

DECENCY MATTERS MOST, CALEB

by Jeff Jacoby

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My beloved Caleb,

You haven't gotten much bigger since last March -- you're only three inches taller and three pounds heavier. But those aren't the only ways in which you've been maturing.

When you turned 4 last year, you were so stricken by the thought of a celebration that would make you the center of attention that you didn't even want your nursery class to share a cake and sing "Happy Birthday." But when you turned 5 this month and Mama arranged a small birthday party, you enjoyed every minute -- even when your friends sang "Happy Birthday" twice!

And do you remember how, after the puppet show and ice cream, you couldn't wait to take the kids upstairs so they could all clamber to the top of your bunk bed? When we first got you that bed nine months ago, even getting in the *bottom* bunk made you uneasy. Not any more.

As you grow and change, Caleb, Mama and I have to make changes in the way we treat you. For instance, you have chores now. Before breakfast every morning, it's your job to make sure that Jemima's food and water bowls are filled and neatly returned to her corner. When I bring up clean clothes from the dryer -- in our house, laundry is man's work -- you're the one who has to match the socks and fold the dish towels. I know you aren't always happy about these obligations -- "Why do I have to do all the work in this house?" you sometimes demand -- but if we want you to grow into a responsible man, we have to teach you how to be a responsible child.

Not that we're in any hurry for you to grow up. You are a happy, secure, and deeply loved 5-year-old boy, and it would be a crime to let you learn too soon just how unhappy, insecure, and hateful a place the world can be.

That is why, for you, last Sept. 11 was just another day in pre-kindergarten. You didn't learn then and you haven't learned since about the mass murders that took place that terrible morning. Nor do you know anything about the savage bombings that have killed hundreds of innocent people -- including children younger than you -- in Israel, a country you have visited twice. You have never heard that a mother in Texas drowned her five children in a bathtub. Priests committing sexual abuse? Anthrax sent through the mail? Of all these horrors you are blissfully ignorant. For now.

That's not to say you don't know that terrible things can happen in this world. You've learned in pre-school, and we've talked at home, about some of the atrocities that are recorded in the Bible -- Pharaoh's malevolent decree to drown every Jewish baby boy, for example. But it is one thing to know of such episodes as stories from long ago. It is far more unsettling to know that evil and terror are all-too-real parts of the world *you* live in.

Unsettling or not, they are realities you will have to face, and part of my job is to make sure you are ethically and emotionally well-grounded when you do.

Sometimes you startle me with the moral seriousness of the questions you ask. When you learned in school about Noah and the Flood, you came home troubled. "All the people who died in the water were bad," you said. "But what about the babies in their mothers' tummies? They weren't bad." It reassured you when I said the unborn babies went back to G-d. I know such simple answers will not always suffice. But I want you to go on being troubled -- and asking questions -- when you learn of injustice and suffering. In the presence of evil or cruelty, too many people are mere bystanders. I hope you will be better than that.

Of course, I also hope that you are never the cause of injustice or suffering, either. That is why we place so much emphasis on the importance of kindness and decency and not hurting other people. Do you remember the day last summer when you bit a girl in your pre-school "camp" because she took a marker you wanted? When I heard about it that evening I was appalled, and insisted that you apologize right away. Mama called the girl's house and gave you the phone when she came on. "I'm sorry I bit you," you told her. "I won't do it again."

The reason we make such a big deal about how you treat other people is because we know what can happen when parents don't make that a priority. Their children sometimes grow into monsters who fly airliners into office buildings, or detonate bombs in crowded pizzerias, or prey sexually on teenagers who turn to them for counsel.

Have I ever told you the story of Hillel? He lived 2,000 years ago and was regarded as the greatest Jewish scholar of his generation. One day a non-Jew challenged him to sum up the entire Torah -- the whole Hebrew Bible -- while standing on one foot. Instead of berating the man for his mockery, Hillel gave him a beautiful answer:

"What is hateful to you, do not do unto others; this is the whole Torah. The rest is commentary -- now go and study."

Now that you're in school, Caleb, you're learning so many things. But no lesson will ever be more important than Hillel's. Treat other people the way you would have them treat you; be honest and ethical and kind. Be a good boy. Become a good man.

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