

**PARSHAT YITRO**  
**JANUARY 18, 2014**  
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One of the most famous of all Rabbinic figures in the time of the Mishnah was Elisha ben Abuya. According to the story in the Jerusalem Talmud, Tractate Hagigah, one day Elisha was sitting and studying in the Valley of Ginosaur and saw a man climb a tree to remove a nest containing both fledglings and the mother bird. According to the Torah, in the Book of Deuteronomy, this is forbidden. The text informs us that if one sees birds or eggs sitting in a nest and wishes to take them, he must not take the mother with the young, but send away the mother first. Though this man had transgressed the commandment, nothing happened to him. The next day Elisha saw another man removing the fledglings from the nest and sending the mother bird away. When he came down from the tree the man was bitten by a snake and died.

In the Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Kiddushin, the story is told a little differently. In this case, a man's father said to him: "Go up to the top of the building and bring me down some young birds." The young man went up to the top of the building, let the mother go, and took the young ones. Upon his return, he fell and was killed.

According to the conclusion of these two stories Elisha ben Abuya became a heretic because he could not comprehend how G-d could punish individuals who adhered to the commandments of the Torah, and did nothing to those who transgressed them. He took literally the statement that is found both in Deuteronomy, in the case of the mother and its young birds, and in our Torah reading this morning, having to do with the respect for parents which states "that you may long endure on the land that the Lord your G-d is assigning to you." Elisha ben Abuya's life came to a sad ending. However, he may have misunderstood the true meaning of the text.

If one reads the text literally one may comprehend that there is a personal this-worldly reward for adherence to the commandments. While Elisha expected to see proper reward and punishment for following or not following the commandments, others, while not so literal, still see it in a similar context. Rabbi Simon Glustrom in his book *Timeless Tablets* writes: "I prefer to regard the meaning of the reward for honoring parents in the form of spiritual compensation: Your days will be fulfilled. You will anticipate each new day free of the feelings of guilt that so often accompanies filial neglect of parents."

However, most commentators do not take the text so literally. Professor Nahum Sarna writes in relation to the commandment of honoring your father and mother. "Respect for parents is deemed to be vital for the preservation of the social fabric. Dishonoring parents imperils the well-being of society and survival of the people Israel in the Land." In other words, the resulting punishment of not listening to the commandment of honoring your father and your mother is not personal punishment, but communal punishment. The authors of the Jewish Study Bible understand the phrase in the context of suggesting that Ancient Near Eastern legal documents make children's rights to inherit their parents' property contingent on honoring them by providing and caring for them. However, in our Biblical text of the Ten Commandments, G-d

applies this condition on a national scale: “The right of future generations of Israelites to inherit the land of Israel from their parents is contingent upon honoring them.”

What can we learn from this interpretation? Rabbi Hayyim David Halevi, a former Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv, in his book *Mekor Hayyim* writes that the entire fabric of Jewish life as well as the transmittal of our heritage is dependent on parents. It is incumbent upon children to honor and respect their parents. However, parents must be worthy of that respect as it is the responsibility of parents to pass on our Torah tradition from one generation to the next. As far as he is concerned, a generation which respects its parents allows for the establishment of Torah to be transmitted from one generation to the next, and permits the national redemption of the Jewish people to be enhanced by the nation of Israel living in its land.

What I believe Rabbi Halevi is teaching us is that the family structure is critical both for society at-large and for Jewish existence. A society in which respect for parents exists promotes parents teaching the next generation appropriate life values as well as stressing the necessity of living a committed Jewish life. The next generation will learn to live those values as they enjoy G-d’s promise of living long on the land which G-d has given to us. This is not a personal redemptive promise, it is a collective promise.

With all the studies that have been done as of late in the Jewish community and the many commentaries written upon them, one thing remains an undeniable truth: The family is the central focus of Jewish life, the home is its sacred space, and the values taught in that home, both in being a good person and being a loyal Jew, are critical for the continuation of Jewish life in the next generation. In a new book entitled *Flexigidity: The Secret of Jewish Adaptability* written by Gidi Grinstein, the President of the Reut Institute, a Jerusalem - based Zionist think tank, the author writes: “The household is the basic cell of Jewish society and community. In the Jewish ideal, parents and teachers educate and groom children to join their community as adults, marry other Jews, build a household and educate their own children to do the same in due course.”

Following the PEW research study, there has been much discussion about the importance of a good religious school and day school education, successful Jewish pre-schools, integrated Israel experiences, strong informal education programs, enlightening and fun Jewish summer camps, and strong and vital Jewish campus programs. Unfortunately, sometimes these are often seen as replacements of what really needs to go on in the Jewish home. When I look at my own upbringing, I recognize more and more as I get older that the values that are part of my life stem from my home life. My parents raised me to value being a loving and caring person who appreciates family and service to the community. I realize that the framework of my loyalty to my Jewish tradition, the Jewish people, and the State of Israel was formed in my family’s religious observance, love of Israel, and commitment to Jewish community values. All the rest is commentary.

Too often, parents seem reticent to teach those values to the next generation. One of the great Jewish raconteurs of the past generation was Sam Levinson. In one of his books entitled *You Can Say That Again Sam* he wrote of his family life and recorded that “It takes both courage and foresight to say as my father did: ‘I don’t care what you think of me this minute; I am

concerned with what you will think of me twenty years from now.” Levinson learned to appreciate his father’s teachings only as he reached adulthood and had children of his own.

One of my predecessors in this pulpit, Rabbi Sam Dresner, wrote a pamphlet in 1971 entitled *Between the Generations: A Jewish Dialogue*. In it he attempted to discuss the relationship between parents and their children. While some of it is dated, there are some very important points made. He writes that young Jews are looking for significant models for their lives. “And that is precisely what parents ought to be and what parents can be. But not enough parents have been. For a parent is a teacher – the first teacher. Even the schoolmaster, according to Jewish teachers, is only acting on the parent’s behalf.”

Rabbi Harold Kushner writes in our *Etz Hayim Humash* that “some societies and religious movements teach that people can truly be themselves only if they reject their parents. In Judaism, to reject one’s parents is to reject all of one’s ancestors and pretend that one has no past. It verges on rejecting the ultimate parent, G-d, from whom all life flows.” It is also clear that in Jewish tradition parents must be worthy of that respect. It is a continual dual commitment: parents must be worthy of respect and children must respect their parents. Should this occur then the values that the parents teach become the central focus of their children’s lives. Even if there is some rivalry between the generations, which after all is only natural, the basic framework will remain.

Thus, it seems to me, that if we are really interested in the establishment of just societies and the continuation of the Jewish people, we must make sure that parents live by the correct values and pass them on to their children, that parents possess Jewish knowledge and teach them to the next generation and that this second generation learn to respect their parents and their values. If that is the case then we as a society, we as a people, may have the privilege of living long not only on the land that is promised to us, which according to all the commentators is now the State of Israel, but indeed wherever we may reside throughout the globe.