

A decorative graphic consisting of several curved, parallel lines that sweep from the top left towards the bottom right, creating a sense of movement and depth. The lines are light gray and vary in thickness, with the thickest line at the bottom left and the thinnest at the top right.

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Beyond a Management Mindset

Your Child Has a Purpose

I am starting to believe in divine grace — or in lay terminology, the possibility for change. Lately there has been a growing distance between my son and everyone around him. His elementary school English teacher keeps asking me, “Is everything okay?” His beloved math teacher took him aside: “You are a student who can achieve 100 percent, but you disrupt the class too much.” His father and I have repeatedly questioned him (mostly under our breath), “What’s going on?” And sometimes at night, under the layers of down comforters, we have whispered worriedly, “Do you think we are losing him?”

We aren’t crazy about his friends and we only feel close to a few parents of kids in his grade. Naturally, we started to question whether we are sending him to the right school; we want him to have better influences. Usually my instinct is to “wait and see.” But this approach is questionable. What if there really are behaviors that won’t change without our intervention? What if the window is closing on making a difference in his life, and we are going to miss it?

And yet, even during this uncertain stage, we have experienced moments of divine grace, of closeness, of *finding him* again. In those moments when he gets angry because he's frustrated, his soft, vulnerable side emerges, searching to connect: "I get lonely sometimes. Can you keep me company?" Or when he climbed into my bed the other night to ask me about a bump on his face that is not going away (his first pimple, as it turns out), I could now teach him how to wash his face with soap.

When my son begins a sentence with "Imma, can you please..." I feel a drop of divine grace falling on me, a reminder of his call to connect and my call to answer.

Ego Stories and Soul Stories

The renowned writer, activist, and educational reformer Parker J. Palmer, together with his colleague at the Center for Courage and Renewal, Marcy Jackson, writes about two narratives that are running through our minds all of the time: our ego stories and our soul stories.¹ Our ego stories star in the "curated Me" — you know, the self I present at dinner parties or invite to my interviews. The curated Me is linear, with an upward and forward trajectory. The narratives we tell when we are speaking from a place of *ego* focus on life's high points and the times when we have been successful and affirmed. They focus on *my* story; I am *the* story. When something throws me off track, my *ego voice* (the one telling my ego story) becomes reactive and defensive.

Soul stories, on the other hand, honor the shadow as well as the light. They notice the suffering as much as the gladness.

1. Parker Palmer and Marcy Jackson, "Ego Stories & Soul Stories," worksheet from *Courage to Lead*, accessed September 23, 2019, https://www.clearpathcounsel.com/files/4313/3029/8683/Ego_Stories_Soul_Stories.pdf.

These are the stories that keep us up at night. They allow us to integrate fragments and inconsistency within the whole. As Palmer writes, soul stories are not afraid of fear, loss, failure, or mystery. They are the stories that fold into a larger story. Instead of saying, "I am *the story*," we can say, "I am a part of *a larger story*." When something throws us off track, our soul voice soothes us and reminds us, "Throughout your story, you will experience many ups and downs. At some point, you will feel those parts working together, creating wholeness. Right now that moment might feel far away. But have faith, it will come." Once I was exposed to the concept of ego stories and soul stories, I slowly became more attuned to what is happening inside my head, especially during interactions with my kids.

My ego voice screams, "Why can't you be like other kids? *Other* parents aren't getting calls every evening from the teacher sharing the latest behavioral mess-up of the day. What's *wrong* here?"

My soul voice speaks with more understanding. "This is what my child is experiencing *now*. We moved to Israel a few years ago. My son is a new immigrant in a new school. He is trying to figure out how to fit in." Beyond empathy, my soul voice takes me a drop deeper, saying, "He has a soul too. Sometimes he follows the rules and does what we expect of him, and sometimes he doesn't. He's creative, strong-willed, and determined. The way he is acting is how his creativity, will, and determination are expressing themselves. There is nothing wrong here. These core qualities of his will develop and become refined throughout his life. This *is* him. Love him — *all* of him."

Our soul voices soothe us; our ego voices keep us on edge.

My ego voice is on high volume most of the time. I think that might be true for a lot of us today. We are bombarded by digital media showing us the picture-perfect way to be a family.

We are surrounded by external measurements of success, and our anxiety about our children's employability in the competitive job market of the future grows daily. Small talk with other parents, while collecting the kids from school or at the playground, raises our anxiety level even higher — "Your child hasn't mastered conversational Chinese yet? Don't worry, it will come" [with patronizing smile]. These voices and encounters are valuable when they help us create opportunities for our children to compete and succeed in the world. But they might not serve us all the time. When I am trying to cultivate a closer, more soulful connection in my family, it serves me to turn down the ego voice and turn up my soul voice.

Soul Meeting Soul

Parker J. Palmer once wrote that the process of education is the condition of the teacher's soul meeting the condition of the student's soul.

Face to face with my students, only one resource is at my immediate command: my identity, my selfhood, my sense of this "I" who teaches — without which I have no sense of the "Thou" who learns.²

I wonder if it's like that in our families too. The condition of each of our inner lives plays out in our family dynamics. When we clash, it's my ego voice against my son's: my *need* for him to live up to my expectations versus his *need* to "be himself" at all costs.

But what if I consciously enable a soul-to-soul connection instead?

2. Parker J. Palmer, *Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997).

My son is different from me. I am much more interested in spiritual matters than practical ones. I would rather gaze at a flower; he would prefer to build, dismantle, and rebuild his desk. My idea of a good time is sitting with a friend and talking about my feelings all day long. His is figuring out how to build a fire with a match and some twigs.

A soul-to-soul connection is one in which I appreciate that his daring, cleverness, and strong-mindedness, together with the parts of his soul that are searching and open for connection, *make him who he is*. Though it is easier to rejoice when my son is a mini-me, I need to appreciate when my son is a *right-sized him*. This realization can open the channel for soul-to-soul connection between us, but it is conscious, hard work (to say the least!) to maintain this mindset during all of our interactions.

The Talmud (Niddah 31a) relates, “There are three partners in a human being: the Holy One, the father, and the mother.” While parents might bequeath part of the “raw material” in the creation of a human being, it is the Holy One who gives children all the good stuff. God, or the “Third Partner,” gives each child “the spirit and the breath, beauty of features, eyesight, the power of hearing and the ability to speak and to walk, understanding and discernment.” In short, the Third Partner provides all of what makes our children who they are. Kahlil Gibran relates that our children are not ours. Instead,

They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself . . .

You may house their bodies but not their souls

*For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow, which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams.*³

3. Kahlil Gibran, *The Prophet* (New York: Penguin Books, 2019), 19–22.

Our children are not just like us. They are just like *them*. They are meant to be exactly as they are.

Asking, *Ayeka?*

Sometimes our “management mindset” gets in the way. A management mindset is the one that is busy making lists. “Call the math teacher to improve my child’s basic computing skills”, “make sure to sign-up for dance class”, “remember to reassign the chores on the chore wheel so that my child cultivates a work ethic!” So many of us are preoccupied by managing our children and their lives that we don’t take the time to reflect on the parents we want to become. Sometimes we need help remembering to make the shift.

To start to become attuned to your ego voice and your soul voice and how they play into your relationships, ask yourself, *Ayeka?* (Where are you?) More specifically, where are you in your relationship with your family?

Asking *Ayeka?* isn’t about your physical location. It originates from the Hebrew Bible, where it is the first question ever asked. After Adam eats the fruit that God had expressly forbidden eating, Adam hides “among the trees” in the Garden of Eden and God calls out “*Ayeka?*” (Genesis 3:8). Clearly the omniscient God knows where Adam is hiding and isn’t asking about Adam’s physical location. God is asking about the condition of Adam’s soul. It’s a version of “Is this your best? Have you shown yourself worthy of being in the Garden of Eden?”

Rav Abraham Isaac Kook, the chief rabbi of British Mandatory Palestine, says that Adam didn’t know how to answer the question “Where are you?” because he was estranged from his true self. “[Adam] lost touch with his true T-ness, his truest

self.”⁴ Only when we can create a pathway to access our authentic “I” will we be able to find our way back when we lose our way.

When we are faced with challenges in our families — whether we feel a growing distance between members of our family or we don’t appreciate our children or our partners — the only thing we have the power to change is ourselves. We can change either how we *understand* the situation or how we *respond* to it. In other words, when confronting a challenge and before choosing a course of action, we can first ask ourselves, “How can I journey toward my own truest ‘I?’”

That journey begins with an openness to ask ourselves vulnerable questions, the patience and humility to hear the answers that emerge, and the courage to act on those answers. As the journalist and author Krista Tippett reflects, the right kind of question — when met honestly and openly — can be redemptive.⁵ It can build us in ways we didn’t think were possible.

Open questions are very different from closed questions. As parents, we know how closed questions can shut down the hope for growth and change. “Why didn’t you do X?” “How could you have done Y?” Open and generous questions, however, can suddenly encourage us to imagine growth. “Tell me more about X?” or “How are you thinking/feeling about Y now?”

Four pivotal Ayeka questions will keep coming up throughout this book in different forms. While each section’s questions might be phrased slightly differently, here is the heart of the questions we will be asking:

4. Abraham Isaac Kook, *Orot HaKodesh* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1990), 3:140.

5. Krista Tippett, *Becoming Wise: An Inquiry into the Mystery and Art of Living* (New York: Penguin Press, 2016), 30.

Where am I (given an issue or question)?

How do I want to grow?

What obstacles get in my way?

What's a small step I can take toward moving forward?

Our honest answers to these questions can help us become the parents we want to be. They can help us move from a management mindset to a more reflective one, from a “fixed mindset” to a “growth mindset.” Psychologist Carol Dweck defines a fixed mindset as one where people believe their basic qualities, such as intelligence or talent, are simply fixed traits. In a growth mindset, people believe that their most basic abilities can be developed through dedication and hard work — brains and talent are just the starting point.⁶ Such an attitude creates a love of learning and a resilience that is essential for a meaningful life.

A fixed mindset is the hallmark of relationships on autopilot. To someone with a fixed mindset, any challenging question would be met with the resigned, stagnant answer: this is how it is. Asking the four Ayeka questions can spur us toward a growth mindset — one in which we acknowledge the potential for change.

6. Carol S. Dweck, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* (New York: Random House, 2016).



Ayeka Workbook

Take out a notebook and pen and write down your answers to the following questions.⁷ Give yourself some time; five to eight minutes is good for a start. Write freely and don't censor yourself. When you feel as though you are finished writing, write some more. More truth comes out the second time around.

- ☞ *Where am I — Ayeka? — in parenting my child right now? What am I proud of and where am I stuck?*
- ☞ *What is one way I want to move forward as a parent to my child?*
- ☞ *What is an obstacle that gets in my way?*
- ☞ *What is one practical piece of advice my soul voice would give me in order to move past the obstacle?*

Sometimes We Expect Too Much

The other day, I returned from a meeting that exhausted me. The nervous energy of the man I was meeting with was electric. He spoke about a crisis, about brokenness and the need for a serious intervention. He is becoming the resource




7. Today's families range in size, in most of the Ayeka Workbook sections, I refer to 'your child'. If you have more than one child, you are welcome to change your reading accordingly.

in a community of parents whose children are not “living up to” their parents’ expectations of them — children whose actions today are slaps in their parents’ faces. The parents feel lost — “I thought that if only I raised them with X values, they would turn out with an X lifestyle.” Of course, we know — cognitively — that human development and growth never add up in a neat formula, and yet so many parents of grown children find themselves feeling this way. The younger generation’s decisions to violate their parents’ deeply held beliefs bring pain, confusion, and estrangement between the two generations.

We cannot control or predict what will happen with our children. We can only provide the right conditions for growth and be witness to their development. We all want our children to grow into the authentic selves they were meant to be, for their souls to find their destiny and bring their unique *tikkun* (repair) to a broken world. It all sounds good in theory... But all too often, we get in our own way of that happening.



Ayeka Workbook

-  *Share a time when your child made a different choice from you about a significant issue. How did you react?*
-  *Listen to your soul voice. How does it guide you to react?*
-  *Listen for your child's soul voice. What do they need from you?*

Over the last couple of years, I have started a new ritual. At the end of every day, I tell my kids about their “good inner point” (*nekudah tovah*), a teaching from Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, the founder of the Breslov Hasidic movement.⁸ I tell them about the moments, big and small, that I noticed when they behaved in beautiful, life-affirming ways; when I heard their soul voices coming through. It’s a simple reflective practice. It channels my aspiration to appreciate my children more, and it responds to their need to *feel* my appreciation and love for them more. Sometimes they will tell me what my *nekudah tovah* was: “You didn’t yell at us so much today!” Turns out, they can discern what was good in me that day too.

8. Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, *Likkutei Moharan* 282.