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KIBUD AV VA-EIM:

REDEFINING THE PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIP FOR MODERN LIBERAL JEWS

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Ordination

by

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"*Kibud Av Va-Eim*:
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Abstract:

One of the most difficult commandments to imbibe and follow is the fifth statement in the Decalogue: "Honor Thy Father and Mother." The Sages of the Talmudic and medieval eras devoted countless volumes to defining the specific obligations and provisions that a child must afford his or her parent. At the same time, they used illustrative *midrashim* to elucidate how parents should treat and what they should provide for their children.

Just as individual children mature and undergo distinct changes to their bodies, minds and emotions, so too whole generations of youth change in conjunction with the mainstream language and behaviors that they witness around them. For modern liberal Jews living in North America in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, many of the Rabbinic precepts of the past seem antiquated and do not readily apply to their current circumstances. Therefore, this thesis, comprising a wealth of Biblical and Rabbinic passages alongside current Jewish scholarship, scientific studies, pop [child] psychology, and telling remarks from a group of Reform Jewish teenagers and their parents, aims to give non-*halakhic* Jews various strategies and avenues for creating and sustaining strong parent-child relationships.

The thesis begins with an overview of the Biblical commands to show **honor (*kibud*) and reverence (*mora*)** to one's parents. In the second chapter, emphasis is placed on caregiving, a sacred activity which many of today's grown children know all too well as they begin to take increasing **care of an aging parent**. The third chapter focuses on **parenting today's adolescents and young children** in a Jewish context, aided but not tethered by the tradition. Finally, the fourth chapter highlights the opportunities and difficulties in abiding the fifth commandment when one belongs to a **'non-traditional' family unit**, such as an interfaith, adoptive and same-sex families.

While each of these subjects has been explored on their own as recent socio-logical and religious phenomena, seldom have they all been examined through the lens of *kibud av va-eim*, honoring one's parents. As such, this thesis serves as a comprehensive resource for clergy, Jewish professionals, social workers, teachers and parents who wish to delve into the vast literature on parent-child relationships and make it applicable to the realities of our ever-changing world.

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I also owe tremendous thanks to Dr. Tali Zelkowicz and Felicia Park-Rodgers, who took time out of their busy schedules to sit with me, share innumerable insights about child development and help me work through some of the 'speedbumps' in my research. I also learned an incredible amount from the 11th and 12th grade teens and parents of Leo

Baeck Temple, who spoke honestly and thoughtfully about the struggles and successes they have experienced in the often confusing realm of parent-child relationships.

It goes without saying (but I will say it anyhow) that a primary impetus for choosing this topic was the influence of the generations before me. I continue to look up to my parents as models of compassion, as exemplars of how modern liberal Jews can integrate traditional Jewish teachings and virtues into a modern American context. They have knowingly passed down these values to my siblings and me, for which I feel extremely grateful and blessed.

My most important teachers belong to the beautiful faces that I get to come home to each day: my wife Jaime and my daughter Mikayla. With their unrivaled patience, their infectious laughter and their embracing spirit, they constantly remind me that my greatest role in life is just trying to be a good father and a loving husband. Ironically, in the months of researching and writing a thesis about how to be present in the lives of those closest to you, I spent hours apart from the two most important people in my life. I hope that I learn to practice what I write, and that, in the spirit of honoring and cherishing my loved ones, my relationships with my family only deepen and grow richer over time.

INTRODUCTION

A year and a half ago, I became a father. Having known only one side of the parent-child relationship until that life-changing moment, I began to reflect deeply on one of the earliest commandments my fledgling ears ever heard: *Honor your father and mother*. As a young child, the content of this commandment was abundantly clear—obey your parents, abide by their rules and treat them with unconditional love and admiration. It seemed a satisfying deal in exchange for the never-ending supply of loving attention, the roof over my head and the fulfillment of all of my basic needs (as well as more than a few indulgences, like baseball cards and trips to the neighborhood ice cream parlor).

But as I grew older, I observed that honoring one's parents took on different dimensions depending on the personalities involved. I witnessed friends speaking to their parents callously or not at all. I saw arguments explode between parent and child who seemed to be speaking in a language and tone that the other could not decipher. I watched my own parents deal with *their* parents (i.e. my grandparents), particularly how the aging process affected and somewhat reversed the roles each played in providing for the other. Perhaps most surprising, I noticed my own relationship with my parents beginning to change and evolve as I sought greater independence from home and an inherent desire to be "treated as an adult." The *mitzvah* of parental honor that had been presented to me years earlier in Sunday school demanded a new definition, new parameters to accommodate my increasing need for autonomy and privacy. During my teenage years, I no longer approached my parents or my Hebrew school teachers for those answers; rather, I looked to my peers and to popular culture in search of the normative, acceptable and 'cool' ways to speak and act towards my parents. All the while, it did not occur to me that my parents were changing too.

As I have transitioned into adulthood and begun my training for the rabbinate, I have been struck by the number of conversations I have had with clergy and congregants about the myriad challenges and impediments to the fifth commandment. Does it still apply in the case of an abusive parent? Does Jewish tradition require the parent to show a level of respect and reverence towards their children, or is the commandment unidirectional? What effect, if any, does the increased diversity of American Jewish families have on parent-child relationships? Should a child of same-sex parents simply re-read the Biblical decree as *kibud av v'av* or *eim va-eim* (honoring father and father, or mother and mother), or is it more useful for every child of the twenty-first century to change the language of the commandment altogether?

In the ensuing chapters, I shall draw from the wealth of Biblical and Rabbinic teachings on the fifth commandment, as well as the works of modern Jewish commentators and child psychologists, to arrive at a modern liberal understanding of *kibud av va-eim.* In Chapter One, "Honor vs. Reverence," we will examine various Rabbinic explanations as to how Jews can demonstrate filial piety, as well as some of the common difficulties associated with fulfilling the commandment. Gerald Blidstein's seminal work, *Honor Thy Father and Mother*, is particularly instructive in outlining the scope and substance of these obligations.

Chapter Two, "Caring for an Elderly Parent," reports on the common trend among today's middle-aged 'sandwich generation' who act as caregivers for their aging parents. Given the 'longevity revolution' now occurring within the American Jewish population, a healthy parent-child relationship proves advantageous and desirable during a senior's final decades, yet depends on the willingness of both parties--the grown child as well as his or her elderly parents—to recalibrate the roles of their relationship, making

accommodations or alterations as needed. The articles found in the URJ Press collection, *That You May Live Long* (edited by Richard Address and Hara Person), as well as the contemporary responsa and essays in Walter Jacobs' and Moshe Zemer's *Aging and the Aged in Jewish Law*, present classical Jewish approaches to caregiving while also sharing a diverse array of contemporary voices that reflect on the many hurdles and rewards of honoring parents in the latter years of their life.

The third chapter, entitled "Parenting Jewish Children in the 21st Century," explores the other side of the parent-child continuum, that is, the fair and respectful treatment that a parent ought to bestow upon his or her young children and adolescents. Blending Talmudic dicta, illustrative *midrashim* and recent Jewish guidebooks on parenting—especially *The Blessing of a Skinned Knee* by Dr. Wendy Mogel and *Parenting Jewish Teens* by Joanne Doades—this chapter offers the reader a host of strategies and philosophies for raising strong, resilient and respectful Jewish children in an ever-changing world. Particular attention is paid to the provisions that parents should afford their children, the dignified use of discipline, personalized instruction that recognizes the individuality of each child, and the singular case of the "wayward and defiant child."

Finally, the fourth and final chapter, "Redefining *Kibud Av Va-Eim* For The 'New' Jewish Family," examines the special resonances and dissonances of the fifth commandment among today's spectrum of diverse Jewish families, many of which the Rabbis of the Talmudic and medieval eras could not have conceived. Specifically, we focus on the dynamics between parents and children in interfaith, adoptive and same-sex families, all of which present challenges to the Rabbinic outlook on *kibud av va-eim*. As a result of such tensions and collisions, non-*halakhic* individuals and institutions may be

compelled to rethink the language and concepts that are employed when teaching about filial obligation. In addition to a wellspring of Rabbinic material, this chapter draws extensively from data collected in the 2000-01 National Jewish Population Survey conducted by the United Jewish Communities, as well as Shelley Kapnek Rosenberg's important work, *Adoption and the Jewish Family*. The last section on sexuality and same-sex families includes powerful anecdotes and insights from Felicia Park-Rodgers, the former Executive Director of COLAGE (Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere) and current Executive Director of Congregation Bet Chayim Chadashim in Los Angeles, two internationally-renowned organizations that strive to support, welcome and advocate on behalf of GLBT individuals and their families.

As I begin my own journey as the proud parent of a 'twenty-first century baby,' while still maintaining my 'child' status in relation to my own father and mother, I present these chapters as an opportunity for study, for genuine self-reflection and, perhaps most importantly, as permission to make mistakes and grow from them in the eternally delicate balance of parent-child relations. Strengthening and sustaining these relationships is an imperfect science, for each decision and action made by either party changes the relationship anew. Yet, beyond the commanding words of the Decalogue, there remains an internal impulse to return to the parent or child whose blood and heritage we share, whose honor we defend and for whose love we yearn. *Kibud av va-eim*, the honoring of one's parents, and by extension, *kibud yeladim*, the honor bestowed upon one's children, offers us the first step, the first instruction, as to how we all might strive toward and eventually achieve this ideal.

CHAPTER 1:

HONOR VS. REVERENCE

R. Simeon bar Yohai said: "...the most difficult of all commandments [to observe] is 'Honor your father and your mother."[1]

Gideon was threshing grain in a winepress to avoid detection by the Midianites. An angel [of the Lord] then appeared to him and told him, "God is with you, valiant warrior!"[2]...Why did Gideon merit this Divine revelation? Gideon's father, Yoash, had initially been threshing the grain. Gideon had told him, "Father, you are elderly. Go home and I'll thresh the grain—because if the Midianites come, you won't have the strength to run away." The angel said, "You have fulfilled the *mitzvah* of honoring parents. You are worthy of being the agent of My children's redemption."[3]

Living as a Jew in 21st century America necessarily means testing the waters of Jewish tradition against the realities of the modern condition. Like an experimental serum eye-dropped into a Petri dish, American Jews today from every point on the denominational spectrum—not to mention those unaffiliated or disenchanted by the notion of 'movement' Judaism—experiment with and evaluate the interplay between their religious-ethnic inheritance and the psycho-social complexities of the world around them. Sometimes these disparate elements blend seamlessly, creating a new and worthy contribution to someone's inner chemistry; sometimes they explode in the experimenter's face. The difficulty lies in finding the point of equilibrium between religious doctrine or custom and the true, lived experiences of modernity. When both forces can coexist, even thrive, in a symbiotic relationship, they no longer act as variables but become the unified 'control' of a person's life.

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[1] *Tanhuma, Ekev,* 2; the word Rabbi Shimon translates *hamur* as "difficult," though it can alternatively be translated as "serious."
[2] Adapted from Judges 6:11-12.
[3] *Midrash Talpiyot*, Aleph. Translation by Ze'ev Greenwald in *Honor Your Father and Your Mother*, Jerusalem: Feldheim Publishers, 2006, p.25.

As such, each strand of Jewish law, whether distilled from Biblical narrative, the Rabbinic imagination, or contemporary responsa, must be isolated, analyzed, tested, and, to an extent, reconfigured for it to hold weight and meaning for those modern liberal Jews who would seek to follow "the tradition." Of the 613 commandments that the Sages isolated, some may appear self-evident, accepted without strong hesitation or alteration, like giving *tzedakah* or gathering for a Passover seder. Others, like *shatnez*, *kashrut* and *tefilin*, may be discarded completely if they fail to engender any intellectual or emotional resonance for the individual who requires a rational or spiritual impetus in order to perform sacred duties. But most will be interpreted and adapted so as to synchronize with what a modern liberal Jew deems meaningful and comfortable. One illustration of such adaptation would be the use of instruments or the spending of money on Shabbat precisely to 'observe' the day of rest.

Beyond these aforementioned categories of *mitzvot,* it would seem that the initial Ten Commandments, ordained from Mount Sinai at the seminal moment in Jewish peoplehood, have maintained their relevance and resonance throughout the centuries. Even as the Jewish people becomes increasingly variegated in terms of practice and philosophy, these ten statutes remain the spiritual and ethical bedrock of what it means to be a Jew and, by extension, the follower of any Judeo-Christian tradition.

While the first four commandments [claim of God's existence; ban against worship of other gods; ban on uttering God's name in vain; observance of Shabbat][4]—establish a framework for the relationship between man and the Divine, the

[4] Exodus 20:1-11.

last five [prohibitions against murder, adultery, theft, false testimony and covetousness][5] introduce legislation for man to function and survive in civilization.

It is the fifth commandment—*kibud av va-eim,* honoring father and mother—that serves as a strategic hinge between the spiritual and social commands. As contemporary writer Gerald Blidstein observes, it is "the pivotal statement in the Ten Commandments, the one that moves man from contemplation of the divine to human society..."[6] After presenting a claim of Divine authority and the expectations placed on man therein, the Decalogue transitions to five tenets that form the basis of social morality. The directive to honor one's parents links the two lists.

The 1st century Greek philosopher-historian Philo posits why the statute to honor father and mother inhabits such a strategic position:

> Parents by their nature stand on the border-line between the mortal and immortal sides of existence, the mortal because of their kinship with men...the immortal because the act of generation assimilates them to God, the generator of All.... Parents, in my opinion are to their children what God is to the world, since just as He achieved existence for the non-existent, so they in imitation of His power, so far as they are capable, immortalize the race."[7]

Philo correlates man's deferential relationship toward his parents with man's praise of the Divine, an ideology that Philo may well have ascertained from the pages of Greek philosophy.[8] He contends that parents possess an almost godlike quality for the essential role they play in (pro)creation, and thus merit praise and gratitude from their progeny. But the notion that a child's treatment of his parents ought to parallel his loyalty and devotion to God dominates the pages of rabbinic teaching as well:

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[5] Exodus 20:13-14.
[6] Blidstein, Gerald. *Honor Thy Father and Mother*, Tel Aviv: Ktav Publishing, 2005, p.6.
[7] Philo, "On the Decalogue," sec. 106-107, 225, pp. 61, 447.
[8] Aristotle wrote that "one should honor one's parents as one does the gods." *Ethics*, trans. W.D. Ross, IX, Chapt.2, sec. 1165a.

"The Sages taught: There are three partners [in the creation of] man—God, his father and his mother. When a man honors his father and his mother, God says, 'I reckon it as though I abided with them and they honored me.'...When a man pains his parents, God says, 'I have done wisely not to abide with them, for if I did they would pain me.'"[9]

The Rabbinic impulse to compare parental and Divine relationships was not purely the product of their imagination; rather, they found numerous examples in Scripture that supported this equation.[10] When Israel neglects God, like a parent being ignored, God wonders, "A son honors his father, and a servant his master; If then I be a Father, where is my honor?"[11] When the people are obstinate in their disobedience, God's temper flares and unleashes a scolding, reminiscent of a domestic drama that erupts around the kitchen table on any given night: "Do you thus requite the Lord, O dull and witless people? Is He not the Father Who created you, fashioned you and made you endure!"[12]

Conversely, when Israel behaves, complies with "house rules," and turns back to God in mercy, the gentler, paternal/maternal aspect of God rises to the surface: "They shall come with weeping, and with compassion will I guide them...For I am ever a Father to Israel, Ephraim is my first-born."[13] Further, pride abounds in the high heavens when God's children act justly and thoughtfully: "My son, if your mind gets wisdom, My mind, too, will be gladdened. I shall rejoice with all my heart when your lips speak right

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[9] BT *Kiddushin* 30b. An expanded version of the human-divine partnership in the act of creation can be found in *Kil'ayim 31c*: "The white matter is of man—from that are formed the brain, the bones, and the veins; the red matter is of the woman—from that comes the skin, the flesh and the blood; life and the spirit and the soul are of God. And they are all partners in him."

[10] The most direct illustration of this is God's frequent labeling of the people Israel as God's children: "You are children of the Lord your God." (Deut.14:1)

[11] Malachi 1:6

[12] Deuteronomy 32:6

[13] Jeremiah 31:9

things."[14] The musings of a proud parent are unmistakable. So too, the Psalmist captures moments when the children Israel reciprocate that pride, acknowledging the greatness of God's creative power and the gift of life which can never be paid back in full: "It was You who created my conscience; You fashioned me in my mother's womb. I praise You, for I am awesomely, wondrously made."[15] In the Psalmist's verse, a template for mutual appreciation emerges, one that embodies an exemplary parent-child relationship as much as, if not more than, the covenanted commitment between deity and humanity.

The parallels between honoring parents and God allowed the Rabbis to affirm a hierarchical order in society that elevated the eldest, most educated and experienced members in a family (or the community). In such a system, the Rabbis could inhabit their place at the top of the human hierarchy and, presumably, position themselves as the demographic most deserving of honor. To be sure, there existed young rabbis who garnered the respect of their students, younger and older than they, but even within the halls of the academy, those sages blessed with the crown of old age and wrinkles of experience were granted reverence by their younger colleagues.

Today, the metaphor of God as Parent enables the modern liberal Jew to gain greater access to the Holy Day liturgy (*Avinu Malkeinu*) and perhaps a more articulate conception of how to relate to God at all.[16] But the inverse does not hold; when asked why one should honor his or her parents, a sample group of Reform parents and teens resoundingly replied that it was one of the few "obvious" and "instinctual"

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[14] Proverbs 23:15-16

[15] Psalms 139:13-14.

[16] Reuven Hammer remarks on the effectiveness of *Avinu Malkeinu* in that it combines the familiar, but often unrelatable image of God as a stern and demanding ruler with that of a "parent who is loving and accepting....therefore we can appeal to Him for love, understanding and forgiveness." Hammer, Reuven. Entering the High Holy Days, JPS, p.68.

commandments, both logical and inherently felt.[17] The topic of God did not come up in conversation.

At the same time, the respondents echoed Simeon bar Yohai's assertion that honoring one's parents can be extremely challenging, often untenable. Laws of *kibud av va-eim* prove exceedingly difficult because (1) sometimes the emotional realities of family dynamics do not provide fodder for honor or reverence; (2) it is a *mitzvah* "never completed during the course of your life."[18] It has no endpoint, no statute of limitations. It is a yoke of obligation we carry with us from our earliest conscious thought until our final breath, even after our parents have left this world.[19]

Honor and Reverence: Two Sides of the Same Coin

Further complicating the commandment to dignify one's parents are the different ways it is articulated in Biblical law. In two distinct renderings of the Decalogue, the obligation of a child to parent offers alternate models of filial piety:

1) Honor your father and your mother so that your days will be extended on the land which the Eternal your God is giving you.[20]

2) A man – his mother and his father you must fear (be in awe of) and you must observe My Sabbaths. I am the Eternal your God.[21]

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[17] Sample groups of Jewish teens and adult children responded to this question on 12/13/09 and 12/15/09, respectively, at Leo Baeck Temple, Los Angeles, CA.
[18] Ibid.
[19] The Talmud Bavli, *Kiddushin* 31b asks: "How does one honor parents after they have died? If repeating something in his father's name, a man should not say, "This is what Father said," but rather, "This is what my father and teacher, may I atone for his death, said." The Shulkhan Arukh, *Yoreh De'ah* explains that this phrase is only to be uttered during the first twelve months of mourning, after which the child says of the deceased parent, "May his memory be a blessing for eternal life."
[20] Exodus 20:12.
[21] Leviticus 19:3.

The first source employs the Hebrew root *k-b-d*, meaning "heavy" or "cumbersome." It suggests that honoring one's parents is both a ponderous task and an acknowledgment that parents carry serious weight in the lives of their children. For following this obligation, a person stands to inherit the gifts of time and space, specifically, long years of life and acquisition of holy ground (i.e. *eretz Yisrael*). Finally, God's name is invoked to show that in dignifying one's father and mother, one pays homage to and pleases the Creator of all beings.

The second source text employs a different verb—*tira'u*—derived from the noun *mora*. Alternatively translated as "fear," "awe" and "dread," the impact of this root implies an emotional reaction to a figure of authority, rather than a proactive set of behaviors to glorify the selfsame figure. Blidstein postulates that "honor would seem to demand behavioral concretization, while reverence might primarily describe an inner feeling."[22] The inclusion of the clause "observe My Sabbaths," similar to the first text, reminds the law-abider to associate the laws of filial piety not with parents alone, but with God. Transitively, it reminds us that failure to observe either commandment—*yirat ha-horim* ("awe of parents") or *shmirat Shabbat* ("guarding the Sabbath")—will be construed as an affront to both parental and Divine authority.

Confronted by these two related but discernibly different texts, the Sages necessarily composed distinctions between *kibud* and *mora*.

> Our rabbis taught: What is reverence and what is honor? Reverence means that [the son] must neither stand nor sit in his father's place, nor contradict his words, nor tip the scale against him [by siding with his opponents]. Honor means that he must give him food and drink, clothe and cover him, and guide his footsteps.[23]

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[22] Blidstein, p.38.
[23] BT *Kidushin* 31b.

From this oft-quoted Talmudic passage, we distill two dimensions of the parent-child relationship. The first, reverence, entails three negative commands that prevent the child from undermining the status, privately or publicly, of the parent. The latter, demonstrations of honor, offers specific provisions through which a child can fulfill a parent's basic needs. By following these positive commands, the child effectively reciprocates that which has been provided for her since (and including) birth.

The Talmudic interpretation of how one must fulfill the Biblical injunctions to honor and revere one's parents, however neat and explanatory, reveals the normative expectations of a different era and culture than our own, one of patriarchal hegemony rather than the increasingly "flattened" and democratic world in which American Jews now find themselves. The passage suggests dutiful service to one's master and reverential submission as a subject would bestow upon a king; today's emancipated and enlightened Jews have no first-hand knowledge of either.

While they conceded to the importance of providing for the needs of a parent who can no longer take care of him or herself, the overwhelming majority of my teen sample group did not feel that it was incumbent upon them to serve food and drink, clothe, or refrain from disagreeing with their parent publicly if they felt justified in doing so. While the *Shulkhan Arukh* prohibits a person from contradicting or siding with her father in public discourse, so as not to indicate weakness or cause humiliation,[24] the ethos of American Jewish children today is to share their opinion forthrightly, to boast their mastery and attainment of information in the presence of their elders. "Why be silent if you know you're right?" one teen asked. By and large, the language of "reverence" did

[24] *Shulkhan Arukh, Yoreh Deah*, 240:2

not resonate with the cross-section of American liberal Jewish teens with whom I conversed (an idea that will be more fully explored in the third chapter).

The adult sample group, perhaps because of its actual experiences taking care of an elderly parent, deeply felt the imperative to honor one's parents according to the language of the Rabbis, as well as the guilt associated with evading this responsibility. Additionally, they resonated more with the language of *mora*, of reverence, drawing upon childhood memories in which they held their parents not only in great esteem, but in awe and fear as well. Still, they recognized that today's youth are "growing up in a different climate" where "adults are not automatically viewed as authority figures."

The generational gap, particularly in regard to Jewish traditions and communal mores, has been researched extensively in the past two decades, with sociologists like Steven M. Cohen proposing that today's younger liberal Jews are loath to imbibe the principles and pastimes of their parents out of any sense of duty or parental expectations:

> In the 1960s there was still largely a consensus that being Jewish was a matter of obligations. Such norms can derive from God, parents, nostalgia, tradition, *halakha* and/or belonging to the Jewish people. One could violate these, but then one felt guilty about it. Fewer people today regard being Jewish as a matter of norms and obligations."[25]

The givens of a previous decade or generation can no longer be construed as self-evident for the modern Jew. The teens and adults I interviewed certainly embraced *kibud av va-eim* as an inherent value, but the idea of "honor," generally understood as genuine respect and displays of gratitude, proved much more palatable than "reverence." For these respondents, *kibud av va-eim* entailed heeding parental advice, abiding by their rules, and more broadly, being a good person who ascribes to the model of ethical

[25] "Changes in American Jewish Identities: From Normative Constructions to Aesthetic Understandings" An interview with Steven Cohen, Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, March 2008.

behavior exhibited by one's parents. This contemporary definition of honor ironically mirrors an underlying agenda of the Biblical authors: "Listen, my son to the instruction of your father and do not abandon the teachings your mother." [26] The implicit assumption here is that adherence to parental guidelines will result in the perpetuation of a parent's beliefs, values and faith tradition. Whether the impetus or effect of *kibud av va-eim*, the transmission of tradition, according to the Biblical and medieval sources we have highlighted, depends upon honoring one's parents. By this logic, the fifth commandment becomes a prerequisite for the quartet of laws that immediately precede it. A person cannot have fearful awe of the Divine parent until they have exhibited deference to their earthly parents.

The famed 14th century commentator R. Levi ben Gershom (Ralbag) stresses the functional role of honoring one's father and mother in the preservation of tradition. Ralbag writes that honoring parents "will ensure that succeeding generations will accept the teachings of their elders...This will be a factor in the continued loyalty of Israel to the Torah of the Lord, generation after generation."[27] His predecessor Maimonides, however, expands the import and impact of filial piety. He deems proper observance of the fifth commandment essential to the stability of society. He considers it to be one of those "*mitzvot* whose reason is apparent, and the worldly benefits of whose fulfillment is known, such as the bans on robbery and murder, and the command to honor one's father and mother."[28]

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[26] Proverbs 1:8.
[27] *Commentary to the Torah*, Venice, 1547, p.77c. Working toward the same conclusion, R. Don Isaac Abarbanel (15th century) writes: "The thrust of this command is to create belief in the tradition of earlier generations... without which the Torah could not exist." *Commentary to the Torah*, Warsaw, 1862, p.38c. Translations from Blidstein, pp.21-22.
[28] Mishnah Torah, *Hilkhot Me'ilah* 8:8.

Whatever the ripple effects of *kibud av va-eim* may be, seismic changes in the dominant culture have transformed this statute from a Rabbinic given into a conditional right which young modern Jews (post-Bnai Mitzvah age) feel must be earned and mutually reciprocated between parent and child. It is neither unidirectional nor assumed.

The extent and type of honor afforded to parents by their children varies widely based on ethnicity and socio-economics as much as epoch; we would not expect an aristocratic family in Victorian England to embody the same tribal mores as a Yemenite family who immigrated to Israel in the early years of statehood. Certainly, in modern times, a Jewish family living in the United States enjoys a far greater degree of religious freedom, educational and economic opportunity, and integration into mainstream society than Jews at any other time in history. This elevated lifestyle does not exempt or excuse 21st century American Jews from their filial obligations; however, it most definitely influences their attitude toward their parents and affects their definition of such obligations.

Where is the Love?

In discussing definitions of "honor" and "reverence," it should be noted how conspicuously absent one verb is from the legal language of parental treatment: love. Although the Torah reminds its readers to "love your neighbor as yourself," it never campaigns for the cause to love one's parents any more or less than the neighbor or stranger residing in one's midst. Plainly, the commandment does not read, "Thou shalt *love* thy parents." Recitations of love between parent and child may be an ideal to which we aspire, but they do not always reflect the reality of domestic relationships. Grudges, altercations, and estrangements all drive a wedge into the fabric of loving and

affectionate connections. Moreover, a heartfelt emotion like love cannot be mandated. It takes shape in the soul, sometimes spontaneously and unpredictably, but never because of legislation or external obligation.

Instead of trying to enforce the unenforceable, Biblical and Rabbinic law obligate the Jew to show honor and pay reverence. Maimonides asserts that "it is possible for a man to honor and revere and obey those whom he does not love,"[29] that filial piety does not necessarily stem from filial affection. Contemporary Talmudic scholar Michael Chernick explains that respect and honor are not emotions for the Talmud, but "concrete acts directed toward different aspects of the parent as human being...Mere lip service to these issues is insufficient...Rather, acting in a way that makes the parent feel that he or she is a significant and special person to the child is what Jewish law demands."[30] In other words, *kibud* and *mora* generate actions with observable outcomes, behaviors taken upon oneself in order to uphold the humanity of those biologically closest to them.

A midrash from *Pirkei d'Rebbe Eliezer* further distinguishes honor from love, stressing that the former can be performed even when the latter is absent:

> Until a man takes a wife, he directs his love toward his parents. Once he marries, he directs his love toward his wife, as we read, "Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife, and they shall be one flesh"[31] Does a man leave his parents in the sense that he is free of the obligation to honor them? Rather his soul's love cleaves to his wife....[32]

In this sequence, love travels from parent to partner, proving to be both temporary and transitory. The problem with the Midrash lies in its repeated use of the word "love" to describe two dissimilar relationships, each sustained by love but love of a completely

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[29] Maimonides, *Responsa*, ed. J. Blau, II, no. 448, p.728.
[30] Chernick, Michael. "Who Pays? The Talmudic Approach to Filial Responsibility" *That You May Live Long*. UAHC Press, New York, 2003.
[31] Genesis 2:24.
[32] *Pirke d'Rebbe Eliezer* 32.

different nature. The love and affection a child showers upon parents from a young age does not resemble the love and affection he or she shares later in life with a spouse or companion. Thus, the conclusion that honor does not hinge upon feelings of love in the least is misleading; rather, the outward expression of love will appropriately change depending on the type of relationship (parent-child, spouse-spouse, brother-sister) one pursues at any given moment. Love is but one variable in the quest to find the elusive balanced equation of parent-child harmony.

Mathematical proofs aside (for we are 'social' scientists)—how do we unlock the vague distinctions between *love* and *honor*? Can the modern family function cohesively if the children, young or grown, show respect but feel no love towards their parents?

When a sample group of Reform Jewish teenagers were asked how their parents could best reciprocate and show honor to their children, the resounding response was to "love them unconditionally."[33] In essence, these teens equated "love" with "honor," unable to make the distinction between an internalized emotion and the external expression of that emotion. But the Sages of the Talmud, in their wisdom, knew that the expectation of unconditional love was beyond the pale of lawful discourse. Therefore, outside of a few legal statements and illustrative *midrashim*, the Talmud leaves many specifically emotional contours of the parent-child relationship undiscussed. Blidstein thinks this deliberate in that the "rabbis realized the unique quality of each relationship and did not hasten to issue generalized rules [about love]." [34] Truly, no 'one-size-fits-all' formula of a family exists; each parent-child relationship must be viewed and evaluated as a stand-alone case, unique in its concomitance (or collision) of personalities.

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[33] Quotation from a conversation with 11th and 12th grade Reform Jewish teens at Leo Baeck Temple, December 13, 2009.
[34] Blidstein, p. xiii.

Love certainly problematizes the desire to perform acts of *kibud av va-eim*, for it blinds, blurs and colors the perspectives of each party in the relationship. It can spur guilt or manipulation, denial or enablement. Especially when a child stands in conflict with her parents, or is bitter that he must care for them tirelessly as they deteriorate with illness and old age, how does one disentangle the knotted threads of love and honor, so as to effectively act in the spirit of the commandment? Is there a point at which love must give way to honor, or at the very least, "tough love"?

Perhaps the two impulses can coexist, beginning with simple acts of kindness and generosity toward one's elders. One contemporary responsum, found in *Sefer Charedim*, believes that the *mitzvah* is fulfilled merely by speaking respectfully to parents: "A person must honor his parents through speech, by speaking to them calmly, gently, respectfully and with reverence."[35] Another localizes the seat of honor in the heart itself, out of which thought and emotion combine to perform loving and honorable deeds: "He should honor them in his heart, feeling and seeing them as being important....This is the essence of the honor due to them."[36]

The Palestinian Talmud conveys the same idea—that "honoring" implies the granting of dignity and self-worth—in a short parable:

> A man may feed his father fattened chickens and inherit hell, and another may put his father to work treading a mill and inherit the Garden of Eden. How is this possible?
>
> There was a man who used to feed his father fattened chickens. Once his father said to him, "My son, where did you get these?" He answered, "Old man, shut up and eat, just as dogs shut up when they eat." Such a man feeds his father on fattened chickens but inherits hell.
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> There was also a man who worked in a mill. The king ordered that millers be brought to work for him. Said the man to his father, "Father, you stay here and work in the mill in my place [and I will go work for the king]. For if insults come to the workers, I prefer that they

[35] *Sefer Charedim*, 4:1-2.
[36] *Chayei Adam* 67:3, as translated in Greenwald, p.104.

> fall on me and not on you. Should floggings come, let them beat me and not you." Such a man puts his father to work in a mill yet inherits the Garden of Eden.[37]

It is not difficult to explain why each man merited his corresponding fate. The first suppressed his father's autonomy and treated him with disdain and condescension. The second, despite pushing his father into manual labor, upholds his father's dignity at the same time that he shields him from potential harm. Certainly, this could be construed as an act of love; however, the wording of the passage specifies action not emotion, protection over affection.

As we transition into the next chapter, we will examine the effect of today's "Longevity Revolution," in which American Jews are living longer, healthier, more productive lives than ever before. Certainly, this adds to the 'weighty' obligation of caring for, honoring, and at times, revering elderly or infirm parents. But the burden of trying to fulfill a commandment that has no time limit, no endpoint, may turn out to be a blessing in disguise as the modern Jew adapts to longer life spans and increasingly nuanced and complicated situations that arise from taking care of one's parents in later-life stages. Though the bodies and minds of our loved ones may slowly deteriorate, the imperative to treat them with dignity and respect never fades.

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[37] Talmud Yerushalmi, *Kiddushin* 1:7

CHAPTER 2:

CARING FOR AN ELDERLY PARENT

"Do not throw me away in the time of old age, when my strength is failing me, do not forsake me." --Psalms 71:9

"When a father ties his son's shoes, the son smiles.
When a son ties his own shoes, they both smile.
When a son ties his father's shoes, they both cry." --Yiddish proverb

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The Sages who authored volumes of classical Jewish law and legend recognized that the parent-child relationship undergoes one of its most intense and complicated periods toward the end of the parent's life. While the advancement of years and decades may indeed lend themselves to a long, healthy and productive lifestyle—one that allows ample time for the aging senior to grow closer with his or her adult children—the physical and mental deterioration that often accompanies old age can also create unbalanced, often unreciprocated, dependency on the grown child. In this manner, it has the potential to weaken the fabric of the relationship itself.

Providing care to one's elderly parents is nothing new to Jewish tradition; however, the increased longevity of today's Jewish community creates a new set of demands over a longer period of time for the child, bringing the discussion of *kibud av va-eim* to the realm of contemporary trends and challenges in caregiving. Rabbi Ruth Langer juxtaposes the *halakhic* tradition with more modern sensibilities toward filial piety:

> The rabbinic discussions took place at a time when reaching old age at all was rare, and extended chronic illness was relatively uncommon. In our day, when medical advances and longer life spans have dramatically increased the likelihood that any individual parent will spend an extended period in frail physical and mental health, the question of the

> *halachically* required nuances of 'honoring one's parents' needs to be reopened with much deeper attention paid to...the changed reality of our times.[38]

With the advent of advanced medical technologies and increasingly specialized healthcare over the past half-century, the American Jewish population today enjoys a longer average lifespan than at any other moment in recorded history. The latest U.S. National Vital Statistics Report of 2008 puts the average life span of an American at an all time high of 78.1 years of age.[39] In 1950, by contrast, average life expectancy for both genders of any race in the United States was 68.2 years of age.[40] These statistics prove even more staggering when compared to life span during the Biblical period, during which some archeologists contend that the mortality rate, when unaffected by war or an unusual famine, was approximately 36.9 years of age.[41]

Today, especially in the liberal American Jewish community where the number of children per family unit has gradually decreased, the percentage of Jews over the age of sixty-five continues to grow and, by some reports, constitutes close to 20% of American Jewry.[42] As such, the elderly (which many institutions define as age 60 and older) comprise the fastest-growing segment of the Jewish population, resulting in what Rabbi Richard Address, former director of the URJ Department of Jewish Family Concerns, refers to as the "longevity revolution."[43]

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[38] Langer, Ruth. "Honor Your Father and Mother: Caregiving as a Halachic Responsibility." *Aging and the Aged in Jewish Law: Essays and Responsa.* Eds. Jacob, Walter and Moshe Zemer. Pittsburgh: Freehof Institute, 1998, p.21.
[39] "American Life Expectancy Hits Record High", *Medical News Today*, June 13, 2008.
[40] National Center for Health Statistics, *National Vital Statistics Reports,* vol. 54, no. 19, June 28, 2006. www.cdc.gov/nc
[41] MacDonald, Nathan. *What did the Ancient Israelites Eat? Diet in Biblical Times*. p. 86
[42] "Introduction". *To Honor and Respect.* ed. Richard Address. URJ Press, 2005, p.vii.
[43] Ibid., p.viii.

This "revolution" manifests itself in both the secular and religious realms, causing individuals and institutions to re-examine the way they go about their 'business,' be it of the occupational or spiritual variety. A greater number of seniors in the workforce has implications for productivity, job mobility, health care and workplace standards to be negotiated by employers and employees, such as appropriate retirement age. On a spiritual level, synagogues and other houses of worship face the challenge of offering senior-targeted programming, including opportunities for study, socializing and social action that resonate with meaning for this older demographic. Barriers to participation—from the lack of wheelchair-accessible ramps to the proclivity of many synagogues to deliver pediatric Shabbat and holiday experiences— heighten feelings of alienation and disenchantment for elderly Jews in their home communities. As a response, the Union for Reform Judaism has promoted the development of "sacred aging" initiatives in congregational life intended to attract older congregants, celebrate the wisdom and experience they can offer younger generations, and create rituals and venues for spiritual exploration and support amongst their peers.

In addition to communal institutions, the longevity revolution impacts family structure and dynamics in profound ways. Now that the older, post-retirement adult culture typically lasts more than one decade—potentially two, three or four decades of life, during which seniors become increasingly dependent on others as they face the onset of debilitation and disease—their adult children must wrestle with determining the type and extent of care they can provide for their aging parents. Questions of geographic proximity, preservation of an elderly parent's sense of autonomy (despite their diminished health and capacity to live independently), and financial burden can weigh heavily upon the adult child who seeks to adhere to the fifth commandment. Moreover,

this middle generation may have their own children whom they must support and nurture, limiting the resources of time, money and energy that they can devote to their elderly parent. Address calls members of this cohort the "club-sandwich generation,"[44] at once trying to fulfill the needs of their nuclear family while beginning to deal with the real psychological, social and economic tolls of their own parents' aging. The double-sided tension of multi-generational demands is well encapsulated by Susan Bortz of Pittsburgh:

> The obligation to honor our parents may weigh heavy on our shoulders and our souls, as is balancing our responsibilities and our time with and for all members of our families. The balancing act takes careful planning, and should include an obligation to take care of one's self and should be a part of a routine so one does not neglect or forget time with family, prayer, study, and exercise.[45]

Bortz paints the fifth commandment as one made that much more difficult by the longevity revolution. The blessing of longer life translates into added years of self-sacrifice and service on the part of the child. Today's aging population may live several decades longer than their predecessors, but these years will undoubtedly be characterized by increasing frailty and dependency. It follows that the adult child's attempt to strike a balance between caring for her elderly or infirm parent, her children, and her own physical and mental welfare is analogous to performing a tightrope walk without a net; the wire-walker must carefully and continuously shift weight in every direction so as to prevent the whole enterprise from crashing down to earth. Only painstakingly planned

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[44] In 1981, Dorothy Miller coined the term "sandwich generation" to describe the segment of the middle-aged generation that provides support to both young and older family members yet does not receive reciprocal financial or emotional support in exchange. (Miller, Dorothy, "The Sandwich Generation," *Social Work*, Sept.1981, p.420). Address' emendation to the term refers to the added generations, younger and older, that may be dependent on support from the adult parent/child, as part of the longevity revolution.

[45] *That You May Live Long*. Eds. Richard Address and Hara Person. New York: UAHC Press, 2003, p.6.

steps in small measured increments will keep the walker in balance, able to withstand the pressures tugging at her from all sides, as well as the gravity of the task at hand.

In this chapter, we will explore the dimensions of honoring one's parents during the twilight of their lives: the demands and difficulties of caregiving, the question of who pays, and the way contemporary realities either harmonize or collide with halakhic rulings and *aggadic* insights on the treatment of elderly parents.

Caregiving: A Counter-Cultural Impulse

Most adult children can not help but feel some sense of guilt over the (in)adequacy of care they provide their parents. How can they possibly repay a fraction of the time or attention afforded them throughout childhood and young adulthood? In the event that they hire someone else to provide daily care, have they even truly fulfilled the obligation to honor their parent? Is it really such an 'honor' for an ailing, aging parent to be tended by a complete stranger?

Rabbi Dayle A. Friedman, Director of *Hiddur:* the Center for Aging and Judaism, articulates the feelings of insufficiency so many Jewish adults have when contemplating care for their aging parents: "We are afraid that Jewish law and values will merely validate our already overpowering sense of guilt for not doing, or being, enough for our parents."[46] Yet, Friedman assuages the caregiving adult's shame to some degree by reminding us that Jewish tradition—especially post-Talmudic commentaries and medieval Rabbinic responsa—is nuanced, realistic and open to interpretation as relates to the honoring of parents. Ultimately, it favors direct, dignifying and attentive care of the aged, but properly sets limits as to what a grown child can actually accomplish.

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[46] Friedman, Dayle A. "Beyond Guilt: What We Owe Our Aging Parents—A Perspective from Tradition." *That You May Live Long*. New York: UAHC Press, 2003, p.79.

The concern that an adult child can never fully compensate a parent in kind for the care provided during his upbringing sets up a false dichotomy; the two relationships are not reciprocal. As Langer explains:

> Some have tried to claim that this pervasive sense of filial obligation is based on understandings of an economic exchange of services. Just as parents cared for children in their youth, so, now, children have an obligation to pay the debt and return the favor... However, the model is insufficient. The parent who cares for a healthy child makes an investment in the future and looks forward to the satisfaction of watching that child become a contributing member of society...In contrast, the child that cares for an aged parent can not realistically expect a rosy future. Thus, although from the parent's perspective there may be an element of exchange, from the child's perspective, the emotional and psychological burden of the caregiving is substantially different.[47]

The Babylonian Talmud succinctly parallels Friedman's message: "The love of parents goes to their children, but the love of these children goes to *their* children."[48] Contrary to a parent raising a child during the incipient stages of life and watching them explore, flourish and try things anew, the caregiving adult focuses his energy on making the aging parents comfortable during the last months and years of life. This amounts to an "obligation without measure"[49] or reward, for no matter how great or attentive the care, the endpoint will eventually be death.

Moreover, while the opportunity to rear and guide children is often thought a privilege, the task of administering care to heavily reliant elders might be labeled a burden.. These divergent psychic attitudes toward the two age groups closely align with current American societal trends—the denigration of the old and feeble and the lionization of youth and beauty. As far back as the Middle Ages, strands of ageism could

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[47] Langer, p. 24.
[48] BT *Sotah* 49a.
[49] Mishnah *Peah* 1:1. Honoring one's parents (*kibud av va-eim*) is the first on the liturgical list of *mitzvot* that have no equivalent measure in the "*Eilu D'varim*" paragraph that is read daily in morning prayer.

be detected in Jewish sources, such as this stark admission from the Maharal of Prague, Rabbi Judah Loew (1520-1609): "It is natural for the old to be despised by the general population because they have many needs and little to contribute. They can no longer function the way they once did but now sit idle and have no purpose. The mitzvah "Honor your father and mother" was given specifically for this situation."[50] Similarly, the 20th century stalwart of spiritual and social justice, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, writes:

> The typical attitude to old age is characterized by fear, confusion, absurdity, self-deception and dishonesty...Old age is something we are all anxious to attain. However, once attained we consider it a defeat, a form of capital punishment. Enabling us to reach old age, medical science may think, it gave us a blessing; however, we continue to act as if it were a disease.[51]

Loew and Heschel delve into the complexities of caring for the aged even as a society is predisposed to shun or isolate them for the 'sin' of growing old. Certainly, the tendency of individuals to distance themselves from human reminders of their own mortality and deterioration is a culturally coded construct. In many indigenous cultures, all generations, young and old, occupy a valued place under the same roof. Reverence for the aged preserves the sanctity of family relationships and permits traditions and customs to pass seamlessly from elder to youth. But the contemporary American ethos, obsessed with the erasure of wrinkle lines, the eradication of gray hairs, and the escalating costs of health care, holds a different set of standards, largely antithetical to the idea that one must not only support, but readily engage with and celebrate the aging population. In essence, by accepting the mantle of obligation to care for one's aging or

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[50] Gur Aryeh, *Melekhet Machshevet.* (translation from *"Kabed et Avicha v'et Imecha"* curriculum by Joel Lurie Grishaver, Torah Aura Productions).
[51] Heschel, Abraham Joshua. "To Grow In Wisdom". *The Insecurity of Freedom: Essays on Human Existence*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1964, p.70.

infirm parent, one must actually follow a counter-cultural impulse. He or she must defy the expressed values of the surrounding milieu and act selflessly in an era of selfishness, make personal sacrifices in a time of unchecked individualism. For this reason, Heschel concludes that "the test of a people is how it behaves toward its old. It is easy to love children...but the affection and care for the old, the incurable, the helpless, are the true gold mines of a culture."[52]

The Nursing Home Conundrum: Take 'em or leave 'em?

A critical decision facing the child of an elderly or infirm parent is whether to become the primary caregiver or to entrust the sacred duty to someone else. Some traditional sources specify that none other than the child should carry out all parental care in person. *Ben Sira,* a pre-Rabbinic work of wisdom literature from the second century BCE, pontificates at length on the issue of filial obligation, exhorting its readers thusly: "My son, be strong in the honor of your father, and do not leave him all the days of your life. And even if he loses sense, let him do all that he wishes..."[53] A post-Talmudic work, *Seder Eliyahu*, offers a similar message: "Even if your father's spittle is running down his beard—obey him promptly." [54] These pre-modern voices contend that a person can only guarantee appropriate reverence and promptness of care if they personally fulfill the role of chief caregiver. Any other option spells abandonment.

Ruth Langer, a contemporary liberal voice in this debate, makes a counter-argument that when a senior's dignity is compromised—perhaps when his or her faculties

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[52] Ibid., p. 72.
[53] *Wisdom of Ben-Sira*, 3:12, p.13.
[54] *Seder Eliyahu*, ed. M. Friedmann, Chapt. 25, p.136, as translated in Blidstein, p.116.

begin to fail—third party designation may be the *only* appropriate mode of treatment.[55] Langer maintains that third party care is a *halakhicly* viable option when it serves to maintain the physical modesty and emotional integrity of the aging parent. So long as the substitute caregivers display the same measure of reverence and loyalty that Jewish law demands of a child—such as refraining from cursing or striking one's parents, addressing them with titles of respect, and not contradicting them in public—delegation of care to a third-party falls within the bounds of defensible *halakhah*.

To this list of traditional expressions of *yirat ha-horim* (reverence of parents), Langer adds that caregivers should be familiar with and able to implement newer medical technologies that can maximize the elderly parent's ability to remain independent. Personal autonomy has undeniably emerged as a predominant value in modern American society. Distinct from our ancient forebears as well as most indigenous peoples in the world today, American Jews live in a culture that places high priority on independence and does not consider multigenerational living arrangements the norm. Thus, caregivers - be they kin or employee - would ideally follow a program of care in which they encourage the aging person, as much as she is able, to live an independent lifestyle, perform activities that promote her self-sufficiency (e.g. grocery shopping) and participate in major decisions concerning her own health.

Still, despite the espoused objective of preserving their relative autonomy, members of the aging population must necessarily surrender aspects of independence as their health and mobility decline. Painful transitional moments, like relinquishing one's car keys or moving from one's own home to a nursing home, may spur feelings of powerlessness and resentment for the aged parent, guilt and anxiety for their grown child.

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[55] Langer, p. 34.

Even if the elder acknowledges that an assisted living environment is better equipped to accommodate his needs, loss of home and the mere hint of filial abandonment can cause him to regard such a decision with suspicion or disdain.

This emotionally charged family dilemma finds its way to the Responsa Committee of the Central Conference of American Rabbis in 1980:

> If an aged parent who now lives with his family is feeble to such an extent that he would be much better cared for in a nursing home, but if he strenuously objects to leaving the family home, what in the light of Jewish tradition can be done under these circumstances?[56]

The Responsa Committee first consulted the applicable *halakhic* literature regarding the obligation of and seemingly boundless limits of filial devotion. The initial task confronting these liberal *posekim* is finding the precedent for a situation in which an enfeebled parent's illness or infirmity so burdens the family that the decision to move to third-party care becomes a necessity. Drawing primarily from the *Shulhan Arukh*, Yoreh De'ah 240-241, which summarizes the Jewish laws pertaining to honoring father and mother, the committee finds no clear exemptions or limits to parental care. Rather, it cites several Maimonidean passages that endorse compliance to the fifth commandment to a reverential extreme:

> What is the extent of honoring one's father and mother? Even if they took his pouch of gold coins and, in his presence, threw it into the sea, he should not reproach them or show distress or anger in their presence, but rather he should accept the decree of Scripture and be silent.
>
> What is the extent of revering them? Even if one were wearing expensive clothing, sitting at the head of an assembly, and one's parents came, tore his clothes, hit him on the head, and spit in his face, he should not reproach them. Instead, he should be silent and

[56] Freehof, Solomon B. "#22: Aged Parent to Nursing Home," *New Reform Responsa*, Cincinnati, OH: HUC Press, 1980.

> have reverence and fear of the King of Kings, who has commanded him thus [to revere his parents].[57]

It would initially seem, based on these teachings, that despite the health benefits and constancy of supervision available at an assisted living facility, children must not contradict the wishes of their elderly parents and force them to move against their will. Even in the face of such extreme examples of financial sacrifice and public humiliation bordering on abuse, the *halakhic* principle unequivocally promotes the continuance of *kibud av va-eim*. Simply put, erratic or abnormal parental behavior does not nullify the obligation to honor and revere.

Yet, the Responsa Committee has the mind to dig deeper into the vast well of classical sources so as to uncover instances in which a child effectively *does* bestow honor, even if it may be construed by the parent as mistreatment or disrespect. A prime illustration of honor concealed as maltreatment is the scenario from the Palestinian Talmud that depicts a grown son sending his father to grind at the millstone while the son puts himself in a position to absorb harsher blows in the royal court (see end of previous chapter for full text). Here the child places his parent in an uncomfortable, potentially hazardous, environment; yet, he knows the alternative to be far worse. Paramount to his decision-making is the emotional and physical welfare of the father, now entrusted to his care.

The similarities between the *aggadah* and our modern day scenario are striking. The child who believes that he can no longer protect his rapidly aging parent from the "blows" of everyday life—from the steep flight of stairs that never before posed problems to the lonely isolation of being left home alone for long hours during the work

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[57] Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Mamrim* 6:7.

week—must find a way to explain to his parent that there is a better lifestyle choice for both parties. Yet, while his intentions may be honorable, Jewish law cautions the child, when seeking to convince his aging parent to accept a new venue or course of treatment, to speak calmly and compassionately. Rabbi Moses Isserles, in his gloss on the relevant passage from the *Shulhan Arukh*, *Yoreh Deah* 240:4, moves beyond mere persuasion and charges the grown child to consider the way in which he delivers the message:

> If the son makes the father grind at the millstone but his intention is for the benefit of the father, to save him from a worse situation, then the son should speak words of kindness to the heart of the father and to show the father that his intention is for the father's benefit, until the father finally consents to grind at the millstone. This son will inherit Paradise.[58]

In his words and his conduct, the child must not hammer the decision forcefully without regard for the parent's anxiety and acute sense of loss. If the elder's obstinacy is met with more obstinacy, no *mitzvah* has been performed, no autonomy granted, and no real "care" has been provided. The key to preserving the health of the parent, and simultaneously, the health of the parent-child relationship revolves around gentle, unhurried communication. The hope is that one's elderly parent will respond to the child's softness of tone, lucid rationale and intentionality of proper care, and subsequently concede to the mutually beneficial (though difficult) move. Echoing the guidance of Rabbi Isserles, the Reform Responsa Committee recommends that adult children, "be sure that their motives are not selfish, but for the good of the parent, [assume] their duty to reason with [the parent] until he consents, if only reluctantly. To insist that he leave the home over his strenuous objection would be wrong."[59] Gentle and gradual encouragement that safeguards the parent's integrity may lead both parties one

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[58] Isserles, R' Moses on *Shulhan Arukh*, *Yoreh Deah* 240:4.
[59] Freehof, Chapt.22.

step closer to reaching consensus on this particularly challenging 'nursing home dilemma' amplified by the longevity revolution.

In sum, whether one chooses to personally accept the role of caregiver or designates someone else to function in this capacity, both traditional and contemporary liberal strands of *halakhah* demand that a parent's needs should be carried out with dignity and compassion, never resentment or hostility: "Children should serve parents with a pleasant facial expression; for if they serve them with a dismal face, it is wrong...A person's attitude and manner of speaking to his parents is what counts."[60]

Rav Assi's Decision: Senility vs. Servility

But what represents the proper course of action for those modern Jews who do not observe any *halakhic* system? At what point in a parent's mental and physical deterioration must assisted-living options or around-the-clock care become a thing of necessity? Can the Jewish sources be instructive without being prescriptive?

Surely, one of the gravest health challenges for today's elderly is chronic brain syndrome, often referred to as senility.[61] While the sages of the pre- and post-Talmudic eras may well have observed some instances of mental illness among the aged, such cases were undoubtedly less frequent and minimally understood as compared to the medical research that guides our diagnoses and treatments today. As a result of much shorter average life spans and a paucity of biomedical knowledge, the Rabbis were neither equipped nor dedicated to devoting vast tomes of literature to the subject. Indeed, most of the *midrashim* involving parents acting in a strange or aggressive manner toward their

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[60] *Shulhan Arukh,* Yoreh De'ah 240:4

[61] Butler, R.N. and M.I. Lewis. *Aging and Mental Health.* St Louis: C.V. Mosby Co., 1973.

children—as with the case of the father who flings a bag of gold into the sea or the mother who strikes her son, tears his garment and spits in his face—are presented as aberrations or momentary lapses of reason. By and large, the codified laws of *kibud av va-eim* fail to take the real burdens of senility into account when laying out the standards of fiscal and emotional support imposed on children whose parents suffer from chronic brain syndrome.

Even in contemporary society, many people incorrectly define 'senility' as the condition of forgetfulness or excessive reminiscing on the part of the aged parent. Though these may be early stage symptoms of senile psychosis (the predominant form of chronic brain syndrome)—alongside errors in judgment, decline in personal care, and increased anxiety and irritability—there are five traditional clinical signs of the condition as enumerated by Rabbi Levi Meier *z"l*, longtime chaplain at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles:

(1) Disturbance and impairment of memory;
(2) Impairment of intellectual functioning;
(3) Impairment of judgment;
(4) Extreme disorientation;
(5) Shallow or labile affect.[62]

Unlike the *acute* brain syndrome that occurs after a physical or psychological trauma and can result in complete recovery, chronic brain syndrome is irreversible, progressive, and eventually fatal. Its common forms include dementia and, within that category, Alzheimer's Disease, the seventh leading cause of death that plagues 5.3 million people living in America today.[63]

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[62] Meier, Levi. "Filial Responsibility to the Senile Parent." *Jewish Values in Bioethics*. New York: Human Sciences Press, Inc.
[63] Report: *2009 Alzheimer's Disease Facts and Figures*, conducted by Alzheimer's Association. (www.alz.org)

The American Jewish community is no stranger to these tragic neurological diseases. Based on the 2000-2001 National Jewish Population Survey's estimate of 956,000 Jewish elders in the United States, there are at least 95,000 American Jewish seniors who suffer from dementia today.[64] Framing the disease in a Jewish context, Rabbi Dayle Friedman likens dementia to the Biblical motif of *midbar*—the wilderness, in which the Israelites traversed uncharted territory for 40 years en route to the Promised Land. Friedman writes:

> For the Israelites, the forty years of sojourning in the *midbar* after their liberation from slavery were mysterious and difficult. They wandered with few markers toward an unknown destination. They could not sustain themselves without Divine help. They were vulnerable to unsympathetic people they met along the way and to the harsh realities of nature. They could not return to the place of their memories, Egypt, and they could not truly imagine what lay ahead...Perhaps people with dementia experience their lives as a kind of *midbar*.[65]

Like the Hebrews of the enslaved generation who became increasingly despondent, rebellious and combative with each passing year, modern-day sufferers of dementia find themselves in a 'no-man's land' in which they cannot remember the past nor conceive of the future. They have a tendency to wander, literally and figuratively, and whether they realize it or not, come to be treated as disempowered, infantilized beings. Their worsening condition becomes especially difficult for the children who love and care for them, and over time begin to miss the twinkle of recognition in their parent's eyes. Friedman submits that "loving a person with dementia means facing a long, slow

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[64] Rieger, Miriam. *The American Jewish Elderly,* United Jewish Communities Report Series on the National Jewish Population Survey 2000-2001. New York: UJC, 2004. Note that these numbers are likely underestimates, as Jewish residents of nursing homes and other residential institutions were not included in the study.

[65] Friedman, Dayle. "Seeking the *Tzelem*: Making Sense of Dementia." *Jewish Visions for Aging*, p.40.

farewell, losing your dear one a little bit at a time. You experience loss anew every time you see the person..." [66]

The command to show *kavod* and *mora* to one's elders certainly holds; however, the occurrence of dementia will radically alter the long-held roles in any parent-child relationship. Authority and dependence likely switch hands, and significant responsibilities and decisions are now under the jurisdiction of the caregiving child. "[It] does not mean that you are now your parent's parent," Friedman assures, "but it is a painful realignment of roles nonetheless."[67]

We now return to the question of whether to give direct or delegated care in the case of a parent stricken with dementia. The teaching of Maimonides, a gifted doctor and philosopher as well as the preeminent medieval Torah scholar, sheds insight while still empowering the adult child to gauge and act on the particulars of his own situation:

> If one's father or mother should become mentally disordered, he should try to treat them as their mental state demands, until they are pitied by God [i.e. they die]. But if he finds he cannot endure the situation because of their extreme madness, let him leave and go away, assigning others to care for them properly.[68]

In the Rambam's ruling, the child is neither exempted from caring for her parents nor charged with taking on the full burden of this emotionally-charged responsibility for the duration of their lives. The important phrase is "*if he finds he cannot endure the situation,*" meaning that the child must be persistent in trying to provide direct and intimate care for his parent and, only when all other options have been explored and discounted, might he consider assigning the task to someone else.

Interestingly, Maimonides does not base this conclusion on any one specific Talmudic statement. Rather, his thinking stems from an story in the Babylonian Talmud with a distinctive ending:

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[66] Ibid, p.44.
[67] Ibid, p.45.
[68] Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Mamrim, 6:10.

> Rav Assi had an elderly mother. She said to him, "I want jewelry." He provided it for her. "I want a husband." [He replied,] "I'll search for one for you." "I want a husband who will be as handsome as you." Thereupon he left her and went to the Land of Israel.[69]

Aside from this mystifying quotation, there is a paucity of Talmudic material on *kibud av va-eim* that justifies a child's decision to leave his parent's side (except in the cases of young men who depart from their father's house so as to attend a great academy and immerse themselves in Torah learning). Hence, many scholars have pored over the Rav Assi passage in their quest to understand his motivation for leaving and his mother's forfeiture of proximity to her son.

First, it must be noted that Rav Assi departs for the land of Israel, a *mitzvah* in its own right. He must be torn between two competing *halakhic* obligations: to settle in the land of Israel and to demonstrate proper honor and reverence toward his mother. Secondly, and perhaps more critically, his mother instigates his decision to leave with what he (and his Rabbinic contemporaries) perceives to be an unreasonable and unfulfillable demand. After complying with her first two wishes, the third request she makes of her son renders continued caregiving impossible. The inappropriate, boundary-crossing nature of the request was understood by Maimonides and other law codifiers as so outlandish that it must have been indicative of mental disease. Under such duress and discomfort, Maimonides absolves Rav Assi of his obligation to remain in Babylon near his mother.

Although a few commentators objected to Maimonides' final ruling, the majority supports his reading and endorses Rav Assi's sudden departure. Rabbi David ben Solomon ibn Zimra (Radbaz), a 15th/16th century commentator, claims that in this

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[69] BT *Kiddushin* 31b.

scenario "the child is in a weakened position, unable to rebuke the parent and not able to command the respect necessary to effect some measure of stability. An outsider is unencumbered by these realities and is better able to restore the parent to a more functional level."[70] Thus, Assi's choice to leave is vindicated and a classical argument for third-party care begins to emerge.

Similarly, Rabbi Meier, in his contemporary reading of the text, suspects that Maimonides may have equated Rav Assi's mother's condition with chronic, irreversible brain syndrome. In such terminal and potentially devastating cases as this, Meier recognizes that "the child's tolerance may be overtaxed and the child is therefore exempted from direct personal service. However the responsibility to ensure that someone else takes care of the parent is incumbent upon the child."[71]

Chronic brain disease, in all its forms, presents a formidable challenge to the aging Jewish population in the United States today. For a culture and faith that relies so heavily on the power of memory, an illness that distorts and eradicates memory, be it familial or historical, is nothing short of a tragedy. While the mental frailty of the afflicted may actually shield them from consciously experiencing this tragedy, it is raw and enduring for the grown children who hold their parents' hands tightly through the wilderness of old age and dementia.

And who will hold the hands of the caregiver, leading him to a destination of inner peace, spiritual relief and self-worth? The more support and love that can be offered by one's relatives, friends, synagogue and other affiliations, the more likely the child of an Alzheimer's patient will not 'burn out,' nor become so easily agitated and

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[70] Radbaz on *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Mamrim 6:10. Translation from Levi Meier, "Filial Responsibility to the Senile Parent", p.81.
[71] Meier, p.82.

resentful about their caregiving status. This extended network of support proves even more critical in relation to the fifth commandment, as it provides guidance and direction for the child to continue their sacred work of *kibud* and *mora*, and continually reframes and injects energy into the parent-child relationship so that the younger never resorts to committing actions or speaking words to her elder that lack reverence and honor. Finally, we ask: what is the role of *halakha* in this paradigm? Whether the child adheres to the codes and commands of Jewish law or not, she must be given the space and tools necessary to see the humanity and the Godliness in the debilitated other. In the quiet moments where no other non-anxious presence sits in the room, perhaps Jewish texts, comprising legend and legalese, can function as yet another base of support, comfort and guidance for the child who will inherit Paradise.

A New Frontier of Sacred Aging

The longevity revolution inarguably presents fertile ground for deepened relationships between parents and their adult children over the course of several decades. Older adults can live long, productive lives well into their eighties and nineties, creating ample opportunity to cultivate connections not only with their offspring, but with their grandchildren and great-grandchildren as well.

At the same time, an increase in years may put new strains on elderly parents and middle-aged children that previous generations faced but in far fewer numbers and to a lesser degree. A prolonged stage of later life may indeed spell more sickness than health, less acute sensory perception, slower reaction time and overwhelmingly unfamiliar societal and technological trends that leave seniors in a state of befuddlement. While they grapple with their looming mortality, the aging population may also sense that they

have become a greater financial and emotional burden to their children and loved ones. Meanwhile, the child, beset with her own duties to household and self, must increasingly divert time, energy and savings to the parent at the expense of the others who inhabit her daily universe. Moreover, demographic shifts have meant fewer siblings with whom to share caregiving responsibilities, so the escalating costs of healthcare, the spiritually draining task of end-of-life decision-making, and the physical exhaustion of visiting and tending to a parent's needs all take additional toll on the child who bestows honor.

It should be noted that this phenomenon is considerably impacted by gender. Judith Treas, a sociology professor at UC-Irvine, remarks on the disproportionate number of middle-aged women who serve as family caregivers according to population trends:

> Women outlive their husbands and call upon their daughters for support and care in their later years more than from their sons. Widows are most likely to reach out for the support of their family members. It is the daughters who are the ones to be responsible to their widowed mothers, providing various sorts of services for their mothers.[72]

Ironically, the classical Jewish sources usually contextualize issues of filial piety as occurring between father and son; yet nowhere are women exempted from the fifth commandment. This historically male-gendered imperative stands in contrast to the burgeoning amount of secular literature on today's aging population and the people who care for them, literature which, it stands to reason, targets and is consumed by a higher percentage of female readers. Though the breakthroughs initiated by the feminist movement over the last four decades have propelled women into the workplace and

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[72] Treas, Judith, "Family Support Systems for the Aged," The Gerontologist, Vol. 17, No.6, 1977, p.488. A more extensive investigation of the particular features and challenges facing adult mother-daughter relationships, and their implications for religious identification in modern Jewish families, has been undertaken as an HUC-JIR Jewish communal service thesis, *Determinants of Quality of Relationship and Feelings of Burden in Middle-Aged Jewish Women with Aging Mothers* (Laurie Ann Topel, 1982).

enabled men to inhabit, or at least share, stereotypically female domestic roles (e.g. cooking, cleaning, helping with homework), caregiving remains a female-dominated undertaking. Yet, this gendered pattern of caregiving cannot sustain itself, for who will care for the caregiving women of tomorrow? With the percentage of seniors rising across Jewish and secular demographic studies, and with Jewish families having fewer children later in life, a paradigm shift must materialize over the next decades in which *all* siblings, as well as synagogues, JCCs and other caring communities, contribute to caring for the aged. In this way, the commandment to honor one's parents is transformed from an individual pursuit to a communal obligation.

Another pattern at its height in present-day America is the mobility and geographic distance that separates the members of a nuclear family. Long past are the days of tribalism when multiple generations staked claim to a common land and set up their tents and dwelling places on a single estate. Thus, in an era of unparalleled transience, where career and academic pursuits may relocate an adult child far from her hometown, we are compelled to ask: Do the duties born out of filial piety require the adult child to live near an aging parent? Can great geographic distance and an intimate, supportive relationship coexist?

First, we must expose the misleading premise of the question. Today's seniors have themselves migrated from the "land of their upbringing," routinely settling into warmer climes in the southern United States or international getaways so as to enjoy the tranquility of retirement. Secondly, the inclination of the young to move away from 'home' is by no means a modern construct. Gleaning insight from the rich and revealing narratives in the Biblical text, we find a domestic exodus as early as Genesis 12, in which our forefather Abraham obeys the will of God when instructed to "go forth from the land

of your birth to a land that I will show you".[73] At the end of the previous chapter, Abraham's father Terah dies in his native Haran. But one *midrashic* source suggests that when Abraham received the Divine call that would propel him to embark on his journey, Terah was still alive and lived on for another 65 years. This fact troubled the Rabbis, for despite answering God's call, Abraham ostensibly left his aging father to die alone with no promise of return. It would seem that Abraham prioritized his relationship with God at the expense of his filial obligations to his father. The Rabbinic imagination justifies his decision accordingly: "They will say, 'He left his aged father and went off.' So God said to Abraham, 'I release you from the obligations of honoring your father and your mother..." [74] Abraham's willful decision to abandon his father, coupled with the fact that no corresponding punishment is issued him, sets an important precedent in the tradition: in the rarest of cases, precisely in the act of obedience under Divine law, *kibud av va-eim* may be suspended or postponed to perform a *mitzvah* of greater merit.

Realistically, the modern Jew who pursues a job or romance in a distant city cannot convincingly claim that he was following a heavenly call, nor abandoning a pagan home for the prospects of monotheism. But the decision to leave one's home with the hope of attaining 'success,' however defined, harmonizes with the family chronicles of Genesis insofar as the forefathers pass on a legacy of guiding principles and values to their sons—specifically, the promise of a covenant and desire to settle in the Land. Comparably, in the past century, generations of American Jews labored and toiled so that their children and grandchildren could enjoy prosperity, partake in the highest levels of education, and consequently, receive the training and status required to pursue work and relationships across the globe. A parent cannot raise children with such gifts and

[73] Genesis 12:1.
[74] *Breishit Rabbah*, Vol.2, p.369.

expectations, only to deprive them the opportunity to take advantage of their learning and social mobility as an adult.

Still, the Jewish impulse to honor and revere one's parents remains evident in every age and every genre of literature. A child that lives a great distance from her aging or infirm parents must find ways to demonstrate emotional and physical support, even in absentia. Even more than shouldering the financial burden of paying for third-party care,[75] caregiving exists in the soothing tone of a child's voice over the phone, the daily check-ins, the active engagement with healthcare professionals and residential facilities, and the genuine sense of well wishes and blessings. Certainly, as circumstance dictates, there will come a time when the physical presence of the child proves crucial. Despite the expense of travel costs or the inflexibility of one's work schedule, these instances drive home the imperative to dignify one's parents, the individuals solely responsible for giving a child the gift of life, *in person*. In an example of humor revealing a genuine moral principle, we read the famous anecdote told of Rabbi Hayyim of Brisk:

> A man once came to Rabbi Hayyim with the following question: He had heard that his father was ill, and hence felt obliged to journey to visit him. But since the law states that a child need not spend money in the honoring of his parent, he thinks that he may not be obliged to take the trip, for he would, of course, be forced to buy a train ticket. R' Hayyim answered tersely: "Correct—you are not obliged to spend the money—walk![76]

Like the *midrash* of the son who transfers his father to the millstone in order to escape the lash of a tyrant's whip, Rabbi Hayyim's message is unmistakable: if necessary, make

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[75] For an extensive analysis of the *halakhic* literature on whether financial obligation falls upon the parent or child, see Rabbi Michael Chernick's article, "Who Pays? The Talmudic Approach to Filial Responsibility," *That You May Live Long*, pp.94-102. Also, Blidstein, *Honor Thy Father and Mother*, pp.63-74.

[76] Zevin, S.Y. *Ishim v'Shittot*, p.61, based on Gerald Blidstein, *Honor Thy Father and Mother*, p.72.

yourself a little more uncomfortable, your life a little less luxurious, so you can alleviate some small measure of the hardship that has befallen your aging parent, for you will yearn for the same care from your own offspring some day.

From Biblical precept to contemporary Jewish thought, our tradition is one which commands and compels us to treat our elders – not solely our parents – with honor and reverence: "You shall rise before the gray-haired person and grant glory—*v'hadarta p'nei zakein*—to the face of the elderly." [77] Poet Danny Siegel translates the phrase *v'hadarta p'nei zakein* as "to allow the beauty, glory, and majesty of their faces to emerge,"[78] beckoning us to move beyond the baseline obligations of respect and reverence, and enable our elders to experience joy, meaning and pride in their later years. Beyond cost and convenience, the question for many adult children who face the reality of caring for aging parents is both timeless and universal: How do I reconcile my fear of losing my parents, my guilt that I did not do enough for them in the time that we had, and my desire to provide the joy, care and uplift that they have merited? It is time that we disallow caregivers from confronting these questions on their own, in an isolated vacuum, away from the rest of their community. If we do not want the longevity revolution to be superseded by an epidemic of attrition, then the collective power of American Jewry—its congregations, caring committees and the full extent of its communal apparatus—will have to play an integral role in supporting and sustaining the elderly for generations to come.

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[77] Leviticus 19:32.

[78] Siegel, Danny. "The Mitzvah of Bringing Out Beauty in Our Elders' Faces," *A Heart of Wisdom: Making the Jewish Journey from Midlife through the Elder Years*. Susan Berrin, ed. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 1997, p.51.

CHAPTER 3:

PARENTING JEWISH CHILDREN IN THE 21ST CENTURY

"There is a generation that curse their father,
And do not bless their mother.
There is a generation that are pure in their own eyes,
And yet are not washed from their filthiness....
The eye that mocks at his father,
And despises to obey his mother,
The ravens of the valley shall pick it out,
And the young vultures shall eat it."

--Proverbs 30:11, 17

Kids! I don't know what's wrong with these kids today!
Kids! Who can understand anything they say?
Why can't they be like we were, perfect in every way?
What's the matter with kids today?

--lyrics from "Kids," *Bye Bye Birdie*

"When you're a child, you're inferior. When you're a teen, you're equal. When you're a grown adult, you have to be the superior one because your parents rely on you."

--Janna, age 16

Walking down the "self-help" section of any major bookstore, one cannot help but be struck by the preponderance of titles on modern day parenting. Volume after volume utilizes compelling catchphrases and superlative adjectives to beckon a veteran or soon-to-be parent to pick the parenting manual off the shelf and browse the newest philosophies on how to raise perfect, well-adjusted and civic-minded children. *The Attachment Parenting Book* purports to being the "commonsense guide to understanding and nurturing your baby." A book entitled *Screamfree Parenting: the Revolutionary Approach to Raising Your Kids By Keeping Your Cool* insinuates that all previous attempts to raise children meant allowing one's temper to flare up, matching a child's colicky tantrums with a parent's wrath. The authors of the book *Parenting with Love and*

Logic: Teaching Children Responsibility introduce the concept of "helicopter parents,"[79] a term used to describe parents who pay extremely close attention to their children's experiences and problems and, like helicopters, hover closely overhead, rarely out of reach, whether their children need them or not. Also referred to as "overparenting," this trend effectively renders parents as self-appointed personal guardians, who unceasingly try to protect their children from coming into harm's way by shielding them from potentially dangerous situations.[80]

More recently, books like *Free-Range Kids: Giving Our Children the Freedom We Had Without Going Nuts With Worry* represent the antidote to 'helicopter parenting.' They offer parents new sets of practical and emotional tools to step away from their child's every move and, in doing so, contribute to the critical backlash of overparenting so prevalent in contemporary society:

> ...there is now a new revolution under way, one aimed at rolling back the almost comical overprotectiveness and overinvestment of moms and dads. The insurgency goes by many names — slow parenting, simplicity parenting, free-range parenting — but the message is the same: Less is more; hovering is dangerous; failure is fruitful. You really want your children to succeed? Learn when to leave them alone. When you lighten up, they'll fly higher. We're often the ones who hold them down...[81]

Self-help guides such as *Free-Range Kids* advocate the importance of self-reliance, whereby parents make room for children to fail, fall and learn from their mistakes.

Jewish literature on parenting echoes this prevailing trend, moving from a depiction of parents as problem-solvers to parents as coaches and consultants. Most

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[79] Cline, Foster and Jim Fay. *Parenting with Love and Logic: Teaching Children Responsibility*. New York: Pinon Press, 1990, pp. 23–25.

[80] In Scandinavia, this phenomenon is known as "curling" parenthood and describes parents who attempt to sweep all obstacles out of the paths of their children. It was coined in 2004 by Danish child psychologist Bent Hougaard. (Ekman, Ivar. "Swedes as Safety Junkies", *New York Times*, January 23, 2006.)

[81] Gibbs, Nancy. "The Growing Backlash Against Overparenting." *Time*. Nov.20, 2009. (www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1940395,00.html)

emphasize how and why parents should incorporate Jewish living, learning and ritual into the domestic sphere. Some popular titles, such as Sharon Duke Estroff's humorous and instructive *Can I Have A Cell Phone for Hanukkah? The Essential Scoop on Raising Modern Jewish Kids,* devote entire sections to the tensions of growing up as a liberal Jew in an integrated America, the most notable topic being the "December dilemma" (i.e. how to resist the allure of Christmas for Jewish children without building up Chanukah as a holiday solely about gift-giving). Yet, the most effective Jewish parenting guides expertly weave Jewish texts, stories and concepts into practical concerns and approaches that any parent can apply to their home life.

One text that truly captures this spirit of praxis—Jewish theory put into practice—is Wendy Mogel's *The Blessing of a Skinned Knee: Using Jewish Teachings to Raise Self-Reliant Children.* Mogel first reports on the predominant trends in American parent-child relationships, namely, parents' refusal to serve as authority figures, their fetishizing of their child's achievements, and their overprotective efforts to shield their child from any physical or emotional hardship whatsoever. But soon after she presents these troubling patterns, Mogel transitions rather seamlessly into the timeless perspectives on parenting that Judaism can provide:

> By sanctifying the most mundane aspects of the here and now, [Judaism] teaches us that there is greatness not just in grand and glorious achievements but in our small, everyday efforts and deeds. Judaism shows us that we don't have to be swallowed up by our frenzied, materialistic world—we can take what is valuable from it without being wholly consumed.[82]

Mogel distills three cornerstone principles of Jewish living—**moderation, celebration** and **sanctification**—as the basis for a healthy family life, enriched with meaning and stability in an ever-unsteady world. Moderation, for Mogel, means doing "two

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[82] Mogel, Wendy. *The Blessing of a Skinned Knee: Using Jewish Teachings to Raise Self-Reliant Children.* New York: Penguin Books, 2001, p.34.

incompatible things at once: to passionately embrace the material world that God has created...while exercising self-discipline."[83] In other words, one who practices moderation emulates God's decision to rest after six days of creation even though the world was not yet complete. The simple phrase "God saw that it was good" can be read as an antidote to perfectionism, as it showcases a patience and willingness on God's part to "leave a little bit undone" and to seek collaborative partners (i.e. humankind) with whom to continue the act of creation.

The second principle, celebration, comprises gratitude and joy for all of the gifts that are present in one's life. As a necessary component of Jewish child-rearing, celebration and gratitude remind us "to be grateful for the richness of the world and for our good fortune.... Through its spiritual calendar, rituals and blessings, Judaism offers families many ways to practice and teach gratitude and joy."[84] For Jewish children who are accustomed to getting all the toys, clothes and belongings they desire, but often forget to utter a simple "thank you," the display of gratitude becomes a fundamental lesson, rooted in Jewish tradition, which parents can pass onto their children.

Finally, Mogel defines sanctification as the process of acknowledging the holiness in everyday actions and events. Whether piled into the minivan en route to sports practice, doing chores around the house, or assembled around a board game in the living room, Jewish tradition challenges and encourages families to see the holy inside the mundane, to elevate the routines and relationships of daily life to a plane of sacred purpose. Noting that the Hebrew word for house, *bayit*, was the same expression for the Great Temple in Jerusalem, Mogel cleverly equates the most familiar of domestic scenes with the holiest of holies: "Our dining table with our children is an altar. It has the

[83] Ibid, p.34.
[84] Ibid, p.35.

potential to be the holiest spot on the planet."[85]

Mogel's seminal work, accompanied by other comprehensive "how-to" guides for Jewish ritual and observance like Daniel Gordis's *Becoming a Jewish Parent* and Anita Diamant's *How To Raise a Jewish Child*, functions as a fine starting point for raising proud and literate Jewish children. Yet, in order to construct a modern understanding of *kibud av va-eim* as it relates to parenting today's youth, one must also mine the treasury of legends and legal precedents from our collective past, then hold them up as touchstones to the lived realities of Jewish children growing up in the twenty-first century. How can parents embrace the teachings of Judaism and use them to help their children navigate the myriad complexities and phases of growing up: the stresses of school and standardized testing, the incidence of bullying and peer pressure, the radical evolution of technology and its impact on how children speak, think and interact, the accelerated timeline of physical development, and unquestionably, the seesawing status of the parent-child relationship. The ensuing chapter aims to meld tradition with modernity, borrowing insights from Biblical and Rabbinic sources and interpreting them anew, so as to serve the enterprise of parenting Jewish children in the new millennium.

A Parenting Case Study: Hillel vs. Shammai

In one of the most well known stories that distinguishes the academy of Hillel from that of Shammai, a non-Jew approaches each sage and asks them to teach him the entirety of Torah while standing on one foot. He first visits Shammai, who promptly strikes him with a broom and banishes him from his presence, for Shammai is indignant at this man's apparent mockery of the textual tradition. Hillel, however, faced with the same odd request, picks up one foot and famously proclaims, "Do not do to others what is

[85] Ibid, p.35.

hateful to you. The rest is commentary. Go and learn it."[86] As the legend goes, following this exchange the man converts to Judaism and becomes a committed student for the rest of his life.

Certainly, there are a number of lessons to be gleaned from such a parable. Patience is a virtue. Accept every learner who walks through the doorway. Be kind to your fellow human being and the rewards will be everlasting. But there may be special resonance if one were to re-read this tale as an allegory for raising children in modern times. First, the 'child' (i.e. the curious non-Jewish seeker) barges in with a seemingly outlandish request—a desire for access to a nearly limitless amount of learning that many of his elders devote their entire lives to studying. Motivated by the need for a 'quick fix' solution that will require little effort or time on his part, the youth's request actually makes sense with respect to the culture of consumerism and instant gratification in which he has been raised. The first parental figure (Shammai), however, does not bother to ask the 'child' to defend or explain this request; rather, he interprets it as blatant disrespect and exacts immediate punishment—exile. Shammai's parenting style, as it were, comes across as short-tempered and authoritative, marked by decisive action and an unwillingness to put himself in the child's shoes. Essentially, he decides what constitutes a valid request and how justice should be dispensed.

Hillel, on the other hand, displays patience, validation and the spirit of invitation where dismissal might seem more fitting. It is possible that he is just as baffled or incensed as Shammai, but Hillel suspends his judgments (or, at least, keeps them to himself) and tries to honor the man's request with the hope of furthering their relationship. Moreover, it is not the content of what Hillel says that would be

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[86] BT *Shabbat* 31a.

impressionable to today's youth; it is the fact that Hillel's actions align with his speech. He models the lesson he wishes to convey, treating the child-like seeker not with detestation nor sharp rebuke, but by treating him as he would want his neighbor or teacher to do unto him.

To test the hypothesis that Hillel exhibits a more effective and appealing style of 'parenting' than his counterpart, I assembled two groups—one of Reform Jewish teens and one of their parents—to discuss the fifth commandment and current methods of parenting with which they most resonate or receive warmly. Surprisingly, both groups in separate conversations agreed that the most desirable, albeit difficult, quality of strong parenting was role modeling.[87] No amount of rules or threats of punishment can achieve the same power as providing one's children with an emulative model of how to conduct oneself appropriately and ethically. Joanne Doades, author of *Parenting Teens: A Guide for the Perplexed*, writes that "modeling good behavior with our own family members...teaches our children more about how to treat their siblings than any of our [the parents'] words could ever do."[88] Indeed, as one parent of a teenager at my synagogue quipped: "My kids don't often listen to what I say. But they're always *watching*."[89]

This sentiment, at once humorous and poignant, parallels the message of the following Yiddish folktale:

> The elderly father of the burgher Shmuel kept spilling soup on the tablecloth because of his trembling fingers. One evening the old man dropped a fine teacup and it fell to the floor and broke.

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[87] Oral responses collected from fifteen Reform 11th and 12th graders, and parents of teenagers, at Leo Baeck Temple on December 13, 2009.
[88] Doades, Joanne. *Parenting Jewish Teens: A Guide for the Perplexed.* Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2007, p.54.
[89] Adult Education class at Leo Baeck Temple, Los Angeles, CA on December 15, 2009.

"From now on you will eat in your room, Father," declared Shmuel. "Here is a wooden bowl for you to use. This, you cannot break!"

The next day Shmuel came home and saw his very young son sitting on the floor trying to carve out a chunk of wood.

"Dearest Yitzik, what are you doing?" Shmuel asked the boy.

"It's for you, Father," the son explained, "so you can use it to eat in your room when you are old and your hands start to shake."[90]

The tragicomic nature of this narrative lies in its truth: a child will either imbibe or reject the obligation of *kibud av va-eim* not because their parents demand it, but whether their parents practice it themselves. Therefore, if parents hope to elicit the respect of their children they must not focus solely on the singular parent-child relationship. Rather, they should consider the sum of their words and actions towards all people, especially the way they care for and interact with their own parents. Our Sages knew this well, capturing the aphorism "like father, like son" throughout the pages of Talmud: "Ewe follows ewe—what the mother does, the daughter does."[91] "A child's talk in the marketplace is his father's talk or his mother's."[92] Far more instructive than a set of airtight rules at home, then, is the living, breathing role modeling that a parent can provide. Shmuel, a forerunner of the modern day parent, learns this valuable lesson with help from his observant son.

What problematizes the efficacy of role modeling is that parents often fail to abide by the same rules and expectations that they place upon their own children. At times, this discrepancy may be a deliberate choice, as when a parent consciously constructs a different set of parameters for themselves than they have for their children—such as the number of hours per day one is permitted to spend in front of a

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[90] Mogel, pp.63-64. Adapted from Penninah Schram, *Stories One Generation Tells Another*. Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1987.
[91] BT *Ketubot* 63a.
[92] BT *Sukkot* 56b.

computer screen. A parent may try to rationalize that they possess the selfsame values as the child, but that the outward expression of these values manifest themselves differently for adults than they do for children. (e.g. "I use the computer for my work, not for chatting with friends or watching YouTube videos. If you are using it for schoolwork, then it counts differently.") Yet, as much as this parent endeavors to explain the varying nuances of 'house rules,' her actions communicate a clear message: "Do as I say, not as I do." She wants her children to follow her words, not her footsteps.

The incongruity between a parent's words and actions will inevitably create cognitive dissonance for the child who, expected to adhere to a certain code of behavior and speech, watches his or her parent uphold a completely different set of rules. By contrast, the parent who aligns her deeds with her speech cultivates fertile soil upon which a child can soak up the meaning of honor, and readily extend it to family members, teachers, and, most importantly, themselves. As Shelley Kapnek Rosenberg succinctly states in her book *Raising A Mensch: How to Bring Up Ethical Children in Today's World*: "When both our attitude and our actions model a respectful and honorable worldview, we are teaching our children about *kavod*."[93]

The Two-Way Street: A Parent's Obligations to Children

As mentioned in Chapter 1, the duty to dignify one's elders includes providing food, shelter and clothing when the parent cannot supply these independently. But what does a parent, according to Jewish law, owe his or her child? Do children warrant the same basic treatment and necessities that they are commanded to furnish in their parents' advanced years?

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[93] Rosenberg, Shelley Kapnek. *Raising A Mensch: How to Bring Up Ethical Children in Today's World*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2003, p.46.

The Babylonian Talmud delivers the following short list of requirements that parents must impart to their children:

> Our masters taught: With regard to his son, a father is obligated to circumcise him, to redeem him [if he is a firstborn], to teach him Torah, to teach him a craft, and to get him married. Some say: Also to teach him how to swim. R. Judah said: When a man does not teach his son a craft, it is as though he taught him thievery.[94]

In a literal sense, nearly all of these obligations remain relevant for today's Jewish families, no matter where they lie on the spectrum of observance. Additionally, we might do well to add an additional contemporary gloss to make them tangible and resonant for the post-modern, hyper-technological and 'flattened' world in which these families now reside.

1) *Brit Milah* (circumcision). Although there are certainly parents who refrain from partaking in this eighth day custom on the grounds of it being unsafe, archaic or barbaric, the majority of American Jews today continue to practice *brit milah*, the ritual act of circumcision that brings baby boys into the covenant. (In the spirit of egalitarianism, welcoming ceremonies for Jewish baby girls have also become widespread over the past several decades, though traditional Jewish law neither mandates nor outlines such a ritual.) More broadly, *milah* might be regarded as a child's first 'commitment ceremony,' that is, a formal opportunity for parents to publicly articulate the values and commitments that their family holds dear and wishes to transmit to the child. Since *brit milah* (also, Hebrew for "word covenant") marks the child's official welcome into Jewish community, it has also become an apt time to give the child a Hebrew name, a linguistic recognition that this individual is now part of a global community spanning many generations.

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[94] BT *Kiddushin* 29a.

2) *Pidyon haben* ("redemption of the son"). This ritual follows from a Biblical law in which Jewish parents 'bought back' their firstborn son, who was traditionally dedicated to the service of the Temple.[95] This act of redemption has fallen out of favor with most liberal Jews in America, though some have reclaimed the ritual by giving *tzedakah* in honor of the birth of all children. As one would 'redeem' a coupon in exchange for goods and services, *pidyon haben* alludes to an act of exchange. A modern understanding of this obligation might include the notion that when a child is born into a family, the other members— most notably the parents—willfully exchange some of their valued resources, such as free time, physical energy and monetary savings, for the invaluable gift of a new child. These are the unquantifiable resources with which a parent must necessarily part over the course of a child's lifetime, in exchange for joyful milestones and lasting memories that will permeate the years of parenthood.

3) *Talmud Torah* ("study of Torah"). The obligation to teach words of Torah to one's children—sons *and* daughters—speaks to the importance of creating opportunities for Jewish learning in and outside of the home. From a traditional perspective, one might understand Torah to include all written (*Torah d'oraita)* and oral forms (*Torah sh'b'al peh*), from the Tanakh to classical commentaries, legal codes to contemporary scholarship. However, the Reform Jewish parents with whom I spoke expanded this definition to include all forms of Jewish learning: Hebrew, Israel, *middot* (Jewish values), liturgy, history. The unfortunate truth of this undertaking, predominantly in liberal settings, is that although parents concede to the importance of Jewish learning, they tend

[95] Numbers 18:15.

to 'outsource' this obligation to religious schools, summer camps, and day schools. They fund rather than facilitate this obligation. Based on my anecdotal observations of Reform teens and parents over the last decade, as well as numerous conversations with rabbis and educators in the field, the claim can be made that rare is the Reform family who learns Jewishly together. Committed and consistent family learning is more an aberration than a norm. While some synagogues have made concerted efforts to offer family education experiences, there remains a discrepancy between the espoused value of lifelong learning and Reform Jewish parents' actual efforts to take a lead role in the education of their children (or of themselves.)

The idea of imparting Torah to one's children has Biblical origins; every time worshipers chant *Shema/V'ahavta* in a prayer service, they recount the ways in which parents can instill and inscribe Jewish learning on the hearts and minds of their children, reciting this passage from Deuteronomy:

> Teach them [words of Torah] to your children: recite them when you remain at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you arise; inscribe them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates—to the end that you and your children may endure in the land that the Eternal swore to your ancestors to assign to them...[96]

Like the commandment to honor one's father and mother, this parental directive concludes with the phrase, "that you [and your children] may endure in the land," suggesting that adherence to this foundational commandment will (1) enable God's covenantal promise to come to fruition; (2) lead to a long, fruitful life for both parties, the disseminators as well as the recipients of Torah's wisdom; and (3) have ripple effects on successive generations. Thus, the charge to teach children Torah has future implications, not only for one family's genealogy, but for the whole of society.

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[96] Deut 11:19-21.

One might also glean from precise language of the Deuteronomist that failure to teach Torah at all times ("when you lie down and when you arise) and in all places ("when you remain at home and when you are away") will result in an opposite fate: debarment from the land and "short" life, not necessarily in years but short on joy and fulfillment. One *midrash* offers a much more scathing admonishment for parents who eschew this responsibility: "Once an infant begins to speak, the father should speak to him in the holy tongue [Hebrew] and teach him Torah. If he does not speak to him in the holy tongue and does not teach him Torah, it is as though he were burying him."[97] While the contemporary advocate or purveyor of Jewish education might be loath to echo that extreme view, the metaphoric power of the sentiment is apparent: the absence of planful and deliberate Jewish education may extinguish the part of the child's self that proudly identifies as Jewish in any meaningful and affirming way.

Progressive Jewish parents certainly espouse secular education as an overriding value; in any given year, 20-40% of students at Ivy League universities are Jewish.[98] But the discrepancies between a Jewish child's secular and Jewish knowledge are vast. If parents truly want to promote Jewish literacy among their children—facility with Hebrew language, Jewish history, traditions and text—they must partner with synagogues, schools and other centers of Jewish education and socialization to lay a bedrock on which their child's Jewish learning can take root and flourish.

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[97] Sifrei Deuteronomy §46.

[98] Cantor, Norman F. *The Sacred Chain: The History of the Jews*. New York: HarperCollins, 1994, p.400. In the 2000-2001 National Jewish Population Survey, more than 50% of all Jewish adults had received a college degree (80% of Reform respondents), with 25% having earned a graduate degree (40% among Reform Jews).

Ultimately, Jewish literacy requires some kind of formal Jewish education. Anita Diamant, author of many practical Jewish handbooks including *How To Raise a Jewish Child*, acknowledges that

> Unfortunately, many adults recall Hebrew school as a miserable or irrelevant experience that may have even alienated them from Judaism and Jewish life. To instill a love of Torah...means insisting on excellence in whatever Jewish education institution you select for your children. Parents must apply the same standards to Hebrew school curricula and teaching as we do for public or private school. Parents also have to hold their children to the same standards in terms of attendance, getting homework done, and respect for teachers. Kids need to know that their Jewish studies are not on a par with 'extracurricular activities' such as dance lessons, gymnastics, or soccer.[99]

Rather than resort to feelings of futility or hostility based on their own regrettable childhood experiences, Diamant challenges parents to make their child's Jewish education a priority commensurate with secular learning. In a culture where success is so often equated with unblemished transcripts, glowing SAT scores and acceptance into a 'good' college, parents and children must shift their mindset so as to consider the incalculable benefits of Jewish education, an enterprise that usually comes unaccompanied by grades but replete with values. As with the command to 'revere' one's parents, the study and transmission of Torah grows out of a *counter*-cultural impulse. Parents and students must transcend the modern obsession with standardized test scores and college admissions, and give primacy to the nurturing of the child's whole self, to a lifetime of Jewish intellectual as well as spiritual development.

In addition to proactively involving themselves in their child's Jewish education, parents most effectively communicate the value of Torah learning through modeling. It is not enough to ascribe to what Dr. Wendy Mogel refers to as "carpool religion"

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[99] Diamant, Anita. *How to Raise a Jewish Child.* New York: Schocken Books, 2008, p.12.

(children get shuttled to Sunday school while parents stay home) or "dry-cleaning religion" (children get sent to the 'experts' to be spiritually cleaned and pressed).[100] If parents wish to accomplish the task of providing for their children a lifelong commitment to the spiritual and ethical teachings of Judaism, they might attend an adult education class, read Jewish books and periodicals, participate in Jewish cultural and/or social-action events in the area, go to Shabbat services, and speak openly with their children about these endeavors. As aforementioned, children learn more from *watching* their parents than they do from listening to instructions. In the case of Jewish education, this has been a long-lasting phenomenon for generations. As the great Hasidic sage Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotsk once remarked, "If you truly wish your child to study Torah, study it yourself in their presence. They will follow your example. Otherwise they will not themselves study Torah, but will simply instruct their children to do so."[101]

4) *Kishronot chayim* ("life skills"). The next three obligations—teaching a craft, finding a spouse, and teaching a child to swim—might, in adolescent colloquial terms, be categorized as training a child to "get a life."[102] Certainly, most Jewish parents and children in America today would take issue with the traditional assumptions that youth should take their place in the family business or marry the life partner of their parent's choosing. However, the rationale behind these parental provisions may still prove instructive. Instead of taking a literalist approach, we might discover within the text parenting techniques more applicable to our current domestic realities. Read in this nuanced way, the directives to teach a trade, select a spouse and train a child to swim can

[100]Mogel, p. 253.
[101] Ibid., p.254.
[102] Doades, p.47.

more generally be thought of as transmitting life skills and attitudes that can engender self-esteem, job fulfillment and healthy relationships. Joanne Doades stresses the importance of such obligations, specifically with regard to young adults:

> We want to help our teenagers develop the values and the judgment that will enable them to make good decisions about life partners. We want to provide our teenagers with the learning they need to engage in work that will be satisfying to them, both financially and emotionally...And finally, teaching a child to swim...could literally save your life. Some rabbis have expanded the interpretation to mean teaching our children the skills and ways of being in the world that will enable them to survive in society.[103]

Just as the Rabbis interpreted and elaborated upon the meaning of Scripture, Doades helps today's parents of Jewish teens distill the essence of the Rabbinic passage. In her reading, training a child in a specific craft translates to accountability, self-sufficiency and contentment at work. More expansively, the passage of a discipline from parent to child fosters traits that could factor heavily in the child's obtaining and retaining future employment: integrity, self-discipline, the willingness to work collaboratively as part of a team, and the ability to present one's ideas with clarity and confidence.

Selecting a spouse for one's child, the second 'life skill' on the list, might be as taboo in liberal America today as rejecting an arranged match was amidst the shtetl backdrop of *The Fiddler on the Roof.* In the cherished musical based on the stories of Sholom Aleichem, Tevya's daughters usher in the era of modernity—and frankly, feminism—with the desire to marry whomever they wish, though they still seek their father's blessing. As he considers his eldest daughter's request, Tevya reasons whether he can bend the entrenched customs that characterized his own upbringing:

> *"On one hand, what kind of match would that be for my Tzeitel,*
>
> *with a poor tailor? On the other hand, he's an honest hard worker."*

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[103] Ibid, p.47.

Tevya ruminates for some time, oscillating between his embrace of tradition and the growing acknowledgment that his daughters are growing up in a different global 'village' than the world of his fathers. But every parent has his or her breaking point, hallowed ground upon which they refuse to trample; for Tevya, the play's climactic moment comes when his third daughter marries a Russian (non-Jewish) youth and enters the stage, asking her father for a post-marital blessing: "This time, there is NO other hand!"

The underlying theme of the play—Old World familial customs colliding with the inevitable momentum of the next generation—augurs trends that begin to shape the landscape of American Jewry in the late twentieth and, thus far, early twenty-first centuries. The rate of intermarriage among American Jews has never been higher at approximately 52% of couples responding to the most recent National Jewish Population Survey, nor has the percentage of Jewish marriages ending in divorce, which also hovers around the halfway mark.[104] Though neither piece of data necessarily indicates whether a child's marriage merits his or her parents' approval—the Reform Jewish parents with whom I spoke unanimously agreed that the desire for their child to marry "within the tribe," while ideal, proved much less critical than if the potential spouse was kind, loving and supportive—or whether the child has been exposed to healthy, sustaining relationships—it may be that such exposure actually *informed* the child's decision to get divorced—these statistics hint at the decreasing numbers of Jewish children searching for *lifelong Jewish* partners. Given this reality, parents must disabuse themselves of the notion that only they can give final approval or blessing over whom their children meet, fall in love with, and marry; rather, it behooves them to focus their efforts elsewhere. Consequently, Doades redirects the obligation to find a mate for one's child as a parent's

[104] *National Jewish Population Survey 2000-01: Strength, Challenge and Diversity in the American Jewish Population.* New York: United Jewish Communities, 2003.

responsibility to model healthy relationships, whether in the realm of friendship or romance. In this contemporary light, the spirit of the Talmudic law enjoins parents to break the taboo of talking with their maturing child about sex, love and relationships, and by extension, to model the importance of honest communication, equal role-sharing, and genuine respect for one's partner.

Finally, the imperative to teach a child how to swim—which thousands of Jewish youth do every year at JCCs and summer camps—encompasses survival skills as well as social awareness. Like Nachshon taking the preliminary dive into the Sea of Reeds to initiate the miracle of the Israelites' redemption, parents must embolden their children to seek out new experiences, take calculated risks and not shy away from the possibility of failure. Some commentators submit that only 20 percent of the enslaved Israelites followed Moses out of Egypt, afraid of what awaited them in the wilderness. Similarly, every person, in youth as in adulthood, experiences a personal *mitzrayim*, the "narrow straits" that impede forward progress and the taste of success. Mogel, as part of the rationale for the title of her book, explains that

> The world in which we are raising our children challenges them with many straits and narrow places. We want them to have faith that they can make it through and leave the familiarity and safety of home. If we overprotect them, we enslave them with our fears. If we give them the freedom to develop strength through overcoming difficulties, they'll be out in front with the courageous 20 percent.[105]

To avoid 'drowning' under the weight of expectations or fears of the unknown, children ought to understand the value of triumph as well as defeat, the familiar and the foreign. Hence, the impulse to teach one's child to swim is really a lesson in adaptability and determination; when a parent dons the role of 'lifeguard,' she inculcates in her child the

[105] Mogel, p.93.

capacity to persevere in the face of hardship, to stay afloat during the maelstrom of adolescence.

'Fair' Is Not Always 'Equal'

As detailed in the previous section, a cursory glance at classical and contemporary Jewish sources shows harmony between the Sages of the past and the scholars of today in that education—religious, 'secular' or otherwise—remains one of the greatest gifts a parent can bestow upon a child. Yet, the pedagogies of yesteryear may no longer apply or resonate with today's youth.

One of the preeminent philosophies which *does* permeate modern educational and parenting literature is "personalized instruction," that is, the creation and implementation of a particular mode of teaching that depends on the child's preferred learning style. Negating the "one-size-fits-all" pedagogy that has marred the American public schooling system for decades, personalized instruction arises out of the belief that a single set of rules, expectations or learning activities that fosters one child's success may prove detrimental to another's. Educationally, its advocates maintain that the "personalization of instruction and learning is the effort...to take into account individual student characteristics and needs, and flexible instructional practices in organizing the learning environment."[106] Hence, whether at home or in the classroom, individuated instruction allows a child to take pride in their unique talents and gifts, while focusing on their particular challenges and areas for growth.

On a domestic level, personalized instruction calls for parents to potentially set different standards for each of their children, not to equate 'fair' with 'equal.'

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[106] Keefe, James and John Jenkins. *Personalized Instruction.* Larchmont, NY: Eye on Education, Inc., 2000, p.xv.

Demanding two hours of uninterrupted homework time might be a readily achievable task for a child with superior concentration and self-discipline; however, the same expectation could easily spur feelings of shame and anger in a child with pronounced attention deficits.

A verse from Proverbs encapsulates the idea of differentiating and tailoring our treatment of children on an individual basis: "*Chanoch la-na'ar al pi darko*—Train (or, educate) a child in the way he should go."[107] By being attentive and responding to the real needs of every child, the parent sets each of them up for success according to their own path ("*al pi darko*"). The rest of the quotation from Proverbs indicates that such pedagogy, especially at home, has the added benefit of transmitting a parent's values and Torah learning to the next generation:

> R. Eliezer said: The verse means that if you train your son with words of Torah until he becomes a young man, he will continue growing in allegiance to them, as the verse concludes, "Even when he is old, he will not depart from it" (Prov. 22:6). But R. Joshua said: The child may be compared to a heifer—if he is not taught to plow when young, it will be difficult for him to do so in the end; or to a wine branch, if you do not bend it when it is full of sap, once it hardens, you can do nothing.[108]

Eliezer advises the parent to employ an educational method—with Torah at the center—of clear, consistent and repetitive messaging as the child enters into young adulthood. The regularity and repetition of such learning, he states, will foster "allegiance" to the principles contained within each teaching. To the modern liberal reader, this approach dangerously resembles indoctrination and presumes that (a) the youth will not rebel against the lessons of his upbringing, and (b) the repetition of concepts automatically leads to their embrace. Current educational trends in North

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[107] Proverbs 22:6.
[108] Midrash Rabbah on Proverbs 22:6.

America, whether in public or private school settings, tend to stress critical thinking and questioning over rote memorization, a paradigm of learning that has also seeped into domestic life. For example, a child trained in critical thinking does not simply imbibe all the rules that are presented, but demands the rationale, limits and consequences associated with each one before adopting and "re-formatting" them to his particular situation.

Joshua's analogy, by contrast, speaks straight to the issue of parenting the modern Jewish child. Exposing the "heifer to the plow when young" will create sensory experience and 'muscle memory;' the sap-filled branch is not yet so inflexible that it cannot be bent to supply its sweet gifts. Similarly, planting the seeds of learning in a child when he or she is still young and malleable to new experiences proves to have the most lasting impact. As one Midrash professes, "What is learned in early childhood is absorbed in the blood."[109] Anecdotally, when I asked a sample group of Reform teens to recount one lesson they learned from a previous week's class, they mostly shrugged their shoulders and remained silent. However, when I asked them to sing a Hebrew song or share a Jewish fact that they first learned in kindergarten, their eyes lit up and hands bolted into the air.

Study after study has shown that the skills and language that one acquires early in life are more likely to endure if presented lovingly, without coercion or guilt.[110] In a Jewish framework, the celebration of holidays, observance of ritual and commitment to

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[109] *Avot d'Rabbi Natan* 24.

[110] One of the most passionate and eloquent arguments for child-centered 'constructivist' learning, as opposed to teacher-oriented indoctrination, was given by John Dewey, the foremost educational theorist of 20th century America. In his book, *Democracy and Education* (1916), Dewey derides indoctrination as the "systematic use of every possible means to impress upon the minds of pupils a particular set of political and economic views to the exclusion of every other."

keeping *mitzvot* should be demonstrated by parents, rather than imposed, if the hope is to pass on traditions from generation to generation. Abraham Joshua Heschel, the 20th century giant of social justice and spiritual audacity, articulates a grand vision of why Jewish parents must remain committed to providing Jewish instruction for their children in his essay on "Jewish Education":

> The Hebrew term for education means not only to train but also to dedicate, to consecrate. And to consecrate the child must be our goal, difficult as it may be. The survival of the Jewish people is our basic concern. But what kind of survival, we must continually ask, and for what purpose?...We are divided among ourselves as to ritual observance, it is true. But we must not be divided when it comes to teaching the spiritual attitudes of Judaism. Let us remember that it is not enough to impart *information*. We must strive to awaken *appreciation* as well.[111]

By allowing room for interpretation and experimentation, a parent releases the child from the idea that Jewish living and learning are yokes of burden. Rather, parents can offer their children the blessing and permission to engage with a Judaism that is personally meaningful, viable and chosen on the child's own terms.

The Rebellious and Defiant Child

An aspect of child development at any phase of one's childhood—from the toddler years through adolescence and into emerging adulthood—involves testing the limits and rules that have been imposed by external sources of authority. Besides the urge to instigate mischief and demonstrate their supposed invincibility, children truly seek to uncover the boundaries of their burgeoning independence. How much can I get away with? Once I have crossed the lines of proper conduct, how far is too far? What

[111] Heschel, Abraham Joshua. "Jewish Education." *The Insecurity of Freedom Essays on Human Existence*. New York: Schocken Books, 1987, p.236.

are the specific consequences of my misdeeds, and will punishment be doled out in a consistent fashion?

Just as the Bible specifically mandates filial piety, which like other legislative measures serves to 'course correct' the inherent proclivities of man, so too does it offer consequences for the disobedient youth who flouts the fifth commandment. In one of the more troubling passages in the Torah, we read:

> If a man has a wayward and defiant son, who does not heed his father or mother and does not obey them even after they discipline him, his father and mother shall take hold of him and bring him out to the elders of his town at the public place of his community. They shall say to the elders of his town, 'This son of ours is disloyal and defiant; he does not heed us. He is a glutton and a drunkard.' Thereupon the men of his town shall stone him to death. Thus you will sweep out evil from your midst: all Israel will hear and be afraid.[112]

This pericope from Deuteronomy describes the fatal punishment for a "wayward" and "defiant" child (*ben sorer u-moreh*) at the hands of the order-preserving, law-dispensing elders in the community. The parents, unable to garner respect or compliance from their son, relinquish their domestic control over the situation, and task the local chieftains with meting out punishment.

As outrageous and extreme as this passage may appear to the modern reader, it also greatly dismayed the Sages, who grappled with its seemingly cavalier use of capital punishment to end a child's wicked behavior (i.e. gluttony and intoxication). In the most famous Talmudic exchange about the wayward and rebellious youth, Rabbi Yose the Galilean asks, rather astounded: "How is it even conceivable that merely because a young man consumes a heaping portion of meat and wine that he be summoned before the High Court and put to death by stoning?"[113] The next stratum of Talmudic response explains

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[112] Deut 21:18-21.
[113] BT *Sanhedrin* 71a.

that the Torah can foretell where the illicit exploits of youth will eventually lead the young man:

> In the end, after dissipating his father's possessions, the youth will continue to seek what he has become accustomed to and, unable to get it, will go out to a crossroads and rob people. Therefore the Torah said, 'Let him die while yet innocent, and not die guilty.'[114]

By this account, public execution serves as a preventative measure that will keep the child, prone to sinful behavior, from committing greater atrocities in the future. While consistent with the Rabbis' regular attempts to justify especially abhorrent Biblical decrees, this reading seemingly contradicts Rabbinic understandings of *teshuvah*. By punishing a child for crimes that he might perpetrate as an adult, the stoning of the *ben sorer u-moreh* nullifies the very act of repentance by which an individual can atone for his past transgressions and initiate a process of self-transformation.

Continuing the discussion, Rabbi Shimon echoes Rabbi Yose's question, but offers a different explanation: "In truth, the rebellious and defiant son never existed and never will exist. Why was the account about him written? So that you will expound the possible reasons for such misconduct and receive a reward for doing so."[115] Rabbi Shimon views the case of the defiant son as an exemplum, a cautionary tale for parents as to how they should monitor their children's behavior and for children as to how they should properly conduct themselves in society. In modern day parlance, we might refer to this reading of the story as a strategic 'scare tactic,' intended to put fear—*yirah*—into the child who does not instinctively abide his parents, his community, or the rules that govern society. Yet, Rabbi Shimon's perspective proves just as problematic as the earlier response to Rabbi Yose's quandary. Truly, cases existed in both ancient and

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[114] Ibid.

[115] BT *Sanhedrin* 72a. Immediately thereafter, Rabbi Jonathan counters this statement, saying, "I saw one such [case of the *ben sorer u-moreh*] and sat by his grave."

contemporary times whereby children committed such grievous and inexcusable acts that, whether aimed directly at their parents or not, they scarred the family's reputation irreparably and warranted a severe civil response. To say that such an occurrence never happened wrongly absolves humankind of some of its most treacherous legacies.

In his groundbreaking legal code, the *Mishneh Torah*, the great medieval commentator Maimonides outlines the many possible exemptions that could free a rebellious youth from the fatal punishment prescribed by the Biblical text, including:

> (8) If his father and mother pardon him before the death sentence has been passed on him, he is exempt.
> (9) If he ran away before sentence was passed on him and in the meantime he grew beyond the age limit, he is exempt.
> (10) If his father is willing to bring accusations against him but the mother is not [or vice versa]...he is *not* condemned as a stubborn and rebellious son. If either parent is maimed in the hand, lame, dumb, blind or deaf, he is *not* condemned as a stubborn and rebellious son."[116]

It is evident from these wide-ranging exemptions on capital punishment (part of a substantially longer list) that the Rambam wished to establish a legal tradition in which the case of the *ben sorer u-moreh* was so unlikely, that its corresponding punishment would never gain legitimacy. The exemptions also point to the fact that the parents of the guilty party might have played a role, partial or full, in their child's 'rebellious streak.' Particularly in the case of a parent who suffers from a physical or sensory disability (#10), it can be inferred that the parent's condition somehow contributed to the child's recklessness. If so, how can a father in good conscience punish a crime for which he helped lay the groundwork?

Along similar logic, the Babylonian Talmud shares the cautionary parable of a man who opened a perfume shop for his son on a street where prostitutes cavorted:

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[116] Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilkhot Mamrim* (Laws of Rebels), 7:8-10.

> The lad, like any young male, plied his natural inclination—he strayed into depraved ways. When the father came and caught him with a prostitute, he began to shout, "I'll kill you!" But the father's friend was there, and he spoke up. "You yourself ruined your son, and now you are yelling at him! You ignored all other occupations and taught him to be a perfumer; you ignored all other streets and deliberately opened a shop for him in a street of prostitutes!"[117]

The lesson for parents then, as now, is palpable: do not unleash wrath upon your child if you purposed to catch them in the midst of a sinful activity for which you knew they would not be able to resist. If a child's "wayward defiance" results directly from a dysfunctional parent-child relationship, address the root of the problem, not the aftereffects of it.

In applying a modern lens to the case of an alleged *ben sorer u-moreh*, the first order of business precisely might be to clarify what misdeeds the youth committed, what has earned them the labels "rebellious" and "defiant." When the question, "What constitutes a rebellious and defiant teen today?" was asked of my sample group of fifteen Reform 11th and 12th grade teens in Los Angeles, the responses varied.[118] Roughly 75% agreed that partaking in illicit behaviors and substances—drug and alcohol use, underage sexual activity, etc.—would most upset their parents and be viewed as insolent behavior. (Interestingly, this response did not veer far from the Rabbis' early understanding of the *ben sorer u-moreh* as a gluttonous drunk.) A few respondents mentioned that disobeying their parents' rules—breaking curfew was popularly cited—and fighting with their siblings were the most palpable illustrations of noncompliance. Still others in the group remarked how any affront to adult authority figures, be it a teacher, principal, coach or police officer, would be construed as dishonoring their parents. Although they admitted

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[117] BT *Berakhot* 32a.

[118] The following data was collected at a class on *Kibbud Av Va-eim* with fifteen Reform 11th and 12th graders at Leo Baeck Temple on December 13, 2009. Responses were given orally and as answers to a brief survey. See Appendix A for the list of survey questions.

to the occasional bout of defiance or disrespect, they acknowledged that this type of behavior—whether exhibited domestically or publicly, toward their parents or someone else—poorly reflected upon themselves and their families.

Logically, the second issue to be addressed is how the parent or guardian should react to the youth's unseemly conduct. With regard to punishment, the Reform teens did not consider parental scolding or the restriction of privileges to be a strong deterrent from committing future offenses.[119] Rather, they cited the fear of "staining the reputation" of themselves or their family members as the primary force that would discourage them from repeating the same wrongdoing again.

While a humiliating blemish to one's (or one's family's) reputation diverges sharply from the harsh execution endorsed in the Deuteronomic passage, both share a conspicuous thread of commonality: public perception and response. In either case, the exploits of the youth have transcended the four walls of domesticity. The young person's mischief or crime now affects parties outside of the family circle, making the once-private issue a communal matter. Thus, for instances in which a child's defiance encroaches upon the entire community and/or the parents choose to air their grievances publicly rather than keep them 'behind closed doors,' we may find some overlap with the case of the *ben sorer u-moreh.*

If the issue strictly remained a domestic dispute, it could be argued that the neighbors would neither care nor wish to get involved in the messy arena of family

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[119] The teens' cumulative response to the question of parental punishment aligned with the general trend in American parenting to lessen, or in some cases eliminate, consequences for unacceptable behavior. Dr. Anthony Wolf, author of *Get Out of My Life, But First Could You Drive Me and Cheryl to the Mall?*, characterizes this as an "era of permissiveness. As a result, the more fearsome weapons have been taken out of a parent's arsenal...The new teenager does feel freer to do as he or she pleases, especially at home." (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), p.4.

politics. But as children mature, they have an increasingly profound impact on the language, gestures, and decisions made by their classmates—the children of their neighbors—with whom they socialize every day at school, on the sports field, in the mall, and at other social venues. Hence, one child's propensity to break rules and defy authority may soon spread to their like-minded, impressionable peers. Anita Diamant, on the contagiousness of adolescent behavior, writes:

> Somewhere between the ages of eleven and fourteen, the center of the universe shifts from family life to peer-group life. Friends, classmates, and teammates become a primary source of identity and validation, and the primary attraction of school is what happens *between* classes—in the hallways and the lunchroom, on the bus and on the playing field.[120]

By the time a child reaches the 'tween' years, her primary teachers are not necessarily those hired to give instruction in a classroom, but rather, the trendsetters in her grade whose extroverted manner and confidence make them ripe for emulation.

This phenomenon did not escape the Rabbis. In the late 18th century, the founder and first Rebbe of Chabad, Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi (Russia), crafted his own exegesis of the Biblical text in question:

> This phrase [*ben sorer u-moreh*] means one who rebels (*sorer*) and who attempts to teach others (*moreh*) to follow in his lead. That is the nature of the wicked, who are not content with sinning themselves but wish to teach others to follow in their wicked path.[121]

In Rabbi Zalman's view, the felony did not stem from lewdness or intoxication, but the child's desire to disseminate his wickedness. Reb Zalman understands the stoning as a pre-emptive strike to avoid future hostilities, a theory not terribly dissimilar from the original response to Rabbi Yose's question. The major difference between the two responses bears mention: whereas the Talmudic interpretation consigns the misbehavior

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[120] Diamant, p.201.

[121] Rabbi Shneur Zalman (1745-1812). Excerpt from *Torah Gems: Volume 3*. pp. 272-73.

to a lone sinner, Rabbi Zalman anticipates that the transgression will spread like an epidemic, seeping its way into an endless network of youth. Youthful recklessness and indiscretion would thus assume the form of a dangerous contagion to which all the children in town are susceptible. What was initially one child's wrongdoing has the potential to become a community outbreak. As the Mishnah states, *"Aveirah goreret aveirah* – one misdeed leads to another."[122]

The teenagers with whom I spoke generally conceded to the fact that their peers, as well as societal norms propagated by popular culture, played the greatest role in shaping their day-to-day behavior, specifically their "lapses of good judgment."[123] But several also held firm that they had shown resilience in the face of temptation, that they possessed the conscientiousness and willpower to steer clear of scandal and avoid "getting stuck in really awful situations." When I asked them what prevented them from crossing the line into uncharted illicit activities, one female teen, 16, mentioned that her mother "raised her to be better than that." Another girl, 17, talked about how the violence perpetrated against young women in real life as on television, whether in primetime police procedurals or the nightly news, keeps her far from potentially hazardous situations: "My survival instinct kicks in, and I know when to stop and tell my friends they're acting like morons." Although it was by no means a diverse statistical sample of Jewish teens in America today, most of the teens said that the way they showed honor to their parents, in particular, and deference to authority, more broadly, was by "generally being a good person and staying out of trouble."

Yet, not all teens are able to restrain themselves from crossing that imaginary line that separates harmless teenage pranks and rites of passage from licentious and lawless

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[122] Pirkei Avot 4:2.

[123] Quotations from 11th and 12th grade teens at Leo Baeck Temple, December 13, 2009.

behavior. Neurological disorders, such as attention deficit hyperactive disorder (ADHD) or Tourette's syndrome, can cause some children to feel shame, anger and frustration, emotions that may lead them to lash out or misbehave. Other adolescents simply adopt the behaviors of their peers without discerning the potential harms that may befall them. Joanne Doades reports that "our children are coming of age in an era characterized by rising rates of sexually transmitted diseases, binge drinking, drug addiction, and self-destructive behaviors."[124] Whether a child acts out of mischief, malevolence or as a result of an actual medical condition, most children still do not possess advanced decision-making skills through which they could better control their physical or verbal impulses.

Recent scientific scholarship sheds new light on this phenomenon as part of a larger study on the way the human brain develops. In an ongoing study conducted by McLean Hospital in Massachusetts, researchers have made remarkable discoveries about brain development, particularly during adolescence.[125] Research had long shown that the brain overproduced gray matter—the 'thinking' part of the brain—for only a brief period in early development when a child was in the womb and for about the first 18 months of life. In 1999, while performing a longitudinal study of 145 children and adolescents, Dr. Judith Rapoport of the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) was surprised to discover a second wave of overproduction of gray matter just prior to puberty. This newly discovered growth spurt of gray matter, peaking in eleven-year-old girls and twelve-year-old boys, predominates in the frontal lobe cortex, the seat of "executive functions" in the brain, such as planning, impulse control and reasoning. Still, the gray matter in the frontal lobe cortex of adolescents does not fully develop until their twenties. Thus, while the spatial, sensory, auditory and language functions appear largely mature in

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[124] Doades, p. 24.

[125] The ensuing findings were published in an online article, "Teenage Brain: A Work in Progress," accessed on January 17, 2010. (www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/teenage-brain-a-work-in-progress-fact-sheet/index.shtml)

the teen brain, there remain large discrepancies between frontal lobe formation in teens aged 12-16 and in young adults aged 23-30. As a child matures, a layer of insulation called myelin progressively envelops the nerve fibers in the frontal cortex, making the brain more efficient, and cognitive processing even more sophisticated. From this overview of recent data on brain development, we begin to understand that adolescents do not yet have full command of their "executive functions." In general, teenagers do not yet have fully developed functional brain tissue that may help them to make smarter, more strategic decisions as adults.

Beyond the influence of their peers and the culture of 'permissiveness' in which they live, science provides yet another reason as to why today's youth partake in risky behaviors—their brains simply do not perceive the considerable risk or long-term consequences involved. Dr. Tali Zelkowicz, assistant professor of education at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, offers the following insight to parents, based on the existing data:

> When a parent asks their child why they did something bad, and the child answers "I don't know", it is not necessarily a defiant response. They really may not know why they performed that action in the first place...[The key thing] is not asking children *why* they did something wrong, but imparting lessons to help them develop their critical thinking and learn from their mistakes.[126]

Dr. Zelkowicz wonders if a method of parenting that does not rely heavily on punishment or disincentives would be just as, if not more, effective than one which does. Her words suggest that a parent should focus on being present for and *proximate to* their children, so that if risky or illicit opportunities arise, "you can act as their frontal lobe."

Many centuries removed from the unbelievable case of the *ben sorer u-moreh*, parents, teachers, scientists and sociologists uniformly recognize that every child will test the limits and boundaries placed before them. Youth will experiment with new behaviors

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[126] Conversation with Dr. Tali Zelkowicz, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, January 25, 2010.

and challenge authority figures so as to determine their own status in the parent-child and individual-community relationships. In turn, parents who demonstrate strong role modeling and maintain a continual presence for their children prove Rabbi Shimon's conclusion, with a brief addendum: "In truth, there never has existed a wayward and defiant child...at least, *not under my roof.*"

'Spare the Rod': Discipline with Dignity

The *ben sorer u-moreh* represents an extreme example of a child's defiance, but the reality that most parents face is trying to recalibrate their parenting strategies as their young child enters adolescence, a naturally rebellious phase during childhood. During this developmental stage, a child's hormone levels fluctuate dramatically, as do their dress, demeanor, peer group, and feelings of self-worth and belonging. With all of the changes occurring in the lives of their pre-teens and teens, how might Jewish parents in the 21st century draw from both traditional Jewish values and contemporary norms to preserve and even strengthen a relationship with their teen? What constitutes appropriate and effective discipline for their child? What tools and strategies might they employ to form and sustain positive connections with their maturing child that will help both parties live up to the fifth commandment? In this chapter's final two sections, we will highlight useful teachings from the Sages on these topics, and examine Joanne Doades' model of how parents can involve themselves in their teen's life without 'overparenting' or being neglectful.

As far back as the epochs that gave rise to Biblical and Rabbinic literature, Jewish sources have been unabashedly vocal about how to discipline a child, even though

contradictory opinions certainly abound. One set of principles advocates the use of physical force against a child who behaves improperly. The Book of Proverbs states, "He that spares the rod, hates his son."[127] Exodus Rabbah expounds on this instruction, explaining how failure to invoke corporal punishment will have a detrimental effect on the parent-child relationship:

> The verse is to teach you that when a man refrains from chastising his son, the son will fall into evil ways, so that in the end the father will come to hate his son. Thus it happened with Ishmael, whom his father [Abraham] loved so much that he did not chastise him; then when Ishmael fell into evil ways, Abraham came to hate him so much that he cast him out empty-handed from his house.[128]

This Midrash uses other Biblical examples of painful and estranged father-son relationships—Isaac/Esau and David/Absalom are also mentioned as doomed pairings—to correlate the absence of physical discipline with the deterioration of respect and reverence with which a child should view his parent. Though most modern parenting philosophies do not vouch for spanking or hitting children, the use of physical discipline evidently resonated with a pre-modern ethos of parenting. If today's parent is to glean anything from the Proverbs quotation and its subsequent commentary it might simply be that a child's ill or unlawful conduct must be met with a swift and deliberate response, rather than dismissed and forgotten. Whether the means of punishment take on a physical form or not, it remains crucial that the parent recognize the misbehavior, respond decisively, and fend off future 'hatred' by admonishing the child, showing him that his actions have real consequences.

The Rabbinic tradition draws a line between a single spanking and ongoing

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[127] Proverbs 13:24.
[128] Exodus Rabbah 1:1.

torment or threatening of a child by his or her parent. As another Midrash states, "A man should not threaten a child even with as little a thing as boxing his ears. He should spank him at once or say nothing."[129] The underlying message in this pithy statement is to refrain from terrorizing or instilling fear in the child. Neither psychological nor physical threats produce the fruits of future obedience; on the contrary, they breed fear, distrust and the gradual decay of familial relationships. For these reasons, the Talmud goes so far as to limit the degree to which a parent can exercise discipline of a corporal nature: "If you strike a child, strike him only with a shoelace."[130]

According to a different set of disciplinary measures, Judaism prohibits the use of physical punishment altogether. One teaching considers the beating of a child a violation of the Biblical commandment, "Do not put a stumbling block before the blind"[131]:

> When a maidservant in the household of Rabbi [Judah the Prince] saw a man beating his grown-up son, she said: That man should be placed under a ban for he is violating "Put not a stumbling block before the blind."[132]

Generally, it is forbidden for parents to berate or burden children excessively, or entice them to sin, as such actions would constitute a 'stumbling-block.' Instead, they must conceive of a form of admonishment that maintains the child's dignity and allows them to grow from the experience, not founder in self-pity or bitterness.

Fortunately, the Bible offers an alternative mode of discipline to be used, not as a condemnatory weapon but as a tool for self-improvement. This method, serious but sensitive rebuke (*tokhekhah*), appears just three verses after the injunction against putting stumbling blocks in another's path: "You shall not hate your kinsfolk in your heart.

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[129] Sem 2:4-5, translated in Bialik, Hayyim Nahman and Y.H. Rawnitzky, *The Book of Legends*, New York: Schocken, 1992, p. 637.
[130] BT *Bava Batra* 21a.
[131] Lev. 19:14.
[132] BT MK 17a. The argument predicts that the adult son may be moved to strike back, making him liable for the death penalty as a rebellious son.

Reprove your kin but incur no guilt on their account..."[133] By this standard, the parent may reprove or constructively criticize the child to help them grow, mature and make better decisions, but stops short of scolding a child to the point of submission or humiliation. If we are to believe the studies about undeveloped gray matter in the brains of adolescents, then teens may truly require adult authority figures to tell them exactly what they did wrong and how they might improve their behavior (even if it takes a long time for the teen to absorb and internalize this information). The language and practice of *tokhekhah* equips parents with a suitable vehicle for exercising "discipline with dignity" as an outgrowth of love and concern for their child, rather than a gateway to hatred or tension.

Perhaps most instructive for the modern Jewish parent would be a system that combines mercy and compassion on the one hand with a clear sense of justice and right on the other. The Talmud conveys this balance of *rachamim* (mercy) and *din* (judgment) accordingly: "...a child...should be thrust off with the left hand only so long as one brings him near with the right hand."[134] In other words, where a foundation of trust, love, communication and mutual respect already exist, the use of reprimand and reproof will be that much more effective. Parents who achieve such a delicate balance demonstrate to their teenage children that discipline is not synonymous with arbitrary punishment, but functions as a warranted and necessary step in the teen's journey towards adulthood.

Helping Your Child Navigate the Wilderness of Adolescence

Ultimately, today's Jewish teens—like their non-Jewish counterparts—turn to their parents and other respected adult figures for guidance and modeling, even if they are

[133] Lev 19:17.
[134] BT Sanhedrin 107b.

loath to admit it. From my conversations with a number of Reform Jewish youth and their parents, it would seem that adolescents generally desire and react positively to a parenting approach that oscillates between "hands-on" and "hands-off," never residing in one arena for too long. Children want their parents to celebrate their achievements, give them positive encouragement and skills for coping in the "real world," yet they do not want their parents shadowing their every move or infringing upon their privacy.

In her book on parenting today's Jewish teens, Doades suggests a helpful new paradigm for parental involvement in the child's life, centered around five chief components:[135]

1) Stay as close as you can, even when they 'hate' you.

Not to be confused with 'helicopter parenting,' Doades clarifies this statement by urging parents to stay involved with their teens' lives, even if the younger party seems embarrassed by the father's or mother's keen interest and regular presence. Persistent efforts to keep open the lines of communication may eventually prove fruitful, even if it is several years down the road before the teen (now an emerging adult) feels ready to accept the invitation. Dr. Wendy Mogel offers a similar charge to parents hoping for improved communication with their teenage children:

> A major complaint of adolescents is that nobody listens to them—and they may be right. The habit of listening, and of expecting to be listened to, needs to start early. If we are always distracted, always multitasking, our children will perceive us as half listening, and they'll stop trying to talk to us...."[136]

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[135] Ibid., pp.28-30. Each item is followed by a brief description and my own commentary.

[136] Mogel, Wendy. "The Present Parent." *Reform Judaism*, Summer 2004, Vol.32, p.49.

As Mogel and Doades both agree, maintaining an "open door policy" in which adolescents feel secure in the knowledge that their parents are always accessible and present for them has immeasurable power even if teens rarely choose to 'open the door.'

2) Don't waste time preaching sermons "in a foreign language."

Focus on making your messages realistic, concise and comprehensible in a way that a teen can digest. Praise children with specifics, not generalities. Make sure your body language is in alignment with your words.

3) Insist on maintaining your parental role of supervision.

Although they may resemble one, your teenager is not yet a fully-fledged adult. While parents of teens must gradually shift their supervisory role to accommodate the child's growing independence and sophistication, empowerment does not equal absence. Do not let children host or attend unsupervised parties; at the very least, ensure that there is a parental *presence* on the premises.

4) Watch what they watch and listen to what they listen to.

If a parent ever hopes to understand the messages, both subliminal and overt, that popular culture rains down upon her child, she would be wise to consume some of it herself. Moreover, parents should better equip themselves with the *means* of communication that youth use, not just the *messages* embedded in those communications. To help train a child in 'cyber-etiquette' and protect them from 'e-bullying,' parents must attempt to keep abreast of lightning-fast technological innovation, so as not to be left "in the dark."

5) Find or begin a Jewish parenting group.

As the old adage suggests, "it takes a village to raise a child." Don't pretend to have all the answers for perfect parenting (for, in truth, a perfect parent never existed). Parenthood is a journey, laden with successes and speed bumps, that proves much more tenable when there is a supportive network of parents to share, validate and learn from one another. Consult friends and fellow congregants, soliciting the support of others so you are not parenting in a vacuum.

We may be far removed from an early Israelite society in which children were not permitted to raise their voices, speak angrily or sarcastically to their parents.[137] Similarly, prohibitions against children contradicting their parents in public or calling them by name may be losing their normative status in certain regions or within a given family.[138] Yet, the essence of the fifth commandment—a concerted effort to show honor and respect to one's parents—holds true as an eternal precept to which all families aspire. What has changed over the course of the centuries is that today's American Jewish youth grows up faster, with regard to their physical development and the limitless access they have to information via the Internet. Still, the sense of entitlement, affluence and over-parenting has never been so pervasive. Thus, parents must adjust their approaches to discipline, to fair (but potentially unequal) treatment of siblings, and to the ways they involve themselves in their children's lives so as to nurture the will of the younger generation to accept the heavy mantle of filial obligation without coercion or guilt. Otherwise, we resign ourselves to a culture in which parents hover as helicopters, children count the days until they graduate to "free-range" status. Buoyed by the teachings of new 'sages'

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[137] *Pele Yoez,* section Dibur.
[138] *Yoreh De'ah 240:1.*

like Mogel and Doades, Jewish parents may be able to 'ground' some dated parenting strategies of the past and elevate a system that favors relationship over restriction, communication in place of correction. When both parties strive for a lifelong relationship, founded on mutual respect and a reverence for the power of reciprocated love and admiration, the connection between parent and child may well climb to new heights of understanding and leave a lasting legacy for future generations.

CHAPTER 4:

REDEFINING *KIBUD AV VA-EIM* FOR THE 'NEW' JEWISH FAMILY

He who brings up a child is called "Father," not he who merely begot him.
Exodus Rabbah 46:5

God causes the infertile woman to keep house, and to be a joyful mother of children.
Psalm 113:9

"It doesn't bother me to tell other kids my parents are gay. It does bother me to say they aren't married. It makes me feel that our family is less than their family."
Kasey Nicholson-McFadden, 10, in front of New Jersey State Senate, December 2009

In his 2005 international bestseller *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century*, author Thomas Friedman remarks how the fast-evolving world, bolstered by cutting-edge technologies and expansive global networks, has become increasingly 'flattened,' that is, democratized and equalized to such an extent that America's days as the world's sole economic or military superpower are numbered:

> Here's the truth that no one wanted to tell you: The world has been flattened....Global collaboration and competition—between individuals and individuals, companies and individuals, companies and companies, and companies and customers—have been made cheaper, easier, more friction-free, and more productive for more people from more corners of the earth than at any time in the history of the world.[139]

People from around the globe now have access to instant information and a potential audience of millions (via the internet), factors that spur the entrepreneurial spirit and increase the possibility that anyone can become a player in the global marketplace. At the same time, top-down hierarchies have begun to topple in countries and corporations whose patriarchal past long resisted the egalitarian influences of the West. As a result,

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[139] Friedman, Thomas. *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century*. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2005.

one need not be a privileged white male from an English-speaking country in order to reap the benefits of living in a 'flattened' world. The playing field, in terms of communication and acquisition of knowledge, has been leveled. Friedman summarizes this notion in a bit of fatherly advice he gives to his daughters: "Girls, when I was growing, my parents used to say to me, 'Tom, finish your dinner -- people in China and India are starving.' My advice to you is: Girls finish your homework -- people in China and India are starving for your jobs."[140]

Given this new reality of a highly-competitive and collaborative human ecosystem, Friedman admonishes American parents for being overprotective apologists, rather than demanding the highest of standards from their children: "The sense that our kids have to be swaddled in cotton wool so that nothing bad or disappointing or stressful ever happens to them at school is, quite simply, a growing cancer on American society."[141]

Though the financial recession that has gripped the world over the past eighteen months has undoubtedly affected the rate of growth and productivity that Friedman forecasted—all the while awakening the qualities of self-discipline and determination long thought dormant in America's youth—Friedman's 'flattened' picture of the universe has not disappeared from the horizon. On the contrary, economic downturns have historically been followed by years of unprecedented social change, market growth in surprising sectors, and significant shifts in established power structures.

As the world goes, so goes the family unit.

Like a flattened world in which age and experience are not deemed prerequisites for success, where patriarchies tumble, latitudinal partnerships flourish and those

[140] Ibid., p.
[141] Ibid., p.

equipped with an expertise of the newest technologies wield greater power than ever before, the state of the modern American family finds itself in the midst of a radical transformation. In their study, "The Changing Family Life Cycle," social workers Betty Carter and Monica McGoldrick report on some of the changing norms and sociopolitical realities that exist within today's increasingly diverse family structures:

> In the past, respect for parents and obligation to care for elders was based on their control of resources, reinforced by religious tradition and normative sanction. Now, with the increasing ability of younger family members to determine their own fates in marriage and work, the power of elders to demand filial piety is reduced.[142]

According to Carter and McGoldrick, the external, tangible reasons for honoring one's parents have been mostly expunged or nullified by the gradual power shift in America, the exceedingly autonomous self-image of its youth and their swift acquisition of resources. But what has become of the internal moral imperative to respect one's elders? Does it still hold weight for America's Jewish youth who have been raised to accept and appreciate the heaviness of the fifth commandment? More generally, do the prevailing trends in American families coincide with similar progressions in American Jewry?

Truly, the societal winds of change in America have indeed blown into the households of many American *Jewish* families, particularly in the liberal community. Over the past several decades, the advances of feminism have increasingly led to a sharing of parental roles between father and mother, as well as equal opportunities for sons and daughters to pursue their passions. Contributions to the field made by social scientists and educational theorists have resulted in the diminishment of authoritative and corporal discipline. Countless children, having far surpassed their parents' computer

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[142] Carter, Betty and Monica McGoldrick, "The Changing Family Life Cycle" in *The Expanded Family Life Cycle: Individual, Family and Social Perspectives*. Allyn & Bacon, 1998, p.3.

capabilities at a precocious age, have become their parents' de facto computer teachers, charged with imparting their skills and knowledge to the elder generation. These patterns in American family life, while not germane to the traditional teachings of Judaism, have been adapted, adopted and often *initiated* and *championed* by progressive Jews in the United States.

According to Sylva Barack Fishman, Professor of Contemporary Jewish Life at Brandeis University,

> Adaptation implies a continuing awareness of difference; the person who adapts Jewish tradition to contemporary American life remains aware of the differences between the two value systems, and privileges one or the other as the situation demands."[143]

But with regard to familial and parent-child relationships, Fishman offers the theory of "coalescence," in which one's American-ness and Jewishness merge, and the resultant messages or 'texts' are perceived by the individual not as disparate American and Jewish values existing alongside one another but as a "unified text."[144] Therefore, the changing trends within the American family and the command to honor one's parents must both be integrated, sometimes harmoniously and often combatively, into the psyche of the American Jewish family. These dynamic forces, when merged, create a new template for parent-child relationships, new expectations that each party places on the other, and new challenges born out of the increasingly heterogeneous makeup of American Jewish families.

Thus, widespread social and economic changes in American culture, coupled with 'home-grown' values of contemporary Jewish life (e.g. an inclination towards higher education, liberal political ideology, etc.), have implications for whom a Jew marries,

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[143] Barack Fishman, Sylvia. *Jewish Life and American Culture*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2000, p.9.
[144] Ibid, p.10.

how many children a couple has (if any at all), and what kinds of communal affiliations they desire. In addition, the diversity of American Jewish families has become so richly variegated—including same-sex, adoptive, single, multicultural, intermarried, in-married and unmarried family arrangements—that the data can not hope to keep stride with the needs, challenges and gifts offered by such a 'glorious mosaic.' In the ensuing sections, we will begin to hypothesize how some of these societal patterns, both American and Jewish, will impact the modern Jew's understanding of *kibud av va-eim* and influence the ever-changing landscape of American Jewry.

Intermarriage

The incidence of marriage between Jews and non-Jews, which had reached around 22 percent in the preceding generation, currently hovers around 50% nationwide.[145] The increased numbers of multi-faith families in which at least one parent identifies as Jewish suggest that intermarriage is neither a passing phenomenon nor a 'problem' that should be counteracted for the sake of Jewish continuity. Rather, it must be viewed as an irrefutable aspect of twenty-first century American Jewry that can create opportunities for learning, debate, and interfaith understanding.

Certainly, intermarriage presents a unique set of questions and challenges for the parent-child relationship, in either direction. From the perspective of an older Jewish parent who watches from afar as her adult child expresses a serious commitment to or marries a non-Jew, there is a tenuous line between being completely transparent about her feelings and potentially jeopardizing a heretofore positive relationship with her grown child. It does not serve the parent well to condemn or forbid such a relationship when, as

[145] *National Jewish Population Survey* 2000-01: *Strength, Challenge and Diversity in the American Jewish Population.* United Jewish Communities, 2003.

Rabbi Steven Carr Reuben states in his book *There's an Easter Egg on Your Seder Plate: Surviving Your Child's Interfaith Marriage,*

> ...your children will end up making up their own minds and making their own decisions no matter what you do. If you want to maintain the best possible relationship with them you must do what you can to make sure that they always know that they are loved and accepted by you, regardless of whether or not you agree with the individual decisions that they make from one day to the next.[146]

Reuben calls for a parental act of compassion and possible suspension of one's beliefs for the preservation of the relationship. Though we may understand the merits of this approach from a logical, intellectual standpoint, it still proves a tremendous emotional weight to bear for a parent who is troubled by the pairing. Our inmost values cannot be turned on and off as if controlled by a toggle switch. A parent who does not approve of their child's future spouse—whether the betrothed is Jewish, Christian, or of no faith at all—will not be able to conceal their displeasure forever.

Yet, intermarriage in the liberal Jewish community is not the taboo it was just a generation ago. Evidenced by the thousands of non-Jewish spouses who have made unequivocal commitments to raise their children as Jews, join and participate in synagogue life and create a home that celebrates Jewish living and learning, the initial sting may soon subside. Therefore, Reuben cautions elder parents with intermarried children not to act in a way that could result in irreparable estrangement. Instead, they might refocus their efforts on reconciliation and renewal: "the most productive way to maintain the best possible relationship with your child is to focus on the values that you *do* share rather than the values that you *seemingly* do not."[147]

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[146] Reuben, Steven Carr. There's an Easter Egg on Your Seder Plate: Surviving Your Child's Interfaith Marriage, Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2008, p.11.
[147] Ibid, p.12

From the perspective of the child, most difficulties arise when parents of different faiths have not previously negotiated and agreed upon a comprehensive plan as to how the child will be raised and educated religiously. Tensions arise when multiple religious holidays and observances collide on the calendar, causing friction between the parents and ambiguities for the watchful children.

Issues around *b'nai mitzvah* ceremonies are especially loaded due to the involvement of the extended family and the fact that the child is making a public declaration of his/her preference for Judaism. As a child of intermarried parents nears his or her thirteenth year, several questions must be addressed before embarking on the ceremonious path towards becoming *b'nai mitzvah*:

> If the child has been raised in neither or both religions, the question for Bar and Bat Mitzvah is one of "should we?" Has your child been attending religious school? Does he or she want to go through this process? What are each parent's feelings about this?
>
> If a child *has* been raised as a Jew, this decision may not be a question of should we, but *how* should we. What will be the role of the non-Jewish parent? How will the non-Jewish relatives be involved?[148]

Even in some of the most progressive American synagogues, the officiating rabbi or synagogue's bylaws still do not permit non-Jewish relatives to ascend the *bimah* for an *aliyah* or allow the non-Jewish parent to pass the mantle of Torah to the child. Communal standards such as these must be communicated delicately and respectfully so as not to disparage the non-Jewish parent and side of the family. At the same time, the clergy, educator and family should conceive of meaningful and appropriate ways to engage non-Jewish parents in both the process and 'product' of their children's *b'nai mitzvah*. The purpose is two-fold: to give the non-Jewish parent a sense of worth and

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[148] Nathan, S. Courney. "The Lifecycle of an Interfaith Relationship: Raising Teenagers." (www.interfaithfamily.com/relationships/parenting/The_Life-Cycle_of_an_Interfaith_Relationship_Raising_Teenagers.shtml).

belonging at an important milestone in their child's life, and inversely, to ensure that the child—newly anointed as an "adult" in the Jewish community—can look to *both* parents as valuable role models on their journey into Jewish adulthood.

For adolescent children of intermarriage, religion is but one more issue for them to challenge and against which to rebel. Children at this age will often ask their parents to explain the religious and relationship choices they made. If they were raised in the religion of one parent, they may desire to know how and why that decision was made; additionally, as children transition from adolescence into young adulthood, it is not uncommon for them to explore the religion of the non-Jewish parent. Rather than trying to counter this impulse, parents may find it more beneficial to let their adolescent chart his/her own course of self-discovery, comforted by the knowledge that they have already built a firm foundation of Jewish living and learning upon which the child stands.

While there should be clear consensus between intermarried parents as to what religious upbringing the child will have, a family need not (and cannot) deny the existence of a second heritage in the family's genealogy. An intermarried couple that refuses to erect a Christmas tree in their house alongside a Hanukkah *menorah* so as to avoid mixed messaging might comfortably choose to visit the non-Jewish grandparents or relatives to partake in their seasonal celebration. Such an act validates the customs and memories of the non-Jewish parent's upbringing without imposing religious instruction upon the children. For exposure is not synonymous with education; if the non-Jewish symbols and celebrations are presented and explained *outside* of the home, children will learn that it is not part of their home life or religious practice to embrace these symbols once they leave the party. Just as importantly, the family has made a generous effort to celebrate and affirm the heritage of the non-Jewish parent's relatives, an important precondition for familial harmony.

Classical rabbinic codes and responsa support the principle of honoring one's extended family members, though the authors likely never intended the laws to be appropriated in this way: "Honoring your parents' relatives is considered as honoring your parents."[149] "One must also honor his grandparents, but the honor due to parents is greater."[150] By embracing the power of these precepts, and applying them to the demographic realities that the American Jewish population experiences today, the children in multi-faith families can embrace core Jewish values while showing genuine honor to their non-Jewish relatives.

What is paramount to a child's proud self-identification as Jewish is a joyful and substantive engagement with Jewish texts, rituals and values at home. Unfortunately, many contemporary Jews-by-birth have limited knowledge of Jewish ritual and see their connection to Judaism as more ethnic than spiritual or religious.[151] In other words, "they do not model, much less know, a vibrant and engaged Judaism that can be emulated by their non-Jewish spouse."[152] Thus, it is hard to fault non-Jewish parents for not taking Jewish home rituals seriously when their Jewish spouses and peers seem indifferent. Rabbi Harold Schulweis sees this troubling phenomenon as a 'national' dilemma:

> The question is not whether...the stranger can be integrated into the Jewish family, but whether the estrangement of the Jewish family from Judaism can be overcome. It is the foreignness, the alienation of the Jewish family, not the purported foreignness of the proselyte that haunts us.[153]

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[149] *Sheurim Ha-Metzuyanim b'halakhah*, vol.4, p.31
[150] *Kitzur Shulkhan Arukh* 143:20
[151] Cohen, Steven M. *American Assimilation or Jewish Revival*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988.
[152] Sales, Amy, et.al. "Outreach Families in the Sacred Common: Congregation Responses to Interfaith Issues." Waltham, MA: Brandeis University, Nov. 2001, p.16.
[153] Schulweis, Harold. "The Stranger in our Mirror." *In God's Mirror*. Jersey City: Ktav Publishing, 2003, p.204.

Schulweis does not bemoan the presence of non-Jewish 'proselytes' in American Jewry as the main threat to Jewish continuity and survival. Rather, he worries that the *Jewish* parents in any marital equation—whether as part of an intermarried or in-married couple—do not adequately transmit a loving commitment and knowledge of Judaism to the next generation. Conversely, when the gift of Torah changes hands from parent to child, the youth receives a lesson in gratitude and humility that encourages him to uphold the *mitzvah* of *kibud av va-eim.*

Ironically, it is the gentile Dama ben Nesinah who features prominently in one of the most representative *aggadot* about honoring one's parents:

> Rabbi Judah said in the name of Samuel: When Rabbi Eliezer was asked, "How far should honoring one's father and mother extend?" He replied, "Go and see what a certain gentile named Dama ben Nesinah did for his father in Ashkelon. Once, the sages sought some precious stones from him for the ephod at a profit to him of sixty golden *dinars*. But the key to where the stones were kept was under his [sleeping] father's pillow, and he would not disturb him.
>
> The following year, the Holy One gave him his reward. A red heifer was born to him in his herd...Rabbi Hanina said: If one who is not commanded [to honor his parents] and nevertheless does is rewarded thus, how much more would one who is commanded and does so!"[154]

Rabbi Hanina reads this parable as an impetus for performing acts of filial piety even if they come at a personal, financial sacrifice. His exclamation at the end of the passage suggests a sense of astonishment that a non-Jew would willingly subscribe to the fifth commandment. Yet, contemporary Jews—whether from in-married or intermarried families—routinely learn from and become inspired by the positive role modeling of non-Jews in their midst. Certainly, this opportunity can be construed as a "blessing in disguise" for today's child of intermarried parents, who sees Jewish values emanate from

[154] BT *Kiddushin* 31a.

the actions and words of both parents, even if they do not realize the religious underpinnings that compelled them to act in this way. In such an instance, it is the obligation of the Jewish parent to articulate the core Jewish value that has been demonstrated, and by doing so, to seize an opportunity that will simultaneously foster Jewish learning for her spouse and her child.

Fertility and Adoption

A central tenet of Judaism, from Antiquity to modernity, is the commandment to be "fruitful and multiply" (in Hebrew, *p'ruurvu*).[155] In order to bequeath the birthright and sacred covenant between God and the Jewish people to successive generations, the nation of Israel must replenish its own. Yet, the Bible teems with stories of barren women who pray for conception but experience tremendous difficulty getting pregnant. Such heroines include Hannah, who offers a silent supplication in which she entreats God to quell her barrenness and open her womb; Rachel, who captures the heart of her husband Jacob but struggles with issues of infertility foreign to her older sister Leah ("Rachel saw that she had not borne children for Jacob, and Rachel was envious of her sister. And she said to Jacob: "Give me children and if not, I will die."[156]); and Sarah, the mother of all matriarchs, who is unable to give her husband Abraham a son to continue the family line until God delivers a laugh-inducing punchline that ends her "pregnant pause" of ninety-nine years.[157]

Though childless for many years, these women all yearn to fulfill the mitzvah of procreation so as to please their deity, sustain their husband's legacy, and boost their own

[155] Gen 1:22.
[156] Gen 30:1-3.
[157] Gen 17:16-19.

social standing. In addition to populating their households and elevating their status, the foremothers also play an indelible role in the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham, as every Jewish baby born and raised by them strengthens the entire nation: "I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you."[158] For this reason, the Sages consider procreation one of the most meritorious mitzvot in the Bible. One *midrash*, drawing from the language of the Biblical matriarchs, states:

> He who has no child is as though he were dead, utterly demolished. As though he were dead, for Rachel said, "Give me children, or else I am dead" (Gen 30:1). As though utterly demolished, for Sarah said, "It may be that I shall be rebuilt through her" (Gen 16:2), and only that which has been utterly demolished requires rebuilding.[159]

A modern reader of this *midrash* will undoubtedly take issue with the hyperbolic statement that childlessness is analogous to death and self-ruin. Its imagery is particularly painful for couples that genuinely want children but have considerable difficulty conceiving;, its message irrelevant for couples who simply do not wish to have kids. Moreover, the abstract concept of *hitbonenut*—'rebuilding' oneself—could be interpreted and achieved in an abundance of ways, only one of which entails reproduction.

Throughout the ages, the issue of childlessness has led to controversy and contention, even amongst the Tannaim (first and second century sages). A verbal scuffle between Rabbi Eliezer and Ben Azzai, the latter of whom is specifically noted in the Talmud as being unmarried and childless, illustrates this tension:

> We have been taught that Rabbi Eliezer said, "He who does not engage in fruition and increase is as though he shed blood..."

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[158] Gen 17:6.
[159] Gen Rabbah 45:2.

> Ben Azzai said: "He is as one who both sheds blood and diminishes God's image."[160]
> Rabbi Eliezer said to Ben Azzai: "Such words sound well when they issue from the mouths of those who practice them. There are some who preach well and practice well; others practice well but do not preach well. You preach well but do not practice well."
> Ben Azzai replied, "But what shall I do, seeing that my soul yearns for Torah? The world can continue through others."[161]

At first glance, it would appear that both rabbis march in lockstep to the beat of the other's drummer, as both men draw a comparison between those who willfully abstain from the commandment to reproduce and those who commit murder. Ben Azzai expands upon his colleague's forceful metaphor, adding a phrase about the disgrace caused to God when a person does nothing to perpetuate the human race. In the next breath, however, Eliezer exposes the hypocrisy of Ben Azzai's indignation, for the latter does not have children of his own. Instead of citing the tradition that one who raises disciples of Torah is akin to one who rears children,[162] Ben Azzai defends his lack of progeny by touting his exclusive focus on Torah study, the deed that stands as the equal to all other *mitzvot*.[163] Apparently, he feels justified wielding judgment upon others who do not procreate, while granting himself an exemption from the rule of *p'ru urvu* because of his dogged pursuit of knowledge. (This might be one of the earliest examples of someone being criticized for not "practicing what they preach.") Eliezer, blessed with a bluntness unrivaled by many of his rabbinic peers, exposes this hypocrisy, weakening Ben Azzai's argument and, in turn, Eliezer's own position on childlessness.

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[160] BT *Yevamot* 63b.
[161] *Tosafot Yevamot* 8:7.
[162] BT *Sanhedrin* 19b. "Whoever teaches Torah to the son of his companion, Scripture consider it as if he begat him."
[163] See Mishnah *Peah* 1:1.

The one truth that can be gleaned from this passage is not to be found in the *content* of the rabbis' rather insensitive remarks, but in the way these remarks are rendered invalid. For Ben Azzai to make such a hostile assertion against other childless parents seems misplaced and narrow-sighted. Truly, the only Jewish 'experts' on infertility, childlessness and integrating new members into one's home environment are those who have first-hand experience with these issues. Others can speculate to the degree of pain or frustration or indifference or relief that childless couples face, but they cannot compare it to other phenomena until they have traveled down a similar desolate road.

In the absence of first-hand knowledge, statistics may be helpful in raising consciousness about childlessness in liberal Jewish circles today. American Jews, like other Americans of this generation, are marrying later and thus having fewer children than previous generations.[164] The 2001 National Jewish Population Survey indicated that significantly fewer Jews than non-Jewish Americans have *ever* been married.[165] Along these lines, Reform Jews marry 5-10 years later than the rest of the American Jewish population, and 7-12 years later than the general population.[166]

The pursuit of higher education and prestigious career opportunities offers a partial explanation for delayed marriage and family formation in the Jewish community. Proportionally, American Jewish women attain higher levels of education than the general U.S. population and, consequently, marry and try to have children later in life.

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[164] Wuthnow, Robert. *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty- and Thirty-Somethings are Shaping the Future of American Religion.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2007.
[165] 2000-01 NJPS. The study showed that 25% of Jewish adults are single and have never been married; 48% of American Jews have been married by the ages of 25-34, as opposed to 59% of all Americans; 74% of American Jews have been married by ages 35-44, compared to 82% of the general population.
[166] Ibid.

As such, fertility among Jewish women is noticeably lower than it is for all American women, particularly in the 25-35 age range. (The gap narrows from ages 35-44.) Viewed from a different angle, infertility affects one out of every five Jewish couples in America today.[167]

One avenue that thousands of American Jewish couples have explored is the path toward legal adoption. In 1990, the National Jewish Population Survey identified 60,000 adopted Jewish children under age eighteen in the United States, representing more than three percent of all Jewish children in the country. One quarter of these were born abroad.[168] The study also found that thirteen percent of Jewish couples planning to have children were considering adoption from the outset. In some instances, the mother feared possible complications that might arise from pregnancy or delivery; in others, the couple simply reasoned that too many orphaned children living in the poorest countries of the world need a safe and nurturing home environment.

Although classical Jewish law does not have a set of statutes resembling the modern system of adoption, examples of guardianship and surrogate parenting abound in our tradition. Abraham "adopts" his servant Eliezer when it looks doubtful that he will ever conceive a child with his beloved Sarah; Pharoah's daughter Batya saved Moses from the Nile and reared him as her own; Mordechai acts as a foster father to his orphaned cousin Esther. Perhaps the most beautiful statement about adoption, however, concerns Michal, the wife of King David. According to one biblical verse, she never had children all her life[169], yet the Bible later mentions "her five sons." Noticing this discrepancy, the Talmud remarks, "Her sister Merab gave birth to them and she raised

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[167] Lipsitz, Gail. "Adoption and the Jewish Family." http://jewish.adoption.com/faith-based/adoption-and-the-jewish-family.html

[168] *National Jewish Population Survey* 1990. United Jewish Communities.

[169] 2 Samuel 6:23.

them, therefore they are called by her name. This teaches that whoever brings up an orphan in his home is regarded, according to Scripture, as though the child had been born to him."[170]

It follows that adoptive, step- and foster parents—those who raise, care for and teach children, even if they are not genetically linked—should be regarded as full-fledged parents of the child. Though the traditional Jewish legal obligations between biological children and parents (e.g. inheritance, burial, marriage, etc.) may be distinct from those with adoptive parents, the modern liberal Jew in America who does not organize her entire life according to *halakhah* should feel unencumbered by such distinctions. Rather, the child should focus her efforts on cultivating a sincere connection with her adoptive parents, one that acknowledges what a gift each party represents to the other. In this ideal scenario, the adopted or foster child affords her non-biological parent all the dignity and gratitude one would expect from any parent-child relationship.

Adherence and attention to the fifth commandment proves crucial in families with adoptive, step- or foster parents, precisely when adolescents, at the height of their rebellious phase, try to delegitimize the influence or authority of their non-biological parent(s). In fact, it is not uncommon for teen adoptees to actively seek out their biological parent(s) as they struggle to know who they are, from where they came, and how their family's past may shape their future. Though this can be fairly unsettling for the adoptive parents—as the teenage years are already a complicated transitional period in the life of any family—a tolerant and encouraging tone will empower one's children to embark on their journey of identity, and concurrently, nurture within them a true appreciation for those who have helped raise them to maturity.

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[170] Sanhedrin 19b.

One rabbi, himself an adopted child, advised parents who found themselves in a similar conundrum:

> Give your children the freedom and the permission to do what they have to do, while maintaining the parental role. Deal with your own fear of losing your child, but don't put this on your child because it's what often pushes children away. Have faith that the relationship you have had with your child will come back to you.[171]

Children at any age should be reminded that parentage does not solely comprise those connected by blood, but includes those responsible for one's upbringing as well.

Another distinctive issue for many adoptive parent-child relationships is cultural or racial disconnection. In her book, *Adoption and the Jewish Family*, Shelley Kapnek Rosenberg writes that "for adopted children, frequent reminders that they do not resemble their parents can reinforce their feelings of not belonging to the family...Such comments can also become a self-fulfilling prophecy, and have a detrimental effect on adoptees' emerging Jewish identity."[172] Parents must not be shy about acknowledging this concern, talking openly with their children about their distinctive ethnic or racial heritage, where it coincides with their Judaism, and where it may diverge. To offset the anxieties of disconnection, Rabbi Michael Gold, the author of *And Hannah Wept: Infertility, Adoption and the Jewish Couple*, recommends that adoptive parents

> collect books, music, and decorative articles from other countries. Customs from those cultures, especially those connected with holidays such as Chanukah and Passover, can be incorporated into your own family's traditions. While pointing out similarities, also acknowledge the differences between Judaism and your child's birth culture. Avoid idealizing either culture, and be clear about your own beliefs without being dogmatic.[173]

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[171] Doades, p. 118.
[172] Rosenberg, Shelley Kapnek. *Adoption and the Jewish Family*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1998, p.37.
[173] Gold, Michael. "Adoption as an Option". http://jewish.adoption.com/faith-based/adoption-as-a-jewish-option.html

By not retreating from every mention of the child's ethnicity or race but rather embracing it as one of many sacred sparks that make up the whole person, parents can celebrate and legitimate the multi-faceted identity of their adopted Jewish child. In turn, they hope the child will be moved to reciprocate that honor and gratitude, as they realize that without their parents' blessing and encouragement, they would be lost in their multiple identities, unable to 'coalesce' their Judaism, their American-ness and their distinctive ethnic background. Thanks to their parental advocates, their journey towards self-discovery and identity has the weight of family support—*kibud ha-mishpachah*—behind them.

Sexual Orientation and Same-sex Families

In contemporary America, no discussion about the changing face of the American family is complete without mentioning the growing number of same-sex partners raising children in every corner of the country. While the political battle over the constitutionality of same-sex marriage rages on in the halls of Washington, D.C. and the hamlets of Anywhere, U.S.A., same-sex families are slowly but undeniably becoming more normative and more widely accepted in locations beyond New York and San Francisco. To recognize this trend over the past thirty years, one only need look at the numerical data: There were an estimated 300,000 to 500,000 gay and lesbian biological parents in 1976. By 1990, an estimated 6 to 14 million children had at least one gay or lesbian parent. Today, between 8 and 10 million children are being raised in gay and lesbian households.[174]

[174] Data published by Child Welfare Information Gateway. (http://adoption.about.com/od/gaylesbian/f/gayparents.htm)

Having a child who openly identifies as part of the GLBT community can have a profound impact on the parent-child relationship. From the parent's perspective, one must acknowledge that heterosexual orientation is not a given for their child.[175] Each parent reacts to the news of his or her child's "coming out" with a varying level of comfort or discomfort, acceptance or exile. Indeed, a family's denominational affiliation—its core values and beliefs—may play a major part in determining whether the parent accepts or renounces the child. The stance toward homosexuality in the Orthodox world, in which Leviticus 18:22 is commonly cited as proof that homosexual behavior is a *to'evah* (forbidden practice/abomination), makes it exceedingly difficult for openly gay or lesbian individuals to retain their parents' acceptance and their place in a traditional community. By stark contrast, Reform and Reconstructionist congregations generally welcome GLBT individuals and families as part of their movements' core principles that all people are created in the Divine image (*b'tzelem Elohim*).[176] The Conservative movement finds itself somewhere in between the other major streams, having published recent *halakhic* papers both for and against the recent controversial decision to admit gay students to its rabbinical programs. Regardless of one's religious affiliation, the journey toward acceptance may be fraught with challenges, calling into question parents' long-held religious or political beliefs. Hence, for the relationship to

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[175] It is estimated that approximately ten percent of the U.S. population - 25 million individuals - are homosexual.

[176] Though there are certainly exceptions to this rule, these denominations promote a spirit of welcome and invitation as one of their espoused values. While the members of the CCAR Responsa Committee did not unanimously endorse the officiation of same-sex weddings by its clergy, it still calls for gay and lesbian couples to be granted the benefits of civil marriage and rules that "it no longer makes sense to classify homosexual behavior as a sin, much less a *to'evah*." (CCAR Responsa, "On Homosexual Marriage," 1996. http://data.ccarnet.org/cgi-bin/respdisp.pl?file=8&year=5756)

continually evolve and deepen between parent and child, the former must regard the latter with open-mindedness, not mere tolerance but unqualified *embrace*.

From the child's perspective, gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender Jewish youth justifiably fear the loss of family and community when contemplating a decision to reveal their sexual orientation or gender preference to their parents. In addition to experiencing anxiety and depression, they have genuine fears about their—and their siblings'—physical safety. In her book on parenting Jewish teens, Joanne Doades urges parents to become advocates for their children and do everything in their power to let their teens know that their love and support is unconditional, regardless of the sexual orientation of the child.[177]

This acute concern for one's own physical and emotional welfare additionally characterizes the experiences of children raised by same-sex parents. First, they must overcome the prejudices of classmates, teachers, friends' parents and other adult figures, who react to the news that the child has two mothers or two fathers with curious intrigue at best, moral outrage at worst. Secondly, the child must learn to reconcile the feelings of being both an insider and an outsider. Felicia Park-Rodgers, former Executive Director of COLAGE (Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere), explains this insider/outsider tension with regard to the hundreds of children of gay and lesbian parents who came through her office door seeking counsel and support over the past two decades:

> [These kids] have the same toys, music and books as everyone else in their grade, but their friends are curious and confused when they discover that they have two mommies or two dads...There is an inherent challenge of [wanting to be] assimilated into the mainstream, while being very different. And though there is more gender freedom and tolerance today than the overt homophobia that existed when I was a kid, most of the time it is lip service. [For example], 100% of teachers say that their classrooms are welcoming to all children, but

[177] Doades, p. 114.

> 100% don't have a book, photo or piece in the curriculum that looks like my family.[178]

Park-Rodgers offers a unique perspective as both a child of same-sex parents and a mother of two boys with her wife, a local rabbi in the Los Angeles community. A Jew by choice, Park-Rodgers currently serves as the Executive Director of Congregation Beth Chayim Chadashim in Los Angeles, a synagogue that specifically reaches out to Jews from the GLBT community, many of whom have long been disenchanted with or disenfranchised from 'institutional Judaism.' When I asked her to explain the cause of this detachment, she offered an unsparing account of the hostility that many Jewish gays and lesbians feel towards their religion of birth:

> The gay and lesbian community is deeply wounded by religion, not just in Judaism. Many were rejected by their parents and, consequently, by their parents' God. To this day, most GLBT people are alienated from both their family of birth and from religion...At BCC, we spend a lot of time helping people to deal with their wounds. We often don't realize what huge hurdles these people have to overcome just to set foot into a synagogue or church.[179]

Park-Rodgers highlights the potentially dangerous role that Judaism plays in a GLBT parent-child relationship. A person ostracized by his or her parents may transfer that feeling of abandonment or unwelcome to the religious institutions of their upbringing. Moreover, the patriarchal and heterosexist language of Hebrew liturgy and Torah can be disconcerting for those who do not see their gender, sexual orientation or family type represented in the text. On the language of the fifth commandment, Park-Rodgers again spoke from a deeply personal and reflective place:

> Did 'Honor your *father* and *mother*' ever resonate with me? No, not really. But I think that this commandment [is not necessarily about] a literal father and mother, but traits of the feminine and masculine that you

[178] Conversation with Felicia Park-Rodgers, January 21, 2010.
[179] Ibid.

> honor in every single person. You honor the people who have nurtured and provided for you. That's the intention behind the commandment.[180]

Like the aforementioned voices in the Talmud, Park-Rodgers believes that the one who raises children and transmits the values of Torah, of goodness and compassion, merit the honor awarded to any biological parent. In her work at the congregation and in the raising of her own children, Park-Rodgers strives to implant these values and welcome back those who have been alienated for so many years.

She cites the three 'pillars' upon which the world stands—*Torah*, *avodah* and *g'milut chasadim*[181]—as the compelling aspects of Judaism that led to her desire to become a Jew and why Judaism continues to play such a prominent role in her life. She interprets these three core principles as the love of learning (*Torah*), the opportunity to pray and reflect in times of great need and despair (*avodah*), and the imperative to do social justice in order to heal brokenness in the world (*g'milut chasadim*): "These are the pillars that my life is built on, meshed with values that my parents gave to me, even when I didn't know they were rooted in Judaism."[182]

In both the professional and personal realms of her life, Park-Rodgers offers a human chronicle of the triumphs and devastations felt by the gay community over the past four decades. She serves as a role model, not only for her children and her synagogue, but for the entire liberal Jewish community as to how it can better actualize its professed spirit of 'welcoming' toward GLBT Jewish parents and their children.

Studies conducted by social scientists attest to the positive impact of a child being raised by two parents, regardless of whether they represent the same or different sexes.

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[180] Ibid.
[181] Pirkei Avot 1:2.
[182] Felicia Park-Rodgers, January 21, 2010.

Those who would vehemently oppose gay marriage on the grounds that same-sex partners cannot be effective parents have no evidence to substantiate their claims:

> Despite dire predictions about children based on well-known theories of psychosocial development, and despite the accumulation of a substantial body of research investigating these issues, not a single study has found children of gay or lesbian parents to be disadvantaged in any significant respect relative to children of heterosexual parents.[183]

Thus, the liberal Jewish community in America has a unique opportunity to open wide the doors of synagogues, community centers and people's homes, to welcome in those who have been made to feel like strangers among their own people for far too long. By welcoming and offering real support to same-sex families, the Jewish world can begin to dispel the 'outsider' status that so many GLBT Jews, parents and children feel implicitly or explicitly on a daily basis. More broadly, as American Jewry continues to exhibit a more inclusive attitude towards all of its diverse family units, it validates their rightful place in the community and gives them reason to re-engage, reinterpret and rejuvenate their connection to Judaism and its ethical principles, foundational among them, *kibud av va-eim.*

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[183] Hochman, Gloria, Mady Prowler and Anna Houston, *Working with Gay and Lesbian Adoptive Parents*. Rockville, MD: National Adoption Information Clearinghouse, 1995, pp.5-6.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The most important part of the parent-child relationship in any family unit is a sense of connectedness, of familial cohesion and unwavering support. Real connection requires real communication, time set aside for family members to come together and share their thoughts, their questions, and their experiences of both the ordinary and extraordinary moments that fill up each day. This may not require anything more elaborate than making an effort to gather together for nightly family dinners:

> Kids who eat dinner with their families regularly are better students, healthier people and less likely to smoke, drink or use drugs than those who don't. A University of Michigan study of children ages 3 through 12, for example, found that more meal time with the family was the single strongest predictor of better achievement scores and fewer behavioral problems—even better than time spent studying or in church." [184]

When a family—whether consisting of a single parent, birth parents, adoptive, same-sex, in-married or intermarried parents—breaks bread together, the rewards are manifold. Though the level of the family's observance does not in and of itself create holiness, the words and deeds of those who dwell there do. Rabbi Menachem Mendl of Amishinov once proffered: "It is an obligation of every Jew to bring holiness into his/her private home, since the private life, the daily existence, and the atmosphere of the house should be saturated, full of holiness."[185] Though the task may seem lofty or unrealistic, the practice of treating one's parents or children with decency, respect, and compassion creates the sacred household to which we all aspire.

When we boil down the parent-child relationship to its most basic elements—the 'parent' and the 'child'—the parents must realize that they do not, nor ever will, have

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[184] Stout, Hilary. "Family Dinners Improve Kids' Health, Grades; How Not To Dread Them." *Wall Street Journal*, November 11, 2004.
[185] Greenberg, Aharon Yaakov, ed. *Torah Gems,* Vol.3, p.210.

absolute control over the attitudes or behaviors of their child. They can try to create a home life built on sound ethical values, the celebration of Jewish holidays and lifecycle events, and a focus on learning and performing acts of kindness but, ultimately, the only people they can control in the relationship is themselves. Thus, they must consciously consider how they will fulfill their end of *kibud av va-eim*, perhaps re-translating the phrase, not as "honor *for* father and mother" (treatment directed towards one's elders), but rather as the "honor *of* father and mother" (honor given by parents). The lesson recalls an oft-quoted story about a Hasidic man who wanted to repair the world:

> He found that it was too great a task, so he decided that he would just change his community instead. That, too, turned out to be more than he could accomplish, so he resolved to fix just his family. Finally, he realized that he did not have the power to do that either, so he concluded that he would have to begin by repairing himself.[186]

We bring honor to our most sacred domestic relationships when we honor ourselves, choosing carefully the words that leave our mouths and the deeds that leave our fingertips. Though this lifelong task of honoring parents and raising children weighs on our shoulders and our consciences as a most hefty enterprise, the resultant knowledge that we fulfilled our multiple, ever-changing roles in the parent-child relationship brings more peace to our homes, justice to our society, and wholeness to ourselves—a fine case for *kibud av va-eim.*

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[186] Buber, Martin. *The Later Masters,* quoted in Doades, p.103.

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