelations and communications result, these can bring Jewish mothers and daughters closer together. An appreciation for the many different parts of one another becomes, after all, the light in the darkness.