

For the Sake of Our Children
Presented by Rabbi Janet Marder as part of a panel on
Supporting Our Teens: A Multifaith Community Response
August 31, 2009

A passage from the Hebrew Bible: "*Mizmor l'David...Adonai ro'l lo echsar. Bin'ot
deshei yarbitzeini, al mei m'nuchot y'nahaleini.*"

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; he leadeth me beside the still waters; he
restoreth my soul.
He guideth me in straight paths for His name's sake.
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the
shadow of death; I will fear no evil: for Thou
art with me; thy rod and thy staff they
comfort me.

Thou preparest a table before me in the
presence of mine enemies: thou anointest
my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all
the days of my life; and I will dwell in the
house of the Lord for ever.

We are used to hearing those words at funerals. For 2000 years the 23rd psalm
has offered, to those who are tired and grieving and hungry for comfort and love, an
image of rest and peace, of nourishment and shelter. That is one of the things that
religion can do. It looks directly at the world, as it is, and then presents an oppositional
image, of how the world could be. It fills our heads and our hearts with these images,
and then organizes us around our shared commitment to bring these images to life.

What does the 23rd psalm have to say to our kids? What does it have to say to
us? It is about having all that you need. It is about having time to breathe, and spending
time outside, under the sky, and feeling safe enough to lie down in peace. It is about still

waters and clear, straight paths. It is about sensing that your life has purpose and direction. It is most of all about knowing that whatever happens you are not alone, and because of this you can walk through places overshadowed by darkness and fear.

One line continually remains in my mind: “Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies.” At first we picture a soldier somewhere on a distant battlefield opening up his K-ration, his sealed packet of food, and sitting down to eat – finding a moment of respite amidst the tumult of war.

But we can take the image much farther than that. All of us live “in the presence of enemies,” and there are plenty of enemies out there all the time, threatening to grind down our spirits and cast us into despair. Our kids live surrounded by enemies: academic, social and sexual pressures; drugs, violence, shattered families, absent or abusive parents; poverty; boredom; a culture that glorifies the superficial and can be cruel to those who are different.

Young people today are walking through dark and dangerous valleys. What kind of table can we set before our kids to help them survive times that can be dark and chaotic? How can we nourish and sustain them in the presence of their enemies?

Religious congregations have a special role to play in laying the table. For we are the keeper of powerful images that restore the soul, and we are commanded to turn these images to reality. We are the makers of sanctuary – safe places where kids can know that they matter, that they are made in the image of God, each one of them a person of irreducible worth; irreplaceable, entitled to respect; with a crucial role to play in the world. We are the teachers of ancient traditions, connecting our kids with what is timeless and helping them transcend the frustrations of the present.

We are the builders of value—centered communities that demonstrate an alternative ethic, opposed to the materialistic messages that assault our kids from every conceivable media outlet. We create places where you are not judged and pigeonholed by your grades or your SAT scores, or by what you look like or how much you weigh, or your car or your clothes or the size of your house. We try to dwell in the House of the Lord – a place where nobody is mocked for not fitting in or rejected for not being cool. We use words like love and justice; we challenge young people to reach beyond themselves and connect to others through service; we call them to mobilize their talents and gifts to heal this broken world.

Religious communities could do all these things, and more. We could surround our kids with good shepherds and guides – caring adults who love and inspire young people. We could create times and places for our kids to talk about what’s on their minds, and give them adult mentors who are constant and steady, and who have the patience to listen. We could make our congregations cities of refuge for our youth, and for their parents, who are so often tired, frustrated and confused by the most demanding job they will ever have in their lives. We can teach them that here, in this holy place, you can come out of the cold and find that a different climate prevails.

It’s a pity that the 23rd psalm is only spoken at funerals. Because I see it as a celebration of life – a healthy, relaxed and contented life, where kids are sheltered from the pressures of premature adulthood and have a chance to breathe deeply, and think and dream and figure out who they are going to be. The kind of life that helps kids grow into adults who are guided in straight paths by strong and sustaining moral values.

Nothing that we do as clergy, parents and teachers is more important than finding a way to love, protect and nurture our kids – setting before them, in perilous times, a table laden with the nourishment of tradition, faith and community. So we Jews are taught our supreme obligation in the book of Deuteronomy: “*uvacharta va-chayyim* – choose life, that you and your children may live” [Deut.30:19].