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The Parent/Child Covenant in Rabbinic Literature
W. Jack Romberg

Advisor: Dr. Norman J. Cohen

This thesis is a survey of mostly aggadic and midrashic literature to see how the parent/child relationship is handled in rabbinic literature. The initial source for material was midrashim on the patriarchs and matriarchs and their children. This was expanded to include midrashim and commentary on the Book of Proverbs, some apocryphal material, and relevant talmudic law and aggadot on how to raise children. Secondary sources included readings on the ancient Jewish family, Philo and his attitudes towards family and children, some contemporary exegesis on Genesis, and some current books on raising a Jewish child.

Originally, the goal of this thesis was to piece together a parenting guide based primarily on what was stated or implied in rabbinic literature, without the coloring of modern values and psychology. What I discovered, and this is the driving theme of the thesis, is the direct correlation between the God/Israel covenant and the parent/child relationship as an actual covenant. Further, the purpose of the parent/child covenant is to perpetuate the greater God/Israel covenant. The two covenants inform each other and are linked in ways more profound than is obvious. Therefore, Jewish history, beginning with the Genesis patriarchal stories, can be seen as the history of transmission of the covenant. Finally, this research has led me to a study of the word *musar*, as it is used in Proverbs, and some suggestions as to its full range of meaning in the context of the parent/child covenant.

The thesis is divided into six chapters, each with several subheadings.

THE PARENT/CHILD COVENANT IN RABBINIC LITERATURE

W. JACK ROMBERG

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Graduate Rabbinic Program
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Advisor: Dr. Norman J. Cohen

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Introduction

In the early 1980's, a commonly used adoption announcement (as opposed to a birth announcement) read as follows, "I was not expected, I was selected." Besides being a cute way to inform the recipient that the new child was not the parent's biological child, the phrase also implied that the parent was knowingly engaging in a deep set of commitments to the child. The parent had chosen this particular child. Along with the choosing was the recognition that the parent now had a set of legal obligations to the child, in essence a contract. The contract, however, was not meant to be the sole defining factor of this new parent/child relationship. The contract was to be informed by love, first flowing from parent to child and then reciprocated from child back to parent.

This is, in fact, the way that all parent/child relationships should be. The truth is that all parents "choose" their children. The way a parent decides to fulfill his or her role of parent indicates whether or not the parent has, in fact, chosen their child. In Jewish terms, this contract between the parent and child would be called a *brit* in Hebrew, or a covenant. That is, of course, the identifying term for the relationship between God and the Jewish people; covenant.

Currently, parenting books abound. These are filled with all kinds of advice about how to properly develop the covenant that exists between the parent and child, although "covenant" is not necessarily the word used to describe the parent/child relationship. In the Jewish world, the typical parenting book takes some general axioms from the Jewish tradition and layers on modern pop psychology. The results are often disingenuous attempts to portray Jewish tradition and values as the ideal way to raise children. What is missing is a comprehensive study of rabbinic literature to ascertain exactly what this tradition teaches about the parent/child relationship. Such a study can

sometimes be disturbing and therefore force us to re-evaluate what we can actually apply to parenting from our tradition. For example, there is a strain in the tradition that endorses hitting as a mode of discipline. If one is to be true to Jewish tradition, this cannot be conveniently ignored.

According to Jewish tradition, God chose Israel (the People) to be the junior partners in a covenant. This covenant was based on the relationship formed with the patriarchal ancestors, tempered and tested in the wilderness experience during the Exodus from Egypt, and reiterated at Mount Sinai. From the People Israel's point of view, they were selected, not expected. This covenant placed obligations on both God, as provider and nurturer of the people, as well as Israel, in terms of obeying and honoring God. Israel has been the recipient of punishments for disobedience, but the covenant has always been defined in terms of God's love for the people God had chosen.

Within the framework of rabbinic literature, the individual parent/child relationship is a refraction of this God/Israel relationship. As such, the parent/child covenant is a refraction as well of the God/Israel covenant. The parent/child covenant is seen as holy. It is in the image of the larger communal relationship with God, that God is seen as the partner in the formation of the child and family. Perhaps most importantly, the purpose of the parent/child covenant is to perpetuate the wider covenant between God and Israel.

Children are accorded the highest importance in rabbinic literature.¹ There are countless references to children in *aggadot* contained in both the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmuds, as well as in midrashic passages. Children are constantly used to

¹ Abrams, Judith Z and Steven A, *Jewish Parenting: Rabbinic Insights*, (Jason Aronson Inc., Northvale, N.J. 1994.) p. 35.

illustrate teaching points in parables. Yet despite all of these references, the sages legislated only the minimal requirements of parenting, apparently with the hope that parents would go beyond the minimum.²

The ultimate model for any parent is God. In trying to manage their children, parents encounter the same tensions that exist in the God/Israel relationship. The most prominent of these are: at what point is the child ready for the next stage of responsibility, and how does one measure proper punishment (justice versus mercy)? The ultimate purpose for the Jewish parent is to transmit a body of knowledge, morals, religious discipline, and personal responsibility to the next generation so that each child will grow to become a full participant in and transmitter of the Jewish covenant with God. At issue is the proper manner and content of that instruction.

What follows is a study of the parent/child covenant within the context of the greater God/Israel covenant as portrayed by rabbinic literature. The search for text began by surveying anthologies of midrash and aggadah for those which involved the parent/child relationship. As the book of Genesis contains numerous accounts of parent/child interactions, especially among the narratives of the patriarchs and matriarchs, several Biblical verses from these narratives were selected and all references to them in rabbinic literature were traced. A reading of some of these midrashic passages revealed consistent references to verses from the Book of Proverbs that give advice on how

² *Ibid* p 15.

parents should raise their children. The search for rabbinic material was then expanded to include all passages including these key verses from Proverbs.

Chapter One explores the nature of the parent/child covenant as a holy *brit*. This includes God's presence in the family relationship, the formation of the child, the redemptive powers of children and the special status given to parenting. Chapter Two analyzes the transmission of the holy covenant with God through the stories of the matriarchs and patriarchs in Genesis. Chapter Three details the various kinds of instruction through which the transmission of the covenant occurs within the Jewish family. These include religious, moral and practical matters. Chapter Four is an analysis, through various midrashim, of Israel's wilderness experience as a metaphor for the parent/child relationship. Chapter Five describes various tensions in the parent/child relationship, and how they are informed by the God/Israel relationship. Chapter Six is an analysis of the concept of punishment, and how the numerous meanings of the word *musar* illuminate the role of punishment in the transmission of the covenant between God and Israel.

A survey of the pertinent rabbinic literature shows that in some cases it is the dynamic of the parent/child relationship that is used to define the God/Israel one, and in other situations it is the God/Israel relationship informing the relationship of the parent and child. It is clear that these two perspectives are closely intertwined. Where useful, the attitudes reflected by rabbinic literature are compared with attitudes in Greek culture. The result, hopefully, is some insight into the concepts of holiness, transmission of values, education, and discipline; and how they inform the parent/child covenant.

Chapter 1
The Parent/Child Relationship as a Holy Brit

The parent/child relationship can only be seen as a refraction of the God/Israel relationship if it is itself seen as holy. God is an intrinsic part of the parent/child relationship in a number of ways. First of all, God is seen as a partner in the creation of the child, so God is tied to the destiny of the child. If the parents fail to properly nurture this being created in partnership with God, then the parent(s) transgress against God. Second, rabbinic literature teaches that the same attitudes that one is supposed to have toward God, are also due one's parents. Consequently, the duties of the parent to the child, particularly in the area of discipline, are seen as the same as God's duties to Israel. The parent/child relationship is also seen as holy because the parents' redemption can come through their children. Finally, the job of parenting is acknowledged to be exceedingly difficult, and as such is accorded the highest honor.

A. God Participates in the Formation of the Child

Since a newborn child is one day supposed to be a participant in the holy covenant with God, and to help in its perpetuation, it is not surprising that rabbinic tradition sees God's presence in the child's very formation. Accordingly, there are three partners in the formation of a human being, God, the father and the mother.³ The parents are the providers of the physical material; bone, sinews, flesh, hair, etc. God provides the qualities that bring the physical substance to life. In an elaboration of the text found in the Babylonian Talmud tractate *Niddah*, Ecclesiastes Rabbah gives the following ten features as coming from God: spirit and soul, beauty of features, sight of the eyes, hearing of the ears, speech of the lips, the ability to raise the hands and to walk with the feet, wisdom

³ Babylonian Talmud *Niddah* 3a.

and understanding, counsel, knowledge, and strength.⁴ A text in Yalkut Shimoni, drawing on the Babylonian Talmud Tractate *Kiddushin*, takes this idea of the three who participate in a human being's creation, and adds that because of that, God is glorified whenever a person shows honor to one's parents. Similarly, God chooses to be absent from the relationship when the person does not honor their parents.⁵

A somewhat different take on God's participation in the beginning of an individual human life is expressed in Leviticus Rabbah. Here it states that humans entrust God with one drop of fluid and, in return, God gives back a completed human being. This itself is a miracle worthy of praise, but God does even more. The womb is compared to a prison, and God is the provider of the light which enables the nascent baby to find its way into the world.⁶ God, therefore, is not only the provider of the substance that is the essence of humanity, but also the provider of the light showing the way from darkness to illumination. This is a wonderful foreshadowing of the idea that God is indeed the provider of light to guide one's way through life. In terms of the parent/child covenant, the parent is to be the daily provider of that light. In all of the cases cited above, God is both a partner in the providing of elements which comprise the new person (e.g. the soul, and the senses), and in facilitating the birth. By implication then, God is a constant presence in the parent/child relationship. This individual covenant, just like Israel's covenant, begins with God.

There is a clear tradition in Judaism that all life is sacred. Therefore the clearest contrast with concurrent Greco-Roman attitudes is Judaism's view on infanticide.

⁴ Ecclesiastes Rabbah 10:2.

⁵ Yalkut Shimoni, part 1 remez 297.

⁶ Leviticus Rabbah 14:2.

Exposure of unwanted newborns, in particular girls, was widespread in ancient Athens.⁷ Philo condemns the practice of subjecting infants to infanticide.⁸ This implies two things; first, that infanticide was practiced during Philo's times in the Greco-Roman world. Second, it is evidence that this was not practiced in the Jewish world. Unlike the Greeks and Romans, there is no evidence showing that Jews practiced infanticide.⁹

While Jewish children would be seen as the means for continuing a holy relationship with God, Plato and Aristotle viewed children as the raw material of the citizen community.¹⁰ Plato saw the following as the necessary moral virtues for an Athenian adult: orderliness, easy-going temperament, greatness of spirit, discipline, bravery, endurance, willingness to work, will to win, and love of honor.¹¹ While most items on this list would certainly be traits admirable in any good Jew, there is an overall sense of dedication to the political entity as the primary concern, especially in those traits which are military in nature. For the Jewish child, the value of the community, and his participation in it, are delineated by the community's relationship with God.

This is not to imply that Jewish parents loved their children and Greek parents did not. In her article, "Parents and Children: A Philonic Perspective," Adele Reinhartz says that one can glean from Philo's depiction of the family that children were desired and loved, and generally treated with affection. Philo, of course, lived in the Jewish diaspora amidst Greek culture, and therefore observed families influenced as much by that culture

⁷ Golden, Mark *Children and Childhood in Classical Athens*, (Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London, 1990) p. 87.

⁸ Reinhartz, Adele, "Parents and Children: A Philonic Perspective," *The Jewish Family in Antiquity*, Cohen, Shaye JD ed. (Brown University, 1993) p. 71.

⁹ Abrams, *Jewish Parenting*, p 18.

¹⁰ Golden, Mark, *Children and Childhood*, p 4.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p 5.

as Jewish culture. Mark Golden, in his book, *Children and Childhood in Classical Athens*, gives much the same picture; that children were loved, enjoyed, and their limitations recognized. There are other similarities. Just as Jewish culture was sure to give honor to both mother and father, Golden's studies of tragedies and comedies written by Euripides and Antipanes shows that the child was supposed to respect both parents.¹² Further, the gods are said to love the one who reveres his/her parents. Golden cites an example from Demosthenes which says that the one guilty of disrespect to parents is guilty of impiety to the gods.¹³

B. Parallels Between the God/Israel Relationship and the Parent/Child Relationship

Within Judaism, the concepts of parental love of children and the respect a child was obligated to show one's parents, are cast in the context of the holy covenant. In the Mechilta of Rabbi Ishmael, *Pisha*, chapter 1, it is explained; that although one might think that the father takes precedence over the mother because the word "father" comes first in Exodus 2:2 (the text of the ten commandments), in fact, they are to be considered equal. This is because the word "mother" comes first in other parts of the Torah, notably Leviticus 19:3. In the Mechilta of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, the reverence of both parents is considered the same as the reverence of God (המקום).¹⁴ The Palestinian Talmud, *Peah* 1:1 goes even further, saying that "to honor parents is more important even than to honor God." God is said to experience or feel what befalls a parent. In Tanna debe

¹² *Ibid*, p 103.

¹³ *Ibid*, p 102.

¹⁴ Mechilta of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai to Exodus, p 152.

Eliyahu it states that whenever a person curses or strikes a parent, God draws His feet under the throne of glory.¹⁵

These traditions point to an important element which the parent/child covenant shares with the God/Israel covenant: they are relationships built on hierarchy, not equality. While parents have many obligations to children (to nurture, educate, discipline, and make self sufficient), there is little question as to who has the upper hand. Just as God is creator and ultimate arbiter of Israel's fate, a parent is the creator (or co-creator) and the holder of the child's fate, at least until the child is self sufficient. For Philo, the parent/child relationship is a hierarchical structure that parallels the God/Israel relationship.¹⁶ Reinhartz states that this reflects Philo's view that society is made up of a series of hierarchies.

Just as the parent/child covenant is a hierarchy that is a refraction of the God/Israel covenant, so too are the obligations of a parent to a child a refraction of the things that God has done for Israel. This is highlighted in Numbers Rabbah 17:1, a commentary on Numbers 15:2, which states, "When you come into the land of your settlements, which I have given to you." This midrash begins with posing the halachic question, "How many things are a man obliged to do for his son?" The answer, drawn from the Babylonian Talmud *Kiddushin* 29a, is five: to circumcise, to teach him Torah, to redeem him, to teach him a craft, and to find him a wife. The midrash then states, "The father is the Holy One, blessed be He, and the son is Israel." Typically, the midrash then proceeds to provide a proof text for each covenantal obligation which God has fulfilled for Israel. The total

¹⁵ Tanna debe Eliyahu, p 13.

¹⁶ Reinhartz, A "Parents and Children," p 67.

number of duties which God has fulfilled, however, is ten. Further, there are some differences between the obligations listed for a father and the corresponding ones fulfilled by God. The grandeur of God's obligations and their number is an illustration of the difference between covenant on the national scale and the individual scale. Yet, they are mirror images of each other and inform each other.

The reasons for some of the differences are obvious, such as the example of circumcision which draws on a proof text from Joshua 5:2, the mass circumcision of Israel's males. In the matter of redemption, the individual father redeems his first born son to excuse him from the Temple service to which the Levites are chosen to perform. God's redemption of Israel was also a liberation from work (servitude in Egypt); work in the service of other gods. Some differences are less obvious, such as the substitution of the teaching of the commandments for the teaching of a craft. Knowledge of a trade was necessary for basic sustenance, and in the rabbinic mind, the performing of the commandments was Israel's sustenance. On the obligation to find a wife for one's son, the proof text from Genesis 1 sets the paradigm for the finding of a mate with the first man. Key additions in the text of Numbers Rabbah are the acts of feeding, bathing, anointing and clothing. These are not stated halachic obligations, of parents to children, but fall under the heading of what a father should do because God performed them for Israel.

The final duty which God performed according to Numbers Rabbah 17:1, is the giving of the land to Israel. This is compared to a father giving property to his son; again, not a halachic obligation spelled out in the tractate *Kiddushin*, but an important one. One reason it is important is the concept of the land (that is the land of Israel) as the

inheritance of the people Israel. An important part of the transmission of the covenant is the tradition of passing on of the land (see discussion of the patriarchs in Chapter 2).

Similarly, a father should pass on a property inheritance to his children (son) even if the son has not behaved properly. According to the Babylonian Talmud, *Baba Batra* 33b, it is legal to pass on one's property to strangers, but it is not looked upon well by the sages.

This passage ends with a declaration to stay away from places where an inheritance is taken away from a legal heir and passed on to someone else. Philo, in his *Special Laws* II, also affirms that a father must provide an inheritance for his children (sections 25 to 39).

The pericope from Numbers Rabbah helps us to cast this as part of the covenantal obligation.

Another duty of the parent to the child is that of discipline. The disciplining of a child is not a Talmudic dictum, but is based to a large extent on verses in the book of Proverbs that speak of a father's obligation to discipline his son. Rabbinic literature interprets many of the tragedies which Israel has experienced in the context of God, the parent, exercising discipline on Israel, the bad child. In many of these cases, midrash uses verses from Proverbs which are clearly descriptive of a father's duty to discipline his son, as a proof text of the aspect of discipline in the God/Israel relationship. In Numbers Rabbah 17:1, the actions of God are used to provide a paradigm for what a human father is to provide for his son.

In matters of discipline, the perception of the ideal human action is used as a way to understand God's actions. A good example of this is the use of Proverbs 13:24 as a proof text in midrash. Proverbs 13:24 reads: "He who spares the staff hates his son, and he

who loves him disciplines him early (alternate translation: 'regularly')." Gersonides states the following on this verse:

The one who withholds his staff from hitting his son to chastise him is the one who hates him. Because of this he will be without discipline. But the one who loves him seeks discipline for him (and) in his little ones, to educate them in discipline according to his way.

This commentary makes a number of points. First, that the verse is literally speaking about a father's need to strike a child in order to discipline him. Second, that this must be done from the time a child is young, thus interpreting שרחו as "early". Third, that the purpose of this discipline is to educate the child in the father's "way." It seems clear that Gersonides sees this verse as advice to a parent.

The same verse, Proverbs 13:24, is often used in midrash to make a point about God's need to punish Israel. Just as the punishment of a child will hopefully bring about future benefit for the child by teaching him proper behavior, God's punishments of Israel are perceived in the same way. Note the following from Midrash Hagadol to Exodus Masei:

It is written, "Shepherd your people with your staff, the flock of your heritage, let them dwell solitary as a forest in the midst of farmland." (Micah 7:4) "Shepherd your people with your staff," they said that if Israel requests The Holy One, blessed is He, to bring us to life in the future, He brings on us punishments (יסורים) in this world in order that we will not forfeit the future. And there are no punishments other than the staff, as it is said, "He who spares the staff hates his son, he who loves him disciplines him early." (Proverbs 13:24)

The implication of the text is that not only are the punishments necessary in order to bring Israel back to life, but that Israel actually requests the punishments, knowing they will

have a future benefit. Israel, as the chosen favorite of God, is supposed to heed the words of Proverbs 13:1, "A wise son seeks his father's discipline (מוסר)." The linguistic connection between the midrash and both verses in Proverbs is the root for both discipline and punishments, נסו. A fuller analysis of the word will follow in Chapter Six, but here a good definition would be, "correction for the sake of benefit." Further, this correction is done out of the love that God has for Israel. Midrash Proverbs, in giving an explanation on verse 13:24b, "He who loves him disciplines him early," says, "R. Eliezer said: Because God loves the righteous, He chastises them in this world....R. Eliezer said further: Because God loves Israel, He disciplines them by handing them over to enslavement by the kingdoms in this world, so that they will thereby achieve atonement for their sins in the world to come." Not only is the discipline out of love, but it will provide a means for the future atonement of Israel. The seemingly human act of disciplining a child is holy when seen within the framework of the covenant.

C. Redemption through Children

Besides the merit or chastening earned by punishments, another way that individuals can earn redemption is through the merit of their children. Rabbinic literature gives many examples of parents achieving redemption through their children, and this serves to infuse the parent/child relationship with holiness. In Genesis Rabbah 63:2, commenting on Genesis 25:9 which reads, "And these are the generations of Isaac, Abraham's son," the midrash says that Abraham was saved from the fiery furnace only for Jacob's sake. The merit of a child (or in this case, a grandchild) yet to be, is enough to redeem a parent (or grandparent). This redemption is not only an escape from a potential immediate danger, but a means to enter the next world as well. In the Zohar it states, "For

the man who is privileged to have children in this world will through them be worthy to enter 'behind the partition' in the world to come."¹⁷ Merely having children, according to this pericope, gives a man a divine heritage, and is the means through which a person attaches oneself to God at all times. The heritage, according to the Zohar, is the land of Israel.

A number of themes come together in this passage from the Zohar. First, is the obvious quality of holiness inherent in the parent/child relationship, which associates the parent with God. Second, that having the child is redemptive in itself. Third, that what is being ensured is an inheritance; that is the land. Rather than seeing the relationship from the perspective of parental obligation to the child as in Genesis Rabbah 17:1, the perspective here is from child to parent. The parent's ultimate inheritance is through the merit of having the child.

Children can also redeem if one is sure to teach them Torah. Ecclesiastes Rabbah 4:1:1 speaks about children who die young, and roam in the afterworld with the band of the righteous. These children have to plead before God on behalf of their fathers. In order to effectively plea for mercy for their fathers, they need to have studied Torah. The midrash concludes that a person should teach one's son Torah in order to be potentially rescued from Gehinnom. The teaching of Torah to children can be redemptive for the community as well. In Pesikta d' Rav Kahana, the nations of the world inquire of Oenomaus of Gadara to see if they can engage Israel in battle. His response is to check in the synagogues and schools to see if the school children are singing within, and if they

¹⁷ Zohar I 115a-b.

are, then Israel cannot be engaged in battle.¹⁸ Another point in this particular text is that the inheritance of Torah, signified by the schoolchildren singing, is the inheritance of Jacob as opposed to Esau. Jacob is associated with Torah learning in the rabbinic tradition, and Esau is generally connected with violence and evil.

Both the Ecclesiastes Rabbah text and the Pesikta d' Rav Kahana text stress the idea of teaching Torah, which is the means of transmitting the holy covenant. These kind of midrashim are ultimately hopeful, as they look towards the future potential of the children who receive Torah. In this tradition, the child is the hopeful symbol of something better to come. In classical Athens, children were not usually seen in the same way. When depicted as a symbol of the future, the child is seen as hope unrealized. Children are generally depicted in images that ignore their future capabilities in favor of the futility of the present.¹⁹

D. The High Value Assigned to Parenting

Perhaps the greatest measure of the sense of holiness of the parent/child relationship in Rabbinic Judaism, is the recognition of the difficulty of parenting and the high honor given to the raising of a child. In explaining the "pain" of the woman referred to in Genesis 3:16, the rabbis in the Babylonian Talmud, *Eruvin* 100b say that it refers to the bringing up of children. In Genesis Rabbah 20:6, R. Eleazar ben Simeon says, "It is easier for a man to grow a myriad of olives in Galilee than to rear one child in the land of Israel." The sense that raising a child is truly a holy mission is clear in a passage from the Babylonian Talmud, *Ketubot* 5a. This passage states that the person who is the active

¹⁸ Pesikta of Rav Kahana Piska 15:5.

¹⁹ Golden, Mark, *Children and Childhood* p 7.

parent (who supports young children) is engaged in a constant act of charity, as the child is always dependent on the parent. This is an act of mercy and, therefore, according to Ben Sirach 16:14, alone can atone for sin. Through the senses of charity, redemption, and modeling after God, the parent/child covenant is infused with holiness.

Chapter 2
Transmission of the Covenant from Parent to Child: Stories of the Matriarchs and Patriarchs

A. The Covenantal Theme in Genesis: an Overview

Although the parent/child covenantal relationship is hierarchical, the fact that it is a covenant implies obligations in both directions. The obligation of the parent is to nurture and care for the child until adulthood, and to provide a framework and grounding for the child's life. The grounding includes the transmission of the cultural heritage and education. In return, the child, upon reaching adulthood, may have at some point, to care for the parent.²⁰ However, the main obligation that the covenantal relationship places on the child is to perpetuate the culture and values system of the parents. The patriarchal stories in Genesis are about the formation and transmission of the Jewish values and culture that make up the God/Israel relationship.²¹

In the previous chapter we have seen how inheritance, whether of goods transmitted from parent to child or God's gift of the land of Israel, is seen as part of what makes the covenantal relationship holy. Devora Steinmetz writes that inheritance also consists of values and "symbolic estate" as well as material substance, and that kinship is the way that allows parents to hand all of these to their children.²² Steinmetz sees the patriarchal narratives in Genesis as "a search for a stable foundation for the future nation."²³ The pattern in Genesis is that the preservation of the cultural heritage serves as

²⁰ Yarbrough, O.Larry, "Parents and Children in the Jewish Family of Antiquity," *The Jewish Family in Antiquity*, Cohen, Shaye, JD, ed. Brown University, 1993 p. 48.

²¹ Steinmetz, Devora, *From Father to Son, Kinship, Conflict, and Continuity in Genesis*, (Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 1991) p. 31.

²² *Ibid* p. 26.

²³ *Ibid*, p. 48.

the spark for a father - son conflict, and when this conflict happens, an urgent resolution is necessary in order for cultural continuity to happen.²⁴

Two lessons might be learned from studying the father-son conflicts in Genesis. One is the view of Naomi Rosenblatt, that it teaches the importance of the role of an involved father in a child's upbringing.²⁵ Another is the importance of the mother in assessing the child's suitability as a potential participant in the transmission of the covenant. Rabbinic literature will support this latter view through favorable texts dealing with both Sarah and Rebecca. The heritage they are seen to be guarding and transmitting is that of Torah.

According to the normal sequence of events as portrayed in the Hebrew Bible, the Torah is given to Moses at Mount Sinai, well after the time of the patriarchs. Through the lenses of the sages, however, there is not necessarily a linear sequence of events in the Bible. There is no necessary notion of events preceding or succeeding one another in the Torah. In rabbinic literature, then, it is quite possible that Torah existed for the sages even though it was not revealed to the Israelites until Sinai. An example of this is in Tanhuma Buber: "Just as the gift of Torah did not cease on the day it was given; so for one who teaches his son and grandson Torah it shall never again depart from him. And so it was that the Holy One saw Abraham was busy with Torah."²⁶ The passage goes on to state that Jacob would also study Torah. All of this is commentary on Genesis 25:19: "These are the generations of Isaac, son of Abraham." The point of the midrash is that those who are worthy descendants of Abraham are those who engage in the study of Torah. Torah,

²⁴ *Ibid*, p. 43.

²⁵ Rosenblatt, *Wrestling with Angels*, p. 243.

²⁶ Tanhuma, Buber Toledot 62b.

therefore, is something transcendent which has no temporal limitations. So Torah is able to be the heritage and covenant that the ancestors of the Israelites studied even though it was revealed to the Israelites at Sinai. In commenting on the same verse, Genesis Rabbah 63:1 says that God has compassion for those who study Torah. Genesis 25:19 implies a double rejoicing by God because of both father and son who study Torah (they are referred to here as righteous, but the intent is clearly one who studies Torah). What is important to note is that the patriarchal stories in Genesis are about the transmission of a covenantal heritage, and the sages see that heritage embodied as Torah.

B. Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, and Ishmael

The first of the patriarchal stories, centering on Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, and Ishmael, sets the pattern for the key problem as to which son is deserving of receiving the covenantal heritage. Abraham is concerned with having a son through whom his seed will continue. This was promised to him by God. When Ishmael is born, this desire of Abraham's is satisfied and he has a hard time understanding that Ishmael was not born within the covenant, and that he does need another son through Sarah.²⁷ Abraham conflates his love for his son, Ishmael, with the need for an appropriate son to receive the cultural heritage. It is Sarah who perceives the problem clearly, and she is portrayed by midrash as the one who discerns through whom the family's destiny will be insured.

The midrash portrays Sarah as the one who sees the future of idol worship and potential evil in Ishmael. The key biblical verse is Genesis 2:9 in which Sarah observes Ishmael playing with Isaac. The sages focus on the word "play" (מצחק). This word has

²⁷ Steinmetz, Devora *From Father to Son*, p 78.

connotations of idol worship for the rabbis, because of its connection to Exodus 32:6.

This refers to the worship of the Golden Calf: "Early the next day, the people offered up burnt offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being; they sat down to eat and drink, and then rose to dance (לצחק)." So what Sarah really saw Ishmael doing was worshipping idols.²⁸ Abraham is reluctant to recognize reality, whereas Sarah realizes who is truly worthy of carrying on the full inheritance of Abraham and who is not worthy. The Zohar spells this out nicely, "Hence she (Sarah) said, surely this is not the son of Abraham who follows in the footsteps of Abraham, but the son of Hagar the Egyptian who is reverting to the type of his mother."²⁹ Abraham is moved mostly out of love for his son and listens to Sarah reluctantly (Deuteronomy Rabbah 4:5). His love for Ishmael is so great that according to Pirke d'Rabbi Eliezer, Abraham continues to visit Ishmael and give him advice long after expelling him from the family camp.³⁰

Having decided, with Sarah's help, that Isaac is the one through whom the inheritance will be transmitted, Abraham, according to Genesis 25:5, "gave all that he had to Isaac." But what exactly is "all?" The Midrash gives a wide range of ideas as to what exactly it is that was passed on to Isaac. Steinmetz says that it was the land. She states that the promise of the land can only be passed on to a son who understands its meaning.³¹ Other possibilities include the qualities of faith,³² and wisdom,³³ both of which appear in the Zohar.

²⁸ Genesis Rabbah 53:11.

²⁹ Zohar I 118b.

³⁰ Pirke d' Rabbi Eliezer, Chapter 30.

³¹ Steinmetz, *Devora From Father to Son*, p 114.

³² Zohar I 113b.

³³ Zohar I 223a.

In its comment on Genesis 25:5, Genesis Rabbah 6:6 presents a sort of riddle regarding the blessing Abraham gave to Isaac. There is a disagreement over what the blessing was between R. Judah, R. Nehemiah and the sages. R. Judah said that Abraham blessed Isaac with the power of blessing, that is, just as through Abraham others would be blessed, so, too, through Isaac others would be blessed. R. Nehemiah said that the blessing was the right to be buried at the cave of Machpelah. In contrast, the sages maintain that Abraham did not bless Isaac at all, but simply gave him some gifts. In this midrash, Abraham recognizes that any blessing he gives must be for both of his children (perhaps his love of both sons is at work again). But he also knows that it is Isaac who is deserving, that he represents a "life bearing tree." So he decides not to bless either, leaving the matter up to God. It is God, rather than Abraham, who blesses Isaac (see Genesis 25:3). This is important because it affirms that the inheritance which Isaac takes forward is not just the physical gifts he receives from Abraham, but in fact a relationship with God and all that would imply.

C. Isaac, Rebecca, Jacob, and Esau

The next generation of patriarchs and matriarchs repeats some elements of the preceding one. First is the issue of which son is the proper one to inherit the blessing of land and tradition. Second is the inability of the father (Isaac) to see this because of his love for his son(s). Third is that it takes the matriarch, in this case Rebecca, to set things straight. Isaac and Rebecca are the inheritors, not the founders of the culture to be transmitted, so their concern for continuity seems less pressing.³⁴ Isaac is in the twilight of

³⁴ Steinmetz, Devora, *Fathers and Sons*, p 42.

his life and cannot see (note the allusion to the dimming eyes) his sons for who they are. He sees the firstborn, Esau, who is physically stronger, as the spiritual heir promised by God.³⁵ Further, Isaac has not been an assertive father, in the way Abraham was, and, as a result, Esau chooses the wrong wives. Steinmetz states that the blessing which Isaac intended to give Esau was a material one, and he seems to be unaware of any other kind. Rebecca, mother of both Jacob and Esau, is needed to intervene to make sure that the blessing is transmitted to the correct son.

According to rabbinic and proto-rabbinic tradition, Jacob is the correct son because he is the one who understands the basis for the continuation of the spiritual and cultural heritage; Torah. Further, Jacob was refined, while Esau was crude. This is exemplified by a passage from the Book of Jubilees:

And the youths grew and Jacob learned to write; but Esau did not learn, for he was a man of the field and a hunter, and he learned war and all his deeds were fierce. And Abraham loved Jacob, but Isaac loved Esau. And Abraham saw the deeds of Esau, and he knew that in Jacob should his name and seed be called; and he called Rebecca and gave commandments regarding Jacob...³⁶

The pericope from Jubilees asserts that it is actually Abraham, the grandfather, who makes the assessment of his grandsons, and it is noteworthy that he realizes that it is Rebecca who must be the agent who sees that the covenant is properly transmitted. The tradition of Jacob being learned as opposed to Esau explicitly being called a hunter, and therefore prone to violence, is based on the description of Jacob in Genesis 25:27: "Jacob was a

³⁵ Rosenblatt, Naomi, *Wrestling with Angels*, p 42.

³⁶ Jubilees 19:14-16.

quiet (or mild, or innocent or simple) man who dwelt in tents." Rabbinic tradition focuses on the presence of "tents" as meaning the patriarchal equivalent of a house of study. In other words, Jacob was studying Torah. This is explicitly stated in Pirke d'Rabbi Eliezer, Chapter 32, in which Esau is described as going the way of death, and Jacob the way of life, because he studied Torah.

Now it is up to Rebecca to make sure the blessing passes to Jacob. It is Rebecca who has consulted with God, and it is Rebecca who showed concern over Esau's choice of wives. Rebecca is the one who more clearly sees the future, and what is needed for the covenant to continue. In Genesis Rabbah 65:14, 15, and 17, the sages show how far Rebecca was willing to go in order to ensure the proper passing of the blessing. In section 14, Rebecca states (according to R. Helbo) that she is willing to give two kids from the flock of her dowry for Jacob to prepare and take to Isaac. In section 15, as a response to Jacob's fear that he will be cursed, she states her willingness to go into Isaac and tell him that Esau is wicked and Jacob is righteous. Rebecca, however, also realizes that Jacob must learn to stand on his own, so in 17 she accompanies him to the door of the tent and then tells him that from there, only God can assist him. This midrashically created moment is not only a lesson in self sufficiency for Jacob, but a reminder that what they are doing is for the purpose of maintaining the holy covenant.

However, there are also midrashic traditions which credit Isaac with knowing the true nature of his sons and, in essence, "going along" with the ruse which Jacob and Rebecca perpetrate on him. Genesis Rabbah in 65:9 credits Isaac with deducing that the son who has come in for the blessing is in fact Jacob and not Esau, as he thinks to himself

that Esau does not mention God's name, yet the son in his presence does. At that moment Isaac realizes that the responsibility to transmit the covenant is properly fulfilled through Jacob. It is then that Isaac says, "Come closer my son that I might feel you" (Genesis 27:2). In *Pirke d'Rabbi Eliezer*, Chapter 32, Isaac recognizes Jacob's voice as a voice "in the meditation of Torah." The word used in the *Pirke d'Rabbi Eliezer* text is בְּדַגִּינָן, whose range of meanings includes "recitation." Jacob was not merely studying Torah (לִמֵּד), but was reciting Torah as well. In *Genesis Rabbah* 67:12 Isaac is portrayed as projecting an attitude of inviting Jacob in for the blessing; that the secrecy of the ruse was not necessary.

D. Jacob and Sons

Jacob becomes the next link in the chain of transmitting the covenant. For most of his narrative, it appears that he has the same penchant for weakness in regards to his sons as Isaac. He seems to be too passive as a father in both the incidents of the killing of the residents of Shechem, following the rape of Dinah, and when his eldest son Reuben sleeps with Bilhah. Rosenblatt speculates that perhaps Jacob is too self conscious about his own personal history of deceiving his father and Esau to condemn his own son's deceptive behavior.³⁷ *Genesis Rabbah* 8:2 portrays Jacob as someone who just wants some peace and quiet, and that his sons have disturbed that peace by stirring up the Canaanites. His chastisement is weak, and he (according to this midrash) has no response to Simeon and Levi's excuse that the family honor has been blemished. Rosenblatt reads Jacob's failure to intervene with his sons at the incident at Shechem as Jacob's lacking the courage to

³⁷ Rosenblatt, *Wrestling with Angels*, p. 311.

correct his children when they are wrong out of the fear that they would turn away from him.³⁸

Perhaps Jacob's real failure was not being able to see through whom the covenant would continue to be transmitted, or that he did little to prepare any of his sons to accept his inheritance. While Joseph turns out to be the hero of the Genesis narratives, and the agent through which the family ultimately survives thus continuing the covenant, there is little evidence in Genesis that at the beginning of his story, he is much other than a callow youth. Genesis Rabbah 84:8, in a comment on Genesis 37:3, "Now Israel loved Joseph best of all his sons, for he was the child of his old age," states that Jacob did indeed teach him the Torah that he had earlier studied. Pirke d' Rabbi Eliezer adds to this that Jacob saw through his own prophetic ability that Joseph would one day rule, and therefore he loved him more than his other sons.³⁹ This love is expressed in the form of the coat of many colors, and Genesis Rabbah 84:8 states that a man must not make distinctions between his children. What is clear from the actual Genesis text is that at the beginning of the Joseph narrative, the dominant theme is the tension that exists between all of Jacob's sons, especially regarding Joseph. The concept of destiny, of transmission of heritage and covenant has been lost.⁴⁰

The end of the book of Genesis does provide for the transmission of heritage through the blessings Jacob gives his sons in chapter 48; although the blessings themselves in a large part seem to be more of the reproof that Jacob failed to give his sons when he was younger. Rabbinic literature injects a number of Jewish values into the granting of the

³⁸ *Ibid* p. 311.

³⁹ Pirke d'Rabbi Eliezer, Chapter 38.

⁴⁰ Steinmetz, *From Father to Son*, p. 45.

blessings, beyond the passing on of heritage and land. There is also a midrashic statement as to the relative status of a parent to God.

Genesis 49:2a reads, "And Jacob called to his sons," (וַיִּקְרָא יַעֲקֹב אֶל-בָּנָיו).

Genesis 49:2b reads, "Hearken to Israel your father" (שִׁמְעוּ אֶל-יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲבִיכֶם). Two midrashim in Genesis Rabbah make word plays on the word "אל" from the two verses in the Genesis text. Genesis Rabbah 98:2 interprets "אל" as "God." The midrash, in commenting on Genesis 49:1, states: "R. Pinchas said, he invited Him on behalf of his sons. R. Abun said, He appointed Him a guardian for his sons." Both of the tradents as well as R. Judan, whose comment is not included here, say essentially the same thing; that Jacob asks God to take over the stewardship of his family. He is asking God, the Father, to take over for Jacob as their father. In Genesis Rabbah 98:3, commenting on Genesis 49:2b, reads: "R. Judan interpreted it, 'Hearken to the God of Israel your father.' R. Pinchas interpreted it, 'Your father Israel is as a god.' As God creates worlds, so does your father create worlds; as God distributes worlds, so does your father distribute worlds." Here both tradents are interpreting the word "אל" as "God." R. Judan is building on the idea in Genesis Rabbah 98:2 of God being invoked as the parent of Jacob's sons. R. Pinchas is drawing on the same tradition that teaches that honoring a parent is the same as honoring God.

The two midrashim work together to form a holistic view of God and parent as covenantal partners with their respective children: for Jacob it was his twelve sons, while for God it was the twelve tribes which is Israel, the nation. God, the Creator, brings the world, and therefore the nation of Israel into being. Jacob, the father, brought his twelve sons into being. Just as Jacob, the father, will distribute a heritage (land, values, culture),

so, too does God, parent of Israel distribute the same. The midrashic comments in Genesis Rabbah 98:2 and 3 bring together the two covenants, binding together their mutual existence. God wants Jacob to continue the heritage begun with Abraham, and Jacob needs God to be a steward to his children.

Another value which Genesis Rabbah presents as a possible part of the blessing Jacob gave to his sons is in section 99:5. In an added commentary on Genesis 49:2, the midrash states that Jacob called to his sons in order to reveal the final messianic redemption of their descendants.

The fact that Jacob's blessing of his sons is really more of a chastisement provides an opening for midrashic speculation on the nature of what is being passed on to the sons. The reproving character of Jacob's words form the basis for commentary in Sifrei Devarim on Deuteronomy 6:4. Sifre describes the moment of blessing/reproof as follows:

Thus also you find that when our father Jacob was about to depart from this world, he called his sons and reprovved each one of them individually, as it is said, (here parts of Genesis 49:-8 are quoted). Having reprovved each one of individually, he again called them all together and said to them, "Do you have any doubts concerning Him who spoke, and the world came into being?" They replied, "Hear O Israel, our father. Just as you have no doubts about Him who spoke, and the world came into being, so do we have no doubts. Rather, 'The Lord, our God, the Lord is one.' (Deuteronomy 6:4).⁴¹

The focus of Jacob's concern is the transmission of the value of the belief in the one God. His reproofs are directed to past wrongs committed by each of the sons, but his concern for the group, that is, the heritage he wants them to absorb as a group, is the acceptance

⁴¹ Sifrei Devarim, *Piska* 31.

of God. The sons' response to him comprises the words of Deuteronomy 6:4 (the Shema). Their response begins as their own words, (Hear O Israel, our father) but ends as the words of the Torah (The Lord our God, the Lord is one). The heritage of covenant becomes theirs.

The pericope from Sifre continues as follows:

Hence it is said, "And Israel bowed down upon the bed's head." (Genesis 47:3) Did he actually bow upon the bed's head? Rather, he gave thanks and praise to God that unworthy ones had not issued from him. Some say that "And Israel bowed down upon the bed's head" for Reuben's repentance. Another interpretation: He said, "Blessed be the name of His glorious majesty for ever and ever." The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him, "Jacob, surely this is what you desired all your days, that your children should recite the Shema morning and evening."⁴²

Both uses for the proof text of Genesis 7:3 work well together. Jacob is glad that his son has repented, and he is thankful that he has been successful in the transmission of the central element of the covenant with God. His use of the doxology said with the Shema is Jacob's acknowledgment of his place in God's covenant, and God's response affirms an obligation placed upon God's child, the nation Israel.

The point of all of these pieces from Sifre Devarim is to flesh out the explanation given in an earlier part of *piska* 31, which comments on why the Shema is addressed "Hear O Israel" and not addressed to the children of Abraham or the children of Isaac. Sifre says, "Our father Jacob merited such a declaration to be directed to his children, because all his days he was troubled by fear, 'Woe is me, perhaps such unworthy ones will issue from me as they did issue from my forefathers.'"⁴³ The examples of Ishmael and

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*

Esau are then given in the text. This midrash is showing that Jacob did indeed learn from the mistakes of his father and grandfather regarding the transmission of the blessing of heritage to the proper son. He wants all of his sons to be worthy, in fact all of his sons have to be worthy because they form the progenitors of the nation of Israel which is in covenant with God. So the Shema becomes in essence a teaching tool that Jacob, with permission of God, leaves to his children. Genesis Rabbah 98:3 has another version of the first two segments quoted from Sifre. In this version, the doxology which accompanies the Shema is Jacob's thankful response to his sons accepting the inheritance of the covenant.

E. Conclusion

Details of this covenant are extant in apocryphal and pseudepigraphal works. The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs are a midrashic extension of what is presented in the Torah concerning Jacob's sons after his death. A Greek work, the Testament of Levi, speaks of the need to teach the law (Torah) to his children's children along with the skills to study it.⁴⁴ Knowledge of the law will bring one honor. In verse five is the instruction to do deeds of righteousness. A fragment of an Aramaic text which probably influenced the Greek Testament of Levi was found at Qumran.⁴⁵ One part of this text stresses the quality of wisdom and the need for children to learn it along with discipline and the skill of writing.⁴⁶ These examples show how the inheritance, bound up in the blessings of Jacob,

⁴⁴ Testament of Levi 13:1,2.

⁴⁵ Wise, Michael, Abegg, Martin Jr., Cook, Edward, *The Dead Sea Scrolls: A New Translation*, (HarperCollins, London, 1996), p. 251.

⁴⁶ *Ibid* p. 257.

was expanded to give the sages a basis for many of their suggestions as to what and how the covenant should be transmitted.

Finally, the idea that each generation has something to add to the heritage, that the tradition is not stagnant but growing, has a midrashic anchor in Genesis. *Pesikta d'Rav Kahana piska* 1:1 relates how each of the patriarchs received a blessing and passed it on to his son beginning with the word with which the previous blessing from his father had ended. After Jacob, the chain is continued by Moses in the midst of the desert experience of Israel. Again, the individual relationship of father to son is joined to the God/Israel tradition; each covenant being part of and informing the other. The patriarchal stories of Genesis are the starting point for the tradition of transmission. Rabbinic literature retrojects back the qualities of Torah and inheritance of the land, which are necessary items to transmit forward in the framework of the parent/child covenant.

Chapter 3
Transmitting the Covenant: Practical Lessons from Antiquity

If Genesis demonstrates anything, it shows that continuity is not just the birthing and raising of children, but the continuing of family lines and estates, as well as the transmission of culture and religious values. In antiquity, the content that was transmitted to children was not just material, culture, and values, but the structure of the family itself. It is within the family structure that people could live, and this is linked to larger communal groups.⁴⁷ The fact that the family is associated with wholesale communal survival is attested to by the festival referenced in Mishnah *Ta'anit* 4.8. Here, young women go out and dance in order to attract mates, which results in the continual creation of new marriages and families. This occurs on the fifteenth of Av, just after the commemoration of the destruction of the Temple.⁴⁸

In addition to being part of a religious and national culture, the family in antiquity was a group in which work and economy were an intrinsic part.⁴⁹ Therefore, training children meant teaching them the things which would define them as Jews, plus, for a boy, a trade to support himself.⁵⁰ It is within the home that the Jewish child is to first learn the decisive stories which shaped the Jewish community.⁵¹

The transmission of the covenant, therefore, was dependent on an education that was a combination of religious, cultural and practical values. Torah, as the legal and religious constitution of the Jewish people, was most certainly at the center of educational

⁴⁷ Peskowitz, Miriam, "Families in Antiquity: Evidence from Tannaitic Literature and Roman Galilean Architecture," *The Jewish Family in Antiquity*, Cohen, Shaye JD, ed. (Brown University, 1993) p. 20.

⁴⁸ *Ibid* p. 24.

⁴⁹ *Ibid* p. 31.

⁵⁰ Yarbrough, O. Larry, "Parents and Children in the Jewish Family of Antiquity," *The Jewish Family in Antiquity*, Cohen, Shaye, JD ed. (Brown University, 1993) p. 48.

⁵¹ *Ibid* p. 24.

content. The rabbis in the Babylonian Talmud, *Berachot* 48a, define an "am ha'aretz," a crude person, as someone who has sons and does not bring them up to study Torah.

Noach Orlowek points out that the root for the Hebrew word for "lad" and "lass" is the letters "נער," which means to "empty out" or "to shake out." Children are empty vessels waiting to be filled with knowledge.⁵² Because the transmission of the covenant is dependent on this information, the education of the Jewish child is of paramount importance. Orlowek relates the following story as an illustration of this. Once the Russian education minister asked the Vilna Gaon, Rav Chaim Volozhiner when a Jewish child's education begins. His response was, "twenty years before he is born."⁵³ For the sages, then, the issues of education break down into two basic concerns. First, what is the content of the education that the child is to receive. Second, the sages recognized that all children were not alike. Different children, because of either age, level of development, or basic nature, all needed different contents and methods of instruction.

A. Differences in Children: Ability and Development

The rabbinic tradition is not the only one to recognize that children at different stages of development require different educational approaches. Plato in his *Laws* gives the following breakdown of the development of children and their needs: A child is swaddled from birth to two years old and carried by nurses until three (*Laws* 7.789). From the ages of three to six they are to engage in games with other children and to be given mild forms of discipline (*Laws* 7.793). At age seven boys and girls are to begin living separately and formal education begins (*Laws* 7.794). Boys of age ten are to study

⁵² Orlowek, Noach, *My Child, My Disciple*, (Feldheim Publishers, Jerusalem, NY, 1993), p. 88.

⁵³ *Ibid*, p. 36.

literature for three years and at age 13 the lyre for three years (*Laws* 7.8). In his work "Politics," Aristotle gives a slightly different approach. Up until two, the child should be given lots of milk, exercise and become accustomed to the cold. From two to five they should exercise through play, be told stories and supervised though officials. Until seven, children should be raised at home, protected from indecent talk and images. Age seven is the beginning of formal education which is divided into two halves, before and after puberty.⁵⁴ A major part of the education of the Athenian child was physical training, both for beauty, in the form of dancing, and wrestling as preparation for military service (Plato's *Laws* 7.795-796). This education starts at age six with the training of the child to use both the right and left hands (*Laws* 7.794-795). Both Plato and Aristotle seem to be as equally concerned with physical as well as mental development.

Rabbinic literature is focused on the mental and spiritual development of the child, as they are the means through which the God/Israel covenant is maintained and transmitted. Mishnah *Avot* 5:2 outlines the ages in which a child can begin certain studies and subsequently also take on certain responsibilities. At five the child can begin with Bible. At ten he can begin to study Mishnah. By thirteen he is obligated to observe the mitzvot. Talmud study begins at age fifteen. The boy is eligible for marriage by eighteen and to begin work in a trade. In the Babylonian Talmud, *Ketubot* 50a, some variations are given. Six is the age at which the child should start studying Bible. At age twelve a parent or teacher can use threats with the child, and at thirteen he is obligated to do a full fast. For a girl, the obligation for full fast is at age twelve.

⁵⁴ Goldman, *Children and Childhood*, p 21.

The sages, however, recognize that all children do not fall into neat categories defined by attaining a certain age. In the Babylonian Talmud, *Gittin* 59a R. Judah and R. Kahana discuss at what age a young child can legally purchase or sell certain goods. R. Judah says that it is at six or seven. R. Kahana states it is at seven or eight. Another *baraita* (a tannaitic teaching not included in the Mishnah) teaches it is nine or ten. The Talmud resolves these contradictions by pointing out that each child's education varies according to his intelligence.

The basis for recognizing the individuality of each child can be traced, at least in part, to Proverbs 22:6 which states, "Train a lad in the way he ought to go." Some interpretations of the verse state that this means one should train the child properly. Rashi, however, states that it means to train a boy according to his intelligence. Ralbag, commenting on the same verse, takes a slightly different approach saying to train a boy according to his behavior and nature. That both the intellectual capacity and the behavioral nature of the child are to be considered is affirmed in rabbinic literature's treatment of how to teach the Passover story and customs. This is, of course, at the core of the covenant that a parent is trying to transmit to their child; for the story of the Exodus from Egypt is the story of the receiving of covenant. This story is so important that it must be taught to the child on his/her own level. In Mishnah *Pesachim* 10:4 we are told, "According to the knowledge of the child his father instructs him." What is also significant in this quote from the Mishna is that it is incumbent on the father to provide this teaching. The parent/child covenant demands that the father not only instruct according to the "knowledge of the child," but according to his emotional nature as well. This idea is an added layer that appears in the Mechilta of Rabbi Ishmael, Pisha. Among

the four types of sons delineated, the wicked one is included in the instruction. The method for instructing the wicked child is harsh, one of implying exclusion, but it is important that the wicked child is still to be instructed.

Midrash Proverbs on 22:6 teaches that if you educate your child while still young in the words of Torah, he will continually grow up according to them. This midrash compares the training of the child to the training of a vine. If the vine is guided when it is still fresh, then it will grow in the direction you desire. Once the vine is dry, it is too late. The "vine," symbolizing the Jewish child, must grow to do three things. Children must be inculcated in the religious culture and traditions so at age thirteen (or twelve in some cases), they can take on religious responsibility. Children must be able to transmit the key stories of the Jewish tradition to their children. The child must be able to support a family so that the next generation of the God/Israel covenant can be nurtured. All of these traits: religious duty, historical/legal knowledge, and ability to provide for a family, can come under the overall rubric of "Torah." Torah is the document that codifies the covenant between God and Israel, and all three traits are necessary for the covenant to be successfully transmitted. All moral action, as well as all business transactions must be done in a way that is consistent with "Torah," and therefore within the covenant that defines the God/Israel relationship.

B. Educational Content: Commandments

According to Mark Golden, the goal of Greek schools in Athens was to produce citizens of courage and self control. He cites Hyperides as saying that the sign of someone

who was well educated as a child was someone who was especially brave in battle.⁵⁵ The mark of an adult male citizen, according to Aeschines, was the ability to distinguish right from wrong.⁵⁶ When combined with the citations from *Laws* and *Politics* from above, the picture one gets of the final product of a good Athenian/Greek education is someone lettered enough to know the mores of Greek society, but with the physical and emotional attributes to serve as citizen soldier in defending the political entity. Philo, no doubt reflecting the influence of surrounding Greek culture, stated that the child should get training in a gymnasium to gain "muscular vigor," good condition, and grace (*Special Laws* 2.23).

In contrast for the Jewish sages, the people of Israel who are covenanted to God are best defended by adherence to the commandments. Thus the greatest emphasis in rabbinic literature is on the teaching of the commandments.⁵⁷ When one accepts the yoke of heaven in the recitation of the Shema, and, in particular, the words, "and you shall teach them to your children," the sages teach that this specifically refers to the words of Torah.⁵⁸ The word "וְשִׁנַּנְתֶּם" "and you shall teach," is used by the sages to make some points about the teaching of children. First, the root, "שִׁנַּן" means to "be sharp" or "keen," so the Babylonian Talmud in *Kiddushin* teaches that the words of Torah need to be clear in one's mouth, "so that if a person asks you something, you should not hesitate, but be able to answer him immediately."⁵⁹ This passage uses Psalms 124:4 as a proof text: "Like arrows in the hand of a warrior, so are the children of youth." The young students are the

⁵⁵ Golden, *Children and Childhood*, p. 64.

⁵⁶ *Ibid* p. 8.

⁵⁷ Yarbrough, "Parents and Children," p. 42.

⁵⁸ B.T. *Berachot*, 14b.

⁵⁹ B.T. *Kiddushin* 30a.

“arrows” in the hands of the teacher. The segment ends with the idea that a father and a son or a teacher and a student arguing words of Torah are like enemies, but the process of studying Torah brings out the love between them. A passage in Yalkut Shimoni uses essentially the same ideas of the need for the words of Torah to be sharp, but takes the word “וְשִׁנְנָתֶם” and says to read it rather as “וְשִׁלְשַׁתֶּם,” that is to “divide into thirds.” This means that the course of study one should pursue in life should be one third of Bible, one third Mishnah, and one third Talmud.⁶⁰ A detailed course of study for a father to give his child is given in 4 Maccabees 8:-9. As this text pre-exists the Talmud, the course of study is based on the three parts which make up the Hebrew Bible. Here, a mother is relating to her children what their father would teach them when he was with them. This included the Law (Torah) and the Prophets, with specific references to Daniel, Isaiah, and Ezekiel, the singing of Psalms, and the reciting of Proverbs.

Deuteronomy 11:9 can also be translated as, “And you shall teach them to your children,” but a different root word for “to teach” is used (למד). Midrash Sifre Deuteronomy plays on this different root to teach a slightly different lesson. “From this verse it is inferred: When a child begins to speak, a father should speak to him in the sacred tongue and teach him Torah. If he does not speak to him in the sacred tongue and does not teach him Torah, it is as though he were burying him.”⁶¹ Part of the proof text used for this thought is Deuteronomy 11:21, “that your days will be multiplied and the days of your children.” The pericope then ends with the thought that if the holy language and Torah are not taught to the children, our days will be fewer. What this text from Sifre

⁶⁰ Yalkut Shimoni, Part 1, Remez 840.

⁶¹ Sifre Deuteronomy, Piska 46.

is teaching is that it is not only the content of the Torah, that is the morals, laws and histories that is important, but the form as well. The form is the Hebrew language. Hebrew represents the cultural context in which the moral, laws and histories are transmitted. The same information given in Greek is not as powerful, in much the same way that prayer for Jews today is many times more meaningful when prayed in Hebrew. It is easy to see how this is a teaching meant to safeguard religious, national, and cultural heritage. By ignoring any of the three, the parent is failing in his/her covenantal responsibility to the child, at the risk of hurting the God/Israel covenant.

C. Religious Instruction

While children under thirteen were generally exempt from the religious commandments, parents were to instruct them in the commandments and prepare the children to observe them. The sages in the Talmud addressed the assumption of the various obligations as separate circumstances. In Mishnah *Berachot* 3:3, children are proclaimed exempt from the recitation of the Shema and from the wrapping of tefillin, but are obligated to recite the Eighteen Benedictions,⁶² to mezzuzah (a parchment scroll containing the Shema affixed to the doorpost of the house) and to recite the Birkat Hamazon (grace after meals). Sometimes an observance becomes an obligation at the point that the child knows how to perform it, such as the shaking of the lulav. In the same section from the Babylonian Talmud, tractate *Sukkah*, the standard applied to when a child should observe the commandments of tzitzit, tallit, and tefillin is whenever the child has learned how to perform them.⁶³ In regards to fasting on Yom Kippur, the child is to be

⁶² The 18 benedictions is the daily *Amidah*, a series of petitionary prayers recited by traditional Jews three times per day.

⁶³ B.T. *Sukkah* 42a.

gradually eased into observing a full fast, starting a year or two before he/she attains majority.⁶⁴ Parents are also duty bound to convey the emotion of various Jewish observances to their children, as in this example: "A man is duty bound to make his children and his household rejoice on a festival."⁶⁵

D. Moral Education

The companion component to learning the details of the religious commandments is moral training. Education for the learning of a skill is not enough in the rabbinic tradition. This is exemplified in two passages from apocryphal sources concerning the skill of learning to read and write. In the Book of Jubilees we read the story of the son of Arpachshad, who learned his letters from his father and then grew up. However, when he is on his own, he finds a writing on a rock left from a prior time, and it leads him to sin.⁶⁶ Compare this to the Testament of Levi 13:1,2 in which Levi's children are told first to teach their children the law and then also to teach them letters. This is followed in verses three through six by a teaching on the need to do good and to act righteously. Clearly the skill of letters is insufficient without a moral grounding.

Some examples from the Babylonian Talmud show that it is the parent who is responsible for teaching proper moral behavior to his/her child, often through modeling the good behavior him or her self. In tractate *Sukkah* 46b, R. Zeira rules that someone should not promise something to a child and then not deliver, as it teaches the child to lie. Tractate *Hullin* 84a teaches that a parent should not accustom his/her child to flesh and

⁶⁴ B.T. *Yoma* 82a.

⁶⁵ B.T. *Pesachim* 109a.

⁶⁶ Jubilees 8:1-3.

wine, and in *Hullin* 84b a man is told to be modest in regards to food, drink, and clothing, but to be greater than his means in honoring his wife and children. Perhaps the most powerful model a parent can provide for a child is that of providing unconditional love, which should extend into the child's adulthood. This quality is exemplified by the description of Abraham's continuing concern for Ishmael that is portrayed in *Pirke d'Rabbi Eliezer*.⁶⁷

E. Secular Skills

The sages recognized that total immersion in esoteric matters would not be conducive to the survival of the covenant. In order to thrive or even to exist, a living had to be earned. Further, certain basic skills and lessons had to be learned in order for the child to be able to function within the wider community upon becoming an adult. Although covenanted to God, the people Israel did not live in a vacuum; they, as always, had to interact with other people. Because of these realities, the Babylonian Talmud is very clear in specifying that the education of a child must be rounded with practical concerns:

Our rabbis taught: The father is bound in respect of his son, to circumcise, redeem, teach him Torah, take a wife for him, and teach him a craft. Some say, to teach him to swim too. R. Judah said: He who does not teach his son a craft, teaches him brigandage. "Brigandage!" Do you really think so? But it is as though he taught him brigandage.⁶⁸

The above addresses two practical matters. The first has to do with teaching a son a craft. The ability to support oneself is elevated to more than just practicality. It is given the same status of correct moral behavior. Not to teach this to a child is the same as teaching

⁶⁷ *Pirke d'Rabbi Eliezer*, Chapter 30.

⁶⁸ B.T. *Kiddushin* 29a.

him to steal. Further, there is actually some debate as to what is a proper manner of earning a living. R. Yehudah insists that the child must learn a trade, or a craft. Another Tanna teaches that the child must learn business. The reason for this is that a business enterprise can have good and bad cycles, and, therefore, cannot be consistently counted on to earn the entrepreneur a decent living. The second practical matter is teaching the child how to swim. The Talmud states that this is necessary because his life may depend on it. In ancient times, travel on water was common and the skill of swimming would have been seen as a necessary part of life. A similar concept today perhaps would be the teaching of a teenage child proper driving skills.

Because Jewish adults had to interact with the wider world, other skills were also necessary, in particular the need to speak the local vernacular. The attitude of the sages is typified by a discussion in the Palestinian Talmud over the matter of teaching one's son to speak Greek. R. Joshua asserts that a person can teach his son Greek at the time "that is neither day or night," as it says in Joshua 1:8: "Let not this book of Torah cease from your lips, but recite it day and night, so that you may observe faithfully all that is written in it." This position, however, is deemed untenable. If Torah is to be recited at all times except when it is not day or night, in essence dawn and twilight, then a child could never learn a trade which is deemed necessary by the Talmud to learn. So by the same logic that one takes time to teach a child a trade, one can take the time to teach him Greek. Further, the Palestinian Talmud states that it is a positive matter to teach a daughter to speak Greek, as she may then serve as an interpreter.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ P.T. Peah 1:1:B.

The Babylonian Talmud also contains numerous segments of practical lessons of which parents should take note to teach their children. These are often contained in the context of a sage teaching a series of lessons to his son or children. Rabbi Akiva offers this series of lessons to his son Yehoshua:

My son you should not sit and study in a conspicuous place in town. You should not live in a city whose municipal leaders are Torah scholars. You should not enter your own house suddenly, and you certainly should not barge into your neighbor's house unannounced. You should not go barefoot. Get up early in the morning and eat breakfast right away; in the summer because of the heat, and in the winter because of the cold....And try to associate with a person on whom fortune is smiling.⁷⁰

Perhaps most striking here is the recognition that Torah scholars are not the best political leaders; that those engrossed in Torah do not tend to the communal matters of the town. Akiva's series of maxims fall under the category of common sense. Yet, clearly the sages felt it was necessary to include this kind of advice as part of a child's education.

In another case, business advice is dispensed to a son who is clearly not suited for Torah study. Rav says to his son that since he has failed in his attempts to teach him Torah, he might as well give some worldly advice. He then proceeds to outline some of the basic tenets of conducting a successful business: the proper time to sell merchandise, to be sure to collect payment in advance, to take the smaller surer profit rather than taking a large risk on a large profit, and proper preserving of resources. Rav Papa then adds a point to the discussion that extending credit is a risky venture because of the doubt over getting paid.⁷¹ While Torah is most certainly the most exalted form of knowledge, this

⁷⁰ B.T. *Pesachim*, 112a.

⁷¹ *Ibid*, 113a.

passage from tractate *Pesachim* shows a recognition that not all children are suited to it, and that there is value in the skills necessary to gain financial success. Certainly, the sages knew that it was only through financial stability, that the study of Torah, and thus the transmission of the covenant, could continue.

Rava gives his children some advice on how to avoid certain dangers in the world. He tells them not to cut meat while holding it in their hand. In addition to the obvious reason that they might cut themselves, it is important as well so as not to spoil the meat, or to make the meat repulsive to others who may be eating with them.⁷² He continues by stating not to sit on the bed of an Aramaean woman. Again, the reasons are varied, from forgetting to say the bedtime Shema to the risk of being the object of duplicity by the Aramaean woman.⁷³ This, as with all of the above examples, illustrate that the educational component of the parent/child covenant is to be the best possible combination of religious, legal, cultural, financial, and common sense lessons.

F. Conclusion

That learning is a lifelong venture which begins at birth, was recognized in much of the ancient world. Greek theorists in education stress the importance of training and environment from the moment of birth.⁷⁴ A similar idea is expressed in Mishnah *Avot*: "I remember Rabbi Joshua's mother taking his cradle to the house of study so that his ears would become attuned to the words of Torah."⁷⁵ What distinguishes the Jewish sages' approach to education is its place in the pastiche of the covenantal relationship between

⁷² B.T. *Berachot*, 8b.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ Golden, *Mark Children and Childhood*, p. 1.

⁷⁵ *M. Avot*, 2:8.

God and Israel. Very simply, the teaching of a child the elements of Jewish tradition represented by Torah in both oral and written forms, is considered the equivalent of standing at Mount Sinai and hearing the first revelation. This is so important that normal custom can be altered:

Rabbi Chiya b. Abba found R. Yehoshua b. Levi walking down the street with a sheet on his head (instead of his normal headgear) as he was taking a child to the synagogue. R. Chiya b. Abba asked him, "What is the rush?" R. Yehoshua replied, "Is it then a small thing when it says, 'Teach your children and grandchildren,' which is followed by, 'The day that you stood before God your Lord at Horeb'?"⁷⁶

The lesson which this story is emphasizing is that the one who teaches his grandson Torah it is as though he received it at Sinai. This story, and a similar one in the Palestinian Talmud, are powerful illustrations of how the parent/child covenant is a refraction of and intimately tied to the God/Israel covenant. The perpetuation of the latter is essentially tied to the former.

⁷⁶ B.T. *Kiddushin* 30a – A similar story also appears in the Palestinian Talmud, *Shabbat* 1:2 in which R. Yehoshua b. Levi has forgotten that it is time to hear his grandson's Torah lesson already in the ritual bath on Friday afternoon. When he realizes it, he rushes from the bath to his grandson's lesson.

Chapter 4
The Wilderness Experience and Sinai

The moment of revelation at Sinai is the moment of the transmission of the covenant between God, the parent, and Israel the child. Each time an individual Jewish child is taught Torah, the sages see the recreation of that moment of revelation. Sinai, however, is only one of the moments amidst the whole Exodus experience which defines the relationship between God and Israel. The time from leaving Egypt to the revelation at Sinai is filled with incidents which rabbinic literature uses to cast the God/Israel relationship as one of parent/child.

Midrash on the Exodus experience consistently draws on the tensions in the parent/child relationship in order to illuminate the tensions in the Torah text between God and Israel. This illumination is achieved both through direct commentary on the text as well as the choices of Biblical proof texts within the midrashic texts. Further, parables of fathers and sons are frequently used as midrashic metaphors for the various points of tension between God and Israel. Noach Orlowek writes that Rabbi Simcha Ziesel Zeev says that a student must know two things about his/her teacher: that the teacher is wiser than he or she is and that the teacher has no other intention other than the student's well being.⁷⁷ Rabbinic literature makes both of these assumptions about God vis a vis God's parent relationship with Israel.

A. Parent/Child Tension in the Mechilta d' Rabbi Ishmael

There are conflicting emotions within any parent concerning his or her child. The great love that a parent might feel for a child can be disturbed by the anger caused by the

⁷⁷ Orlowek, *My Child, My Disciple*, p. 32.

child's misbehavior. At the same time, great anger can be mitigated by the great love a parent has for the child. This is the essence of the tension that is experienced in the depiction of the God/Israel relationship at the time of the Exodus. A good midrashic representation of this tension appears in certain narrative sections of the *Mechilta d'Rabbi Ishmael* in the form of an ongoing dialogue between R. Joshua and R. Elazar of Modi'in.

These two rabbis, Joshua and Elazar of Modi'in, represent two diametrically opposed views of the nature of Israel's experience in the wilderness. Daniel Boyarin holds that the focus on the tension between these two points of view highlights an awareness of the inherent ambiguity built into the text of the Exodus narrative.⁷⁸ Is Israel a beloved entity for whom the desert experience is a period of the expression of God's great love, or is Israel experiencing the time of its greatest unfaithfulness to God? According to Boyarin, R. Joshua's comments present Israel's wilderness experience as a great honeymoon period, whereas R. Elazar of Modi'in emphasizes the rebelliousness and unfaithfulness of Israel's behavior.⁷⁹ It is important to note that Boyarin casts the God/Israel tensions within the metaphor of a bride and groom. This powerful metaphor is anchored in the opening chapters of the book of Hosea, in which Israel is depicted as the faithless harlot.

The Torah narrative of Israel's travels in the wilderness is filled with moments of misbehavior and rebellion. Even after the miracle God performs for Israel at the Sea of Reeds, there is constant complaining for food and water, illustrating Israel's

⁷⁸ Boyarin, Daniel, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash*, (Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 77.

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, p. 78.

unfaithfulness. Perhaps the greatest transgression is the fashioning of the Golden Calf, which is really one of a series of outright rebellious acts which Israel commits. However, there are also moments when Israel shows great trust and faith; most particularly when Israel moved forward at the Sea of Reeds and more powerfully in Exodus 24:7 when in response to hearing God's commands, Israel responds, "We will do and we will hear."

Just as the two perspectives of Israel, that of beloved and that of unfaithful, exist side by side in the Torah text, so, too, are they represented and exist side by side in the *Mechilta d' Rabbi Ishmael*, in the perspectives of R. Joshua and R. Elazar of Modi'in. Boyarin maintains that the effect of their dialogue is to focus on this ambiguity and to draw meaning from it.⁸⁰ While Boyarin sees this tension in terms of the relationship between a bride and groom, a truer metaphor might be that of parent and child. A look at the dialogue between the two Rabbis is illustrative.

B. The Dialogue of R. Joshua and R. Elazar of Modi'in

Exodus 13:18 states, "So God led the people roundabout by the way of the wilderness at the Sea of Reeds." The question which the tradents will answer is; why is God leading Israel along a much harder way through the wilderness? R. Eliezer⁸¹ and R. Joshua each offer comments on three words, "way," "wilderness," and "Sea of Reeds." R. Eliezer's comment on "way" is that the purpose of the journey was to weary the Israelites. R. Joshua states that "way" means the purpose of the journey was to give them Torah. His proof text for this comment is taken from Proverbs 6:23: "For the

⁸⁰ *Ibid*, p. 58.

⁸¹ The name of R. Eliezer sometimes appears in place of R. Elazar in these dialogues. This is probably a scribal error, or, less likely, it could be R. Eliezer ben Hyrcanus whose personal history and views would make him consistent with Rabbi Elazar of Modi'in

commandment is a lamp and the Torah is a light," which will be used as proof text in Exodus Rabbah 1:1 (which will be analyzed later in this chapter) as proof of God's granting the Israelites the world to come. The association is important because it firmly establishes that Torah is a reward, and not a chastisement. In commenting on the word "wilderness," R. Eliezer says that God's purpose in taking Israel through the wilderness is to refine the people of Israel. R. Joshua counters that it was in order to have them eat manna. In regards to the words, "Sea of Reeds," R. Eliezer says that this was to test the Israelites. His proof text is drawn from Psalms 106:7, "Our forefathers in Egypt did not perceive Your wonders; they did not remember Your abundant love, but rebelled at the sea, at the Sea of Reeds." Eliezer's position is that Israel's memory is short, and that constant testing and reminding of them of God's mercy and love is necessary. R. Joshua also acknowledges that Israel may have forgotten about God, as his proof is also drawn from Psalm 106, but verse 21, "They forgot God who saved them, who performed great deeds in Egypt." His position is that the route by the Sea of Reeds was a way for God to demonstrate God's great love for Israel, once again by performing for them wonders and miracles.

The paradigm for the two positions is established in this commentary on Exodus 13:18. Essentially, R. Eliezer (R. Elazar of Modi'in) maintains that everything God does is either a punishment or a test of Israel, to chastise them into good behavior. R. Joshua posits all of God's actions as demonstrations of love for Israel and His desire to reward them. The purpose of this dialogue between the two tradents is not to prove or disprove one point of view or the other. Rather, it is to present both interpretations of the Torah

text as a holistic point of view. The meaning lies in the tension between the two points of view. The positions of R. Joshua and R. Elazar of Modi'in, taken together, serve to summarize the sense of parenthood; punishment and reward, love and chastisement all coexist. Their dialogue, as a unit, describes the complete parent, but no one view alone can define the parent/child relationship.

The dialogue between the two continues in the commentary on Exodus 14:15, "Why do you cry out to me? Tell the Israelites to move forward." R. Joshua portrays God as telling Moses that all the Israelites have to do is to move forward. The feeling is one of comforting the worried child. God might just be saying, "Do not cry my son, just go right ahead." R. Eliezer, however, casts God as chastising Moses for essentially doing nothing while the enemies are closing in from behind. There is no comforting taking place, just the sense of a parent trying to teach a child that certain behaviors are appropriate for certain times. In this case, there is a time for long prayer, and a time for a short one. This is clearly a time for a short one.

The commentary on Exodus 15:22b continues the basic themes. The wandering for three days without water R. Joshua says must be taken literally; which would make the purpose of their inability to find water another opportunity for God to give the Israelites a gift of a miracle to demonstrate God's love. In contrast, R. Eliezer restates an earlier position, that is, the three days of wandering in the wilderness was meant to tire out the Israelites.

The sense that the Israelites are a people who needed disciplining or refining is present again in R. Elazar's comment on Exodus 15:24, "And the people grumbled against Moses." He states that Israel regularly complained against God and Moses (literally, was

studied in words of complaint against Moses, and not just Moses but God). The picture that R. Elazar presents is very much one of Israel as the petulant child. This leads to the question of how to train that child, to cure him of his miscreant nature.

Some hints are given in the commentary on Exodus 15:15, "So he cried out to the Lord, and the Lord showed (וַיִּרְדֵּה) him a tree; he threw it into the water and the water became sweet." The first set of comments is on what kind of tree God showed to Moses. R. Joshua says it is a willow, which is the simplest, most logical answer, as that is a common tree found at an oasis in the desert. This also reinforces R. Joshua's stance that everything God does is a miraculous gift for Israel. A plain willow tree would be able to sweeten bitter waters. This is in contrast to R. Elazar of Modi'in, who says it is the most bitter of trees, the olive tree. R. Elazar seems to be saying that only the most bitter tree can sweeten such bitter waters; in essence he gives the reader a metaphor for the state of the Israelites. Only the worst kinds of punishments will ever take the "bitterness" out of Israel; will cure them of their ingratitude and faithlessness. Here it is important to introduce one more voice from the Mechilta text, that of R. Shimon ben Yochai, who adds an additional idea that God did not show Moses a tree, but rather taught him something from Torah. This is based on the spelling of the word "he showed him" in the Torah text. Instead of being able to discern the normal root letters for the verb "to show" (יָרָה), R. Shimon ben Yochai notices the Torah's spelling which allows him to read the root as "יָרַח" which means "to teach," and is also the root for the word "Torah." Another voice in the text, that of the allegorists, picks up on this line of thought and agrees that what God showed Moses was words from Torah. The proof texts that both of these perspectives use (R. Shimon ben Yochai and the allegorist) are drawn from chapters in

Proverbs that have references to Torah (see Proverbs chapter 3, verses 13-15 and 18 and Proverbs 4:4), and in fact, form part of the contemporary Torah service.

The midrash on the last part of Exodus 15:25, "and the waters were made sweet," provide an arena to draw the various themes together. The dialogue resumes between R. Joshua and R. Elazar. R. Joshua states that the waters were bitter only for that moment in time and then were made sweet. R. Elazar says that the waters were bitter from the beginning. Each tradent comments on the basic nature of Israel. R. Joshua's perspective is that Israel is only temporarily "bitter" and just needs some redirection. R. Elazar believes that Israel's natural state is one of rebellion. It is important to note that there is a linguistic connection between the Hebrew words for "bitter" and for "rebel" that allows both tradents to make the metaphorical connection between the water and Israel. Finally, whether Israel is naturally rebellious (bitter) or only temporarily so, the means for correcting this state is through Torah. Revelation of Torah is ultimately God's means of setting Israel on the proper path, a means of providing instruction and discipline.

The metaphor of God as parent and Israel as child succeeds in the Mechilta, because the coexisting perspectives that R. Joshua and R. Elazar of Modi'in present are the tensions that exist for any parent. For the Jewish parent, rabbinic literature expects Torah to be the means of correction/instruction/discipline used in raising the child; whether the child is rebellious or innocent.

C. Parent/Child Parables of the Wilderness Experience

Rabbinic literature uses the metaphor of Israel as God's child in ways other than the parent's propensity to reproach or discipline the child. The metaphor is used to describe a variety of the conditions and/or circumstances afflicting Israel. Frequently, the

metaphor is accompanied by a parable of an actual parent/child situation to clarify and illuminate the point of the midrash. The following midrash comments on Ecclesiastes 3:11, "He makes everything beautiful in its time," and explains why it is that Israel did not receive the Torah immediately upon leaving Egypt:

Rabbi Isaac said: Israel merited the receiving of Torah immediately on their departure from Egypt; but the Holy One, blessed be He, said: 'The bloom of My children has not yet returned. From slaving with clay and bricks they have just emerged, and they are not able to receive the Torah at once.' To what is the matter like? To a king whose son arose from his sick-bed, and people said to him, 'Let your son go to his school.' He replied, 'The bloom of my son has not yet returned and you say that he should go to his school! Let my son recuperate for two or three months with food and drink and get well; after that he will go to his school.' Similarly the Holy One, blessed be He spoke; 'The bloom of My children has not yet returned. From slaving with clay and bricks have they just been released, can I then give them Torah? Let my children recuperate for two or three months with the manna, the well of water, and the quails; after that I will give them Torah.'⁸²

First, it should be noted that the perspective of this midrash is one that sees Israel in a favorable light, similar to the perspective of R. Joshua from the above referenced dialogues in the Mechilta d'Rabbi Ishmael. God's perspective is that of a parent who is worried over a sick child. The elements of the parable, King, son, and school, are all parallel to elements in the commentary. It is important that "school" is used as the parallel for Torah, as it reflects the notion of Torah as the instruction manual for the child, Israel. It is a recognition that the child cannot learn if he is not first healthy. The nurturing of the health of a child is of course an obvious key element of the parent/child covenant. That

⁸² Ecclesiastes Rabbah 3:11:2, The parable of the king's sick son appears without the surrounding explanation in Song of Songs Rabbah 2:5:1, and is attributed to R. Shimon bar

this is a key point of the midrash is evident by the triple repetition of the phrase, "The bloom of my children (son) has not yet returned."

The Midrash from Ecclesiastes Rabbah casts Egypt as a place that causes ill health. Egypt is also seen as the cause of Israel's other "ills" as well. The corrupting environment in Egypt is seen as the cause of Israel's wayward behavior in the creating of the Golden Calf. Note the following parable that is used to illustrate this in the commentary on Exodus 32:11.

"That you have brought out of the land of Egypt." What was his idea in mentioning here the going out of Egypt? Because it was thus that Moses pleaded: 'Lord of the Universe, see from which place You have brought them out, from Egypt where everyone worships lambs.' R. Huna said in the name of R. Yochanan: It can be compared to a wise man who opened a perfumery shop for his son in a street frequented by harlots. The street did its work, the profession also did its share; and his youth likewise contributed its part, with the result that the son fell into evil ways. When the father came and caught him among the prostitutes, he began to shout: 'I will kill you!' But his friend was there, and he said: 'You were the means of destroying this youth, and yet you shout at him? You ignored all other professions and taught him only to be a perfumer, and left all other districts and opened a shop for him just in the street where the prostitutes live!' This is what Moses said: 'Lord of the universe, You ignored the entire world and caused Your children to be enslaved in Egypt, where all worshipped lambs, and from whom Your children learned. It is for this reason that they have also made a Calf.'⁸³

This midrash is structured very similarly to the previous citation from Ecclesiastes Rabbah.

It opens with a statement of the position of the commentator, that in Egypt everyone

Yochai. It is a comment on the verse, "Sustain me with dainties, heal me with apples, for I am faint with love."

⁸³ Exodus Rabbah 43:7.

worshipped lambs; the implication being that in such an environment, what other kind of behavior would one expect Israel to learn. The parallel elements in the parable include, God and the wise man, Israel and the son, Moses and the friend, and Egypt compared to the prostitutes' district. After the parable, Moses adds words chastising to God, essentially placing the blame for Israel's behavior with God. The core argument once again (as in the above citation) frames the parable. The midrash exemplifies the argument between nature and nurture. Here, Moses is arguing that Israel is the product of a bad environment, and thus deserving of God's mercy. The nurturing component of the parent/child covenant is not just food and shelter, but the proper environment for stable emotional and moral growth as well.

The pleading on behalf of the child, Israel, takes a slightly different direction in the following parable used to comment on Exodus 32:10 "Now, leave Me alone:"

Why does God say: "Now, leave Me alone?" Was Moses holding Him? To what can this be compared? To a king who was angry with his son, and when the son was brought into the chamber and about to be beaten, the king cried from the chamber: 'Let me alone, that I might hit him.' Now the teacher happened to be standing outside and he thought to himself: 'If both the king and the son are within the chamber, then why does he say, 'Let me alone?' It must be because the king desires that I should plead with him on his son's behalf and for this reason he says, 'Let me alone.' Similarly, God said to Moses: 'Now, leave me alone,' and from this Moses inferred, 'God desires that I should intercede with him on Israel's behalf, and hence He is saying, 'Now, leave Me alone.' Moses immediately began to plead for mercy on their behalf.⁸⁴

⁸⁴ Exodus Rabbah 42:9.

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Here, through the use of the parable, God is depicted as a parent who knows that he is in danger of abusing his child. God's words from Exodus 32:10 are interpreted by this midrash as a cry for help, for someone to intercede and prevent God from abusing Israel. The parallel figure to Moses in this parable is the figure of the teacher, which is consistent with the rabbinic casting of Moses as "*Moshe rabbeinu*," "Moses, our teacher." Moses is the conveyer of Torah from God to Israel, and perhaps the midrash is hinting that there is something for God (the parent) to learn from this Torah as well. This parable is not framed by the core argument as the first two, but it nevertheless functions the same way. The parable illuminates another aspect of the parent/relationship, and projects that aspect onto God and Israel.

Another parental duty in the parent/child relationship is the reminding of the child of lessons learned. When a child has a negative experience, it is up to the parent to cast it in a way that the child draws life lessons from it and remembers those lessons. This is how some midrash understands the Israelites' experience with Amalek. Once again, note an applicable parable.

"Remember what Amalek did to you by the way, as you came out of Egypt" (Deuteronomy 25:17). R. Levi said: Like a highwayman, he came upon you from the wayside. In this connection, the parable is told of a king who had a vineyard, which he enclosed with a fence and in which he put a dog who was a vicious biter. The king said: If anyone comes and breaches the fence, the dog will bite him. Some days later, the king's own son came and breached the fence, and the dog bit him. Afterward, whenever the king wished to remind his son of his sin in breaching the vineyard fence, he would ask him, "Do you remember how the dog bit you?" So, too, whenever the Holy One wished to remind Israel of their sin at Rephidim in demanding to

know, "Is the Lord among us, or not?" (Exodus 17:7), He would say to them, "Remember what Amalek did to you."⁸⁵

The lesson being taught is one of action leading to a certain consequence. The dog bites the son because the son entered an area that was clearly off limits. Israel's rebellious questioning of God (Exodus 17:7) is immediately followed by the description of Amalek's attack on Israel and the ensuing battle. In Deuteronomy 25 the verse commanding the remembrance of Amalek comes at the end of a discourse on laws the Israelites are to follow. The Midrash is teaching that Israel needs to remember the consequence of not realizing that these laws are an expression of God's presence among the Israelites. Similarly, parental regulations express the parent's presence in their children's lives, even when the parents are not physically with them.

A parent might also remind a child of a prior punishment in lieu of immediately administering a punishment. The experience of Amalek is also used in this manner.

"Amalek dwells in the land of the south" (Numbers 13:29).
What reason did they see for commencing with Amalek?
The case is like that of a child who misbehaved and was
beaten with a strap. Whenever people wanted to frighten
him, they used to remind him of the strap with which he was
beaten. In the same way was Amalek Israel's evil strap.⁸⁶

The verse which is the subject of this midrash appears as part of the report of the twelve spies who were sent to scout the land of Canaan. All but two of the spies urge Israel not to try to conquer the land, as they see the inhabitants are too strong. This is, of course, counter to God's wishes, and the midrash sees the mention of Amalek as a reminder of the punishment that rebelliousness had previously brought onto Israel.

⁸⁵ Tanhuma ha Nidpas, Ki Tetze 9.

⁸⁶ Numbers Rabbah 16:18.

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D. Discipline and the Structure of Exodus Rabbah 1:1

Punishment and chastisement are key elements of the relationship between God and Israel. Verses from Proverbs, as noted in Chapter One, are used to idealize the nature of the punishments as being the product of love.

"If folly settles in the heart of a lad" (Proverbs 22:15). This is Israel, for it is written: For Israel was a lad and he loved him. That each time they were spiteful before God, "the rod of discipline will remove it from him. As it is written, "Take from everyone of them a rod." (Numbers 17:17).⁸⁷

This short midrash, which is a commentary on Proverbs 22:15, has a structure which should be noted. The first half of Proverbs 22:15 is used to describe the faulty condition in a person (or persons when Israel is read as the whole people). The second half of the verse is used to describe God's corrective action. The human element is counteracted by the divine element. The verse from Numbers refers to the corrective action God took through Moses and Aaron immediately after the Korach rebellion.

The same basic structure describes a much longer midrash which acts as the commentary on the very first verse of Exodus. This midrash, or a form of it, appears in at least three different midrashic works, Exodus Rabbah, Tanhuma Ha-Nidpas, and Midrash HaGadol. The versions in Exodus Rabbah and Tanhuma are almost identical, and all three contain at least the essence of all the key elements. The following analysis will focus on the version found in Exodus Rabbah.

The beginning of the pericope introduces the first verse from Exodus, "These are the names of the sons of Israel, who came into Egypt with Jacob, each man came with his

⁸⁷ Yalkut Shimoni, Part 2 Remez 960.

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household.” The Biblical verse which is supposed to illuminate Exodus 1:1 is then given, “He who spares the staff hates his son, but he who loves him disciplines him regularly (for in this midrash the translation of ‘regularly’ functions better than ‘early’).” At this stage, there seems to be no apparent link between the two verses introduced. Note, however, the explication which follows:

In regular behavior, if a man's friend says to him, “Ploni, strike your son,” he is ready to deprive him of his livelihood (out of resentment). Then why “He who spares the staff hates his son?” to teach you that anyone who refrains from chastising his son causes him to fall into evil ways and thus comes to hate him.⁸⁸

Note that the explanation offered is only for the first half of Proverbs 13:24, and similar to the citation above from Yalkut Shimoni, where this describes the consequence of failed human action. There is an interesting irony here that is built into the Hebrew which perhaps foreshadows the flow of the midrash. The word for “chastising” is “מַרְדִּיחַ” which has the root letters “רדח.” The same word form (מַרְדִּיחַ) can also be derived from the root “מרד” which means “to rebel” or “to be rebellious.” There are other words that could have been chosen here, including the root of the word used for discipline in Proverbs 13:24 (יָסַד). The irony is complete when one considers that all throughout Exodus, God and Moses will be trying to respond to Israel's rebelliousness: מַרְדִּיחַ (chastising) will be consistently used to cure מַרְדִּיחַ (rebelliousness).

The midrash then proceeds with three examples drawn from Biblical history. The first is Abraham and his relationship with Ishmael. Abraham, the midrash relates, comes to hate Ishmael as he has come to practice an “evil culture,” in other words, to worship

⁸⁸ Exodus Rabbah 1:1.

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idols. The result is that Abraham agrees to cast Ishmael out of his household empty handed. The midrash offers the following reasoning why Abraham had come to hate his son.

Do you really think that Abraham, of whom it is written, "And Abram was very rich in cattle" (Genesis 13:2), could send away his wife and son from his house empty handed without clothes or means of livelihood? But this is to teach you that when Ishmael became depraved, he ceased to think about him.⁸⁹

According to this midrash, due to lack of chastising, Ishmael is doomed to a life of brigandage.

The next example provided by the midrash is Isaac's relationship with Esau. From Genesis 25:28, "Now Isaac loved Esau," this midrash derives that Isaac did not chastise (הדין) him, with the result being that Esau seems to become a more evil figure than Ishmael. Esau even desires the death of his father so that he can take revenge on his brother Jacob. Esau also marries women from the wrong nation. Regarding Esau, the sages criticize Isaac as a parent. In Genesis Rabbah 65:5, the dimming of Isaac's eyes is attributed to his justifying Esau's wickedness.

The third example, not drawn from the patriarchal narratives, is the example of King David and his son, Absalom:

Similarly, because David did not rebuke or chastise his son Absalom, he fell into evil ways, seeking to slay his father, sleeping with his concubines, and becoming the cause of his wandering bare-footed and weeping, and of the slaughter of many thousands and tens of thousands of Israelites, as well as of other sorrows without end.⁹⁰

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

The power of this example is that it is through David that the eventual messiah will be descended. The depravity of the sons (Ishmael, Esau) in each example is progressively worse, with Absalom's being the worst, as he rebelled outrightly against his own father. The gravity of Absalom's evil behavior is itself cast in messianic proportions.

Depravity in a man's family is more grievous even than the war of Gog and Magog; for in reference to the war of Gog and Magog it is written, "Why are the nations in an uproar?" (Psalms 2:1). In the case of Absalom it says, "How many are my adversaries" (Psalms 3:2).⁹¹

The linking of the war of Gog and Magog to the rebellion of Absalom is also made in the Babylonian Talmud, *Berachot* 10a. In this passage, the idea of a son rebelling against his father is cast as a more unnatural happening than the eschatological war predicted by David in Psalm Two. In the pericope from Exodus Rabbah 1:1, this is followed by the statement that David also failed in the parenting of Adonijah. The midrash is presenting a tremendous irony with the progression of examples. David, the progenitor of the messianic line, is the father of the most rebellious sons. He is the father who acts the most unlike The Father.

The next section of the midrash shifts its focus to God as a father.

"But he who loves him disciplines him often" (Proverbs 13:24b). This refers to the Holy One, blessed be He; because of His love for Israel, as it is written, "I have loved you, says the Lord" (Malachi 1:2). He multiplies chastisements upon them. You will find that the three precious gifts which God gave to Israel were all given after many chastisements, the Torah, the land of Israel, and the life in the world to come.⁹²

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² *Ibid.*

Note that the introductory text to this section of the midrash is the second half of Proverbs 13:24. This describes the action that God takes in relation to Israel. The receiving of God's greatest gifts are tied to the necessity of first experiencing God's chastisement, which are "multiplied" on Israel. As the chastisements result in the gifts of Torah, the land of Israel and the next world, they are inflicted upon Israel out of love.

The word used for "chastisement" in the Hebrew derives from the same root as the word for "disciplines" in Proverbs 13:24b (יָסַר). This helps to illuminate an underlying message. Proverbs 13:24 is, on the surface, an instruction to a father on the importance of disciplining a son. The midrash uses the second half of the verse to describe God's manner of dealing with Israel. God is to be the model for human fathers, and the use of words derived from the same root to describe the proper action (discipline/chastisements) teaches that the actions must be in accord with God's instructions. In other words, follow the words of this verse and your children will benefit. This stands in contrast to the beginning of the entire midrash, where the word used for "chastisement" (כָּדַד) is derived from a different root than the word for discipline in the Proverbs 13:24 proof text (יָסַר). Now the play on the word "מַרְדִּיּוֹת" as connected to both chastisements and rebelliousness has added significance. When one's actions are not in consonance with God's instructions (symbolized by the midrash's use of different words to describe the same action), rebellious sons are the result. Further, one can now see a structure to this midrash that is very similar to the structure of the short midrash cited from Yalkut Shimoni. The first part of the proof text from Proverbs introduces what it is that man is doing wrong, and the second part introduces the proper action which God is modeling for human parents through God's parenting of Israel.

What follows is a set three examples of successful parenting, and they are all drawn from the patriarchal traditions. Abraham is said to have chastened and taught Torah to his son Isaac, and so Isaac becomes like Abraham in all ways. That Abraham follows God's model is underscored by the use of the same Hebrew root (נָסִי) describing Abraham's actions as in the Proverbs verse. Isaac is then said to have chastened Jacob regularly, and to have taught him Torah. The Hebrew used in the midrash for "chastened regularly" uses the exact same Hebrew roots as the Proverbs proof text. Once again, Isaac is following the proper model. Finally, Jacob is said to have chastened his sons and taught them Torah (root of "נָסִי" used again). The pericope ends with a restatement of Exodus 1:1 and the declaration that all of the sons are as righteous as Jacob, which is proven by the statement, "He who loves him disciplines him regularly."

The overarching structure of this long midrash is essentially the same as the much shorter one from Yalkut Shimoni. The proof text, in this case Proverbs 13:24, has two separate clauses. The first clause introduces the problem in the human context, the second clause provides the model for God's answer. In Exodus Rabbah 1:1 the use and shift of language for the key words "chastisement" and "discipline" serve as clues for the direction and purpose of the midrash. Perhaps the most striking element of this midrash's structure, however, is the use of the "rule of three." After the problem is introduced, three examples of failed parenting are given; followed by three gifts that represent the ultimate heritage of Israel. When the divine model/solution is stated, Israel is said to have received three gifts. This is followed by three examples of successful parenting. All of the examples of successful parenting are drawn from the patriarchal chain established in Genesis. This indicates a smooth transmission of heritage. However, only two of the negative parenting

examples come from this chain, with the third derived from a completely different narrative in Jewish history. Each of the sons in this negative, disjointed sequence represents a dead end in the transmission of the heritage. This disjointed sequence itself is jarring, as one might expect, on a literary level, to have perfectly balanced sequences of threes. The underlying symbolism is that only the proper application of discipline and Torah results in smooth transmission of heritage.

There are several purposes to this midrash. The first is to establish the heritage and legitimacy of the sons of Jacob, who are the ancestors of the people Israel. This is important as the key point of the Exodus narrative is the releasing of Israel from Egypt and bringing them to Torah. The merit of the Exodus generation to receive Torah rests upon the legitimacy of the transmission of heritage that Jacob completes in the book of Genesis. Another purpose is to show that there is a proper procedure one goes through to create children worthy of this heritage. The procedure is a combination of discipline and instruction in Torah. One of the ironies of the midrash is that one of the methods, the teaching of Torah, is also the goal, the receiving of Torah. Israel, both the people and as individual Jews, is constantly being trained to receive what it already has: Torah. Further, the correct way to implement the procedure in parenting one's children is to imitate God's actions. God, in the rabbinic view, is the perfect parent to Israel, and that relationship does and should inform the individual parent/child relationship. Finally, just as both segments of Proverbs 13:24 are needed to complete the meaning of the verse, so, too, the two covenants, God/Israel and parent/child are needed to complete and give meaning to each other.

E. God as Father, Israel as Mother

While God is seen as and acts as the parent to the community of Israel, there are midrashic examples of God and Israel being cast as the overarching mother and father to an individual Jew. For example:

"He who robs his father and mother and says it is not sin" (Proverbs 28:24). Says R. Hanania bar Papa: All who enjoy in this world and do not bless are as if they stole from the Holy One, blessed be He, and the community of Israel. As it says, "He who robs his father and mother and says it is no sin is a companion to destroyers." And there is no father except the Holy One, blessed is He, as it is said, "Here he is, your father who made you" (Deuteronomy 32:6). And the only mother is the community of Israel, as it is said, "Listen, my son to the discipline of your father and do not forsake the Torah of your mother." (Proverbs 1:8)⁹³

It was noted in the above analysis of Exodus Rabbah 1:1 that two qualities were necessary for raising the child, discipline and Torah. This midrash assigns one to God (the afflicting of punishments) and the other to Israel. This creates a tension between the qualities of discipline and instruction. The model implies that both are needed, just as both parents are needed. The Zohar takes this idea a little further and assigns the value of wisdom to the father and associates this with the word "חָכְמָה" in Proverbs 1:8. It then takes the quality of "understanding" and assigns it to Torah, as represented by the mother.

In the rabbinic mind, the discipline or chastisements of the wilderness experience are what prepare Israel for the receiving of Torah. Israel, as God's child, is at the same time innocent and rebellious. God, as the parent, looks for opportunities to reward Israel

⁹³ Yalkut Shimoni, Part 2, Remez 962.

the child, while at the same time chastising Israel. The goal is to continue to develop and transmit the heritage of the covenant which begins in the patriarchal stories.

Chapter 5
Tensions in the Parent/Child Relationship

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According to Philo, the fundamental features of the parent/child relationship included the presence of an indissoluble bond of love and kinship between the parent and child as well as the inherent superiority of the parent to the child. This was also an accurate reflection of the classical Greek attitude.⁹⁴ The classical sources generally described children by the same criteria as adults, but find them lacking in certain areas, which include physical fitness, moral development, and intelligence.⁹⁵ Plato's attitude towards the intellectual capacity of children was that they were gullible, easily persuaded, able to understand only the simplest things, spoke nonsense, made unreliable judges.⁹⁶

While Greek parents might love and dote on their children, childhood itself was not seen as a preferable state of existence. Classical stories about the Greek gods show them as passing through childhood quickly, or having many of the powers they would have as adults.⁹⁷ Aristotle places children in the same relative position to adults as animals are to human beings. He also links children to the sick, the drunk, the insane and the wicked. Aristotle attributes to them short memory, and considered them to be too troubled and unstable to acquire knowledge and exercise sound judgement.⁹⁸

Rabbinic literature agrees with Philo's attitudes that the parent/child relationship is intrinsically hierarchical, but that parents feel a bond of love with children. However, the sages clearly felt that children are capable of learning and of gradually taking on religious obligations. The difficulty for them is in trying to define at what points the Jewish child is able to assume some responsibility. Another point of tension is the pull between the love a

⁹⁴ Reinhartz, "Parents and Children," p. 86.

⁹⁵ Golden, *Children and Childhood*, p. 3.

⁹⁶ *Ibid*, p 7.

⁹⁷ *Ibid*, p 5.

⁹⁸ *Ibid*, p 7.

parent feels for his child and the inherent superior position of the parent to the child.

Rabbinic literature identifies some of these tensions with both the parent/child relationship and the God/Israel relationship.

A. Age of Responsibility

All parents face the problem of when to intervene with their children and when to abstain from intervening. This tension increases as the child grows older. For any society this is resolved by a time of "coming of age" in which the child is responsible for his/her own actions. In ancient Athens, boys came of age at eighteen and girls upon their marriage.⁹⁹ In rabbinic literature, while there are some cases of agreement, in reality the "coming of age" is a flexible concept, which reflects the sages' recognition of the individuality of the child and that some children can take on certain responsibilities at younger ages, but others at older ages.

Contemporary Jewish practice is that a boy becomes religiously of age at thirteen, at which point the male child is a "bar mitzvah." Modern studies note that this is the age at which children start to agitate to pull free of their parent's influence.¹⁰⁰ Early rabbinic sources also state that thirteen is the time for a boy to take on the commandments.¹⁰¹ There is not much literature that gives the reasons why thirteen is the magical age, but there are two pieces of midrash that seem to offer some insight:

By thirteen years is the evil impulse older than the good impulse. In the mother's womb the evil impulse begins to develop and is born with a person. If he begins to profane the Sabbath, it does not prevent him; if he commits murder, it does not prevent him; if he goes off to another heinous transgression, it does not prevent him. Thirteen years later

⁹⁹ *Ibid* p. 4.

¹⁰⁰ Abrams, *Wrestling with Angels*, p 147.

¹⁰¹ Mishnah Avot 5:21.

the good impulse is born. When he profanes the Sabbath, it reprimands him....If he goes off to another heinous transgression, it reprimands him...¹⁰²

This midrash seems in accord with Aristotle's view that children are not able to make sound judgments, and gives a reason based on the concept of the good and evil inclinations. In essence, the midrash is saying that thirteen is the age at which a child has developed enough of a conscience to know right from wrong.

Another perspective on why age thirteen constitutes the age of majority is that it marks the time when a parent is no longer able to significantly influence the child. Therefore, the parent is ready to relinquish responsibility for the child.

"And the boys grew" (Genesis 26:27). R. Pinchas said in the name of R. Levi: They were like a myrtle and a wild rosebush growing side by side. When they attained maturity, one yielded its fragrance and the other its thorns. So for thirteen years both went to school and came home from school. After this age, one went to the house of study and the other to idolatrous shrines. R. Eleazer b R. Simeon said, A man is responsible for his son until the age of thirteen; thereafter he must say, "Blessed is He who has now freed me from the responsibility of this boy."¹⁰³

The boys referred to in this midrash are Jacob and Esau. The midrash is also an acknowledgment of people's different natures. Both boys went to school, and came home, yet their essential natures were opposite. By age thirteen, there is no hope (according to this text) of changing the rose bush to a myrtle. This midrash builds on the sages' view that Jacob studied Torah, while Esau did not. An intrinsic but unspoken thought in the blessing is the idea that now the child must reap the consequences of his own improper actions.

¹⁰² Avot d'Rabbi Natan, Chapter 16.

¹⁰³ Genesis Rabbah 63:10.

There is no uniformity in thought regarding the age in which a child is still influenced by their parent. In commenting on Proverbs 22:6 "Train a lad in the way he should go," Yalkut Shimoni presents a disagreement between R. Judah and R. Nechemiah. R. Judah says that the child should be disciplined until age thirteen, while R. Nechemiah says until age 24.¹⁰⁴ This is drawn from a longer discussion on the issue found in the Babylonian Talmud.

Rabbi Chisda said: "The reason that I am better than my colleagues is that I got married at the age of sixteen, and if I had married when I was fourteen I would have been able to tell Satan, 'An arrow in your eye'." Rava said to R. Natan b. Ammi: "While you have your son under your thumb, between sixteen and twenty two, marry him off." Others say between eighteen and twenty four. This is the subject of a dispute among Tanna'im. R. Judah and R. Nechemiah differ on the interpretation of the passage, "Train the lad in the way he should go." (Proverbs 22:6) One says it means between the ages of sixteen and twenty two; the other, between eighteen and twenty four.¹⁰⁵

There are three intersecting ideas in this pericope. The first, represented by R. Chisda, is that the age of responsibility is the age that one gets married. His ability to fight the evil impulse would have come earlier if he had been married earlier. The second idea is that a son is still under the father's influence fairly well beyond age thirteen, the age of accepting responsibility for the commandments. The third idea is that the age at which a son is no longer influenced by his father, can fall within a range of ages, and is not a fixed age.

Rava, with his advice, does not seem to disagree with R. Chisda. He seems to be advocating helping a son accept responsibility before reaching the end of the time of the

¹⁰⁴ Yalkut Shimoni, Part 2, Remez 960.

¹⁰⁵ B.T. *Kiddushin* 29b-30a.

father's influence. Judah and Nechemiah are arguing over what age should define the word "lad" as used in Proverbs 22:6. Note that both identify a range and not a specific age, which is different than their argument as presented in Yalkut Shimoni. Further, the passage from the Talmud does not even mention age thirteen. The sages seem to be differentiating between the ability to perform religious duties and the ability to take responsibility for a household. The former is primarily the ability to accept a self discipline of practice and the latter includes the ability to interact responsibly with other people.

The above citations demonstrate that "coming of age" is, in many matters, not a fixed age but something that can occur within a range of ages. There are certain matters in which the child has assumed responsibility, yet is still "under his father's thumb" in others. For many matters there is a variable time of responsibility or liability. An example of this occurs in the Mishnah in the discussion of the rebellious son. The Mishnah establishes a time frame during which the son is liable and punishable for his rebellion, but makes it a finite period which the son eventually outgrows. The son becomes liable at the age he can produce two pubic hairs, which certainly occurs sometime around the age of thirteen. The period in which the son can be stoned for being rebellious to his father ends when "he grows the lower beard."¹⁰⁶ Another period which covers a range of years is a period of innocence, as opposed to a period of liability. The Babylonian Talmud states, "How many are the years of man? Seventy. Subtract twenty, for which You do not punish" (B.T. *Shabbat* 89b). While this is in a plea to God for mercy on Israel, one can

¹⁰⁶ M. *Sanhedrin* 8:1.

infer that we are to see the first twenty years of a man's life as a time of childhood when transgressions are not punished.

Issues of financial responsibility create even more variables when trying to ascertain what is "coming of age" in rabbinic literature. In the Babylonian Talmud, tractate *Gittin*, is a discussion over what is the youngest age at which child can purchase or sell movable goods. The answers range from age six to ten. Further, the final determination of the age has to do with the child's intelligence, and does not focus on reaching a certain number of years.¹⁰⁷ Tractate *Ketubot* includes a case in which a grown up person can be defined legally as a minor in regards to his father's affairs.¹⁰⁸

From a different perspective, one could state that the duties of a parent to a child never end. If in fact the relationship is a covenant, then there must be some obligatory ties that last the parent's lifetime and beyond. Certainly this is in consonance with the general conception of God's covenant with Israel, in which the obligations are perpetual. This is also the view of Philo, who states that the duties of parents to children span the whole time a person is a parent.¹⁰⁹ Financially, Philo says, the obligations of the parent to the child do not end with death, but continue as an inheritance must be provided.¹¹⁰

It is clear that age thirteen, while having religious significance in terms of acceptance of responsibility, is by no means the definitive age of majority for sages. Rather, there is a recognition that different issues plus the abilities and nature of the child determine when responsibility can be assumed. Further, there seems to be little

¹⁰⁷ B.T. *Gittin* 59a.

¹⁰⁸ B.T. *Ketubot* 18a.

¹⁰⁹ Reinhartz, *Parents and Children*, p. 77

¹¹⁰ *Ibid*, p 72.

consonance in terms of when liability for actions is assumed, with the sages again giving a range of ages as opposed to a fixed point.

B. Justice versus Mercy

The relationship between God and Israel hangs in the tension between justice and mercy. The world is said to have been created with equal measurements of each. From the practical point of view for the parent, this translates into judging how much to punish a child for a transgression. Further, is the tension between the love of a child and the obligation to punish the child for unacceptable behavior. The tradition is clear that a parent has the obligation to punish, and even attributes physical ailments to the failure of a parent to discipline their child.

“And Eli was very old” (I Samuel 2:22). Three were caused to grow old quickly because of the evil of their sons. Isaac was the first because of the troubles of Esau, his son, that he was praying to idols and burning incense to them, and made sacrifices to them. And in the midst of this, Isaac’s eyes were dimmed...Also Eli was caused to grow old because of the troubles of his sons. “And Eli was very old.” Because of what? “And he heard all that his sons had done to the people of Israel” (I Samuel 2:22). Also Samuel was caused to grow old because of the troubles of his sons. “And his sons walked not in his ways, but turned aside after gain and took bribes and perverted judgment” (I Samuel 8:3).¹¹¹

The misbehavior of the sons in each of the cases cited in this midrash is blamed on the failure of the father to correct his son(s). This is really a transgression of the obligation to continue to transmit the covenant with God. Although it is Eli who is under discussion, three examples are given here as well, and all are examples of failed transmissions. It is

¹¹¹ Aggadat Bereshit, I Samuel 2:22, It is important to note the tradition of Isaac’s eyes being dimmed because he justified Esau’s wickedness. See Genesis Rabbah 65:10.

important to note that each of the parental figures cited also succeed in transmitting the covenant as well, but with different children: Isaac through Jacob, Eli through Samuel, and Samuel through David. At the end of this midrash (not quoted above), God speaks to Eli and gives him the proper model for his relationship with his children by quoting Proverbs 23:13 and 14: "Do not withhold correction from the child...Beat him with a rod and you will save him from Sheol." That this is God's own method, which is used in disciplining Israel, is proven by a quote from Micah 7:14, "Shepherd Your people with your staff."

Punishment is never pleasant, whether from a parent or from God. Yet rabbinic literature casts punishments as being the result of God's love for Israel, and, in fact, the vehicle through which Israel is endeared to God:

Rabbi Eliezer b Yaakov says: Here is the one who says, "For whom the Lord loves, He corrects, even as a father the son in whom he delights" (Proverbs 3:12). Who caused a son to be reconciled with his father? Alas, he says, punishments. R. Meir says he is the one who says, "You will know with your heart that when the Lord, your God, disciplines you as a man disciplines his son" (Deuteronomy 8:5). Your heart will know deeds which I did and punishments that I brought upon you, that it is according to your deeds that I brought punishments upon you. R. Yossi b Yehudah says, Punishments endear to the name of the Holy One, praised be He, for he forgives who he punishes...¹¹²

The connection between God acting as the parent and the actions of the human parent is clear from the proof texts of Proverbs 3:12 and Deuteronomy 8:5. The implication is that the child (Israel) knows that God's punishments are commensurate with Israel's deeds.

¹¹² Yalkut Shimoni, Part 1, *Remez* 302.

Rather than destroying the God/Israel relationship, the punishments serve to bring the two closer together. The reason is because it is through the punishments of the father that a reconciliation of God as parent and Israel as child can occur. In another passage from the same section of Yalkut Shimoni quoted above, Proverbs 3:11-12 are used to explain this: "My son, despise not the discipline of the Lord. For whom the Lord loves, the Lord corrects." The reason, says this midrash, is that punishments cause a son to be reconciled with his father. As such, punishments are considered highly valuable.

Indeed, chastisements may be considered more precious than offerings, for while a sin offering or a guilt offering atones for a particular transgression, as it is said, "It shall be accepted for him to make atonement for him" (Leviticus 1:4). Chastisement atones for all transgressions. Therefore it is said, "The Lord has chastened me sore, but He has not given me over to death" (Psalms 118:18).¹¹³

The value of the chastisements, and why they endear one to God, is in that they serve to atone for sins. This is a perspective that allows the sages to see even the most tragic of losses as a chastisement that atones for sin. The death of a young child, and his/her passing in innocence into the next world, atones for their father's sins in this world. Even this is seen as a "chastisement of love."¹¹⁴

From the perspective of the sages, it is a human failing when God's chastisements are not seen as the result of God's love. In the same way, it is sometimes hard for parents to administer punishment to a child and see it as an act of love. The sages see these as real problems with real consequences. One of the more poignant examples is that of King David and his relationship with his sons, particularly Absalom and Adonijah.

¹¹³ Midrash Psalms 118:16.

¹¹⁴ Eliyahu Zutah, Chapter 11.

"Vexation is better than laughter" (Ecclesiastes 7:3). Solomon said: If my father had been a little vexed with Adonijah, it would have been better for him than the laughter with which the Attribute of Justice gloated over him. Why? "For by the sadness of the countenance the heart may be gladdened." If David had shown him a sad face, he might have led him to mend his ways, but, "His father had not grieved him all his life" (I Kings 1:6).¹¹⁵

The laughter of the Attribute of Justice refers to Adonijah's violent end. David's failure to show love through discipline is responsible for Adonijah's death. Further, laughter, according to this midrash, would not be the proper expression of a father's love. David's failure to properly raise Absalom is used by the sages to illustrate the axiom, "Bringing up a bad child in one's house is worse than the war of Gog and Magog."¹¹⁶ The sages see Absalom's revolt against his father as a direct result of David's poor parenting, and David reaps the consequences.

Along with the need to administer punishment to wayward children is the counterbalancing sentiment that punishment should not be too severe. While there are numerous passages in the Bible which call for strict discipline, there are also mitigating passages, such as Psalms 127:3, "Sons are a heritage from the Lord."¹¹⁷ There is also the sentiment in ancient times, from the surrounding Greek world, that when a child offends a father, the mother and the elders of the town should administer the punishment.¹¹⁸ Ben Sira, who dedicates a large portion of a chapter to the need to use hitting as a form of discipline, also writes in 4:30, "Do not be like a lion in your house." Discipline is not to be enforced at the risk of the child learning to fear the parent.

¹¹⁵ Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7:3

¹¹⁶ B.T. *Berachot* 7b.

¹¹⁷ Yarbrough, *Parents and Children*, p 46.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

This is a theme that rabbinic literature also echos. Parental anger must be controlled and idol threats which cause the child to fear are not to be employed. Note the following example:

RULE 4: It is related of the son of Gorgias of Lydda that he ran away from school and his father pointed to his ear. In fear of his father he went and destroyed himself in a pit. They went and inquired of R. Tarfon who ruled, "We do not withhold anything from him."

RULE 5: It is related of a child in Bene Berak that he broke a bottle on the Sabbath and his father pointed to his ear. In fear of his father he went and destroyed himself in a pit. They inquired of R. Akiba who ruled, "We do not withhold anything from him."

RULE 6: Hence the sages ruled, "A man should not point at the ear of a child, but either punish him immediately or keep silent and say nothing to him. R. Simeon b. Eleazar said, "With human nature, a child and a woman, the left hand should repulse but the right hand should bring them back."¹¹⁹

Each of the transgressions described in rules 4 and 5 breaks important religious and cultural mores: the leaving of Torah study and breaking Shabbat. Each father reacted the same way, threatening to box the son's ear. The result was the suicidal death of each son, and in each case Tarfon and then Akiba come up with the same ruling, that the son should not be denied any of the customary funeral rites because the suicide was in fact caused by the father. The resulting rule, while accepting that punishment is necessary, stresses that the child should not be terrorized by the threat of punishment. The sages realized that discipline must be immediate in order to be effective. The quote which closed rule six teaches that the tendency to love and embrace the child should be stronger than the

¹¹⁹ B.T. *Semachot* 2:4-6. In the B.T., *Sotah* 47a is a quote similar to the R. Simeon b. Eleazar statement that closes Rule 6. "Always let your left hand repulse and your right hand bring closer. Do not act like Elisha who rebuffed Gehazi with both of his hands."

tendency to punish the child. This is apparent as the right hand, which draws the child back, is recognized as the generally dominant hand.

The theme of mitigating anger with love and mercy which results in a punishment less harmful to the child is present in parables comparing God's actions to human actions.

Sometimes these look to cast God's punishment of Israel in a softer light.

A parable of a king with a son who was stubborn and would not obey. What did the king do? When he became filled with wrath, he went into his son's pavilion and cut and tore and threw about the hangings until they were all ripped to pieces, and then he flung them out. The king said: "Have I not done well? I have torn apart my son's pavillion. I can make another pavilion more beautiful, but I have not slain my son in my wrath. Had I slain my son, my brother's son would be mine heir. It is better that my own son be my heir." So, too, Asaph said, "Did not the Holy One, blessed be He, do well in venting His wrath upon sticks and stones and not upon His children?"¹²⁰

The "venting His wrath upon sticks and stones" refers to the destruction of the Temple in 586 BCE. This most disastrous event in Jewish history is seen as a punishment by God for Israel's transgression, but the midrash holds that the punishment could have been a lot worse. It teaches that punishment should never result in permanent damage ("I can make another pavillion").

In a series of parables in Midrash Psalms, each also uses the premise of a king having a son with whom he is angry. Each parable begins with the idea that God is comparable to the king/son scenario presented in the parable. All of them center on a king who is contemplating a punishment that will destroy his son, one smiting his son's head with a sword, the second throwing a large rock at him, the third whipping him a hundred

¹²⁰ Midrash Psalms 79:3.

times with a rope. In each case the king's love for and need of his son overcomes the initial anger, and the actual punishment is lessened. The lesson is concluded by Psalms 6:2, "Lord, do not punish me in Your anger, nor chastise me in Your wrath."¹²¹ The lesson, which God is seen to be modeling for the parent, is to have patience and not to punish the child while angry, but carry it out in a more reasoned state.

C. Evaluating the Child

While parental love hopefully acts to soften a parent's anger with his/her child, that same love can also be the cause of tension. One example of this has already been discussed: the love of the parent which blinds them to the child's fault and results in failing to discipline them. A different but related tension is the overestimating of the child's abilities; another kind of blindness out of love.

Now a certain woman had a son, a dwarf, whom she used to call 'Tallswift.' Said she, "My son is tall and swift, why then do you not appoint him (to the king's bodyguard)?" "If in your eyes he is tall and swift," they replied, "in ours he is only a dwarf." In like manner his (Esau's) father called him great, "He called Esau his great son." His mother, too, called him great, "And Rebecca took the choicest garments of Esau her great son." Said the Holy One, blessed be He, to them, "If in your eyes he is great, in Mine he is small."¹²²

False inflation of the child's ego causes behavior problems. Here, God intervenes to point out the reality about Esau, at least from the perspective of the sages.

The amount of love a parent shows a child, however, should not be limited by the virtues of the child. The child who displays problems has to be loved all the more so.

"Also he has set the world in their heart" (Ecclesiastes 3:11).
That is a love of the world and a love of children, He set in

¹²¹ *Ibid*, 6:3.

¹²² Genesis Rabbah 65:11.

their heart. To what is the matter compared? To a king who had two sons, one big and the other small. The elder treated him with respect, while the younger relieved himself on him. Nevertheless, his love for the younger child exceeds that of the elder.¹²³

First, it should be noted that this midrash renders an interpretation of the verse from Ecclesiastes differently than some others. It translates "עולם" as being "world" and not "eternity." Therefore, the midrash is describing the world to which one opens one's heart. This is the world of children and the acceptance of even the child who seems incapable of proper behavior. The tension inherent in love is that one cannot always pick and choose where it must be given.

When one operates from the basic premise of love, perhaps the question is no longer what should be the severity of punishment for a given transgression, rather, what is the proper method of instruction to train the child to no longer repeat their mistake. Coming of age then, is no longer trying to ascertain a specific number of years at which a child is ready for responsibility, but the reaching of a certain point in the instruction of a child at which they can successfully break out of the parent's dominant influence.

¹²³ Ecclesiastes Rabbah 3:11.

Chapter 6
Analysis of the Concept of Punishment and Its Relationship to *Musar* (מוסר)

Prior chapters have discussed the degree of importance of two elements in the parent/child relationship: discipline and education. Thus far, they have been treated as two separate items. However, discipline and education are not separate processes, but are actually two components of one holistic process: the instruction of the child in order to successfully perpetuate the heritage of the parents. In Jewish terms, this means the religious and cultural heritage packaged in a moral and legal code by which the Jewish community lives: the Torah.

The key Hebrew word that must be examined in this regard is the word *musar* (מוסר). This word appears fifty times in the Hebrew Bible; thirty of which are in the book of Proverbs. It is commonly translated as "discipline," which itself is a word open to wide interpretation. If one can arrive at a sharper sense of what *musar* is, then one can better ascertain the nature of what is ideally supposed to happen between the parent and child in the context of their covenantal relationship

A. Strict Discipline.

One approach is that *musar* refers to a strict, rigid discipline which not only includes, but is dependent on the striking of a child. There is strong support for this view within the ancient Greek and Jewish worlds. According to Plato, creating the habit of order is the basis of education.¹²⁴ Subsequently, the role of the teacher to students is the same relationship as that of a herdsman to animals; except that students are more unmanageable as they have the capacity of unregulated reason.¹²⁵ Beating, therefore, was a major part of the Greek classroom as a tactic of crowd control.¹²⁶ Golden cites

¹²⁴ Plato, *Republic* IV:425.

¹²⁵ Plato, *Laws* VII:808-809.

¹²⁶ Golden, *Children and Childhood*, p. 64.

numerous places from the writings of Plato and Aristotle which show that respect and obedience were enforced by physical punishment.¹²⁷

Philo also holds that beating needs to be part of the disciplinary program of the child. His views on parental discipline are probably influenced by Roman laws relating to the absolute power a patriarch had over his household.¹²⁸ Philo not only warns against overindulging one's children, but says that the "evil" child needs severe admonishment, including beating and degradation.¹²⁹ These modes of thinking are also reflected in Jewish textual sources.

One of the most strident definitions of discipline is found in the book of Ben Sirach. As with other sources cited earlier, Ben Sira sees the behavior of the child as a reflection on the parent: "It is a disgrace to be the father of an undisciplined son."¹³⁰ The way to avoid this dilemma is detailed in the first thirteen verses of Chapter Thirty. Chapter Thirty begins with a verse that is reminiscent of the wording and cadence of Proverbs 13:24: "He who loves his son will whip him often, in order that he may rejoice at the way he turns out."¹³¹ The purpose of this, outlined in the following verses, is to produce someone like oneself (verse 4), who can avenge one's enemies and reward one's friends (verse 6). The undisciplined son is compared to an unbroken horse (verse 8), and the father is warned not to pamper or play with a child, as it will only result in grief (verses 9 and 10). Verse twelve reiterates that one should "beat his sides while he is still young," so that one is not shamed by him (verse 13). One cannot doubt, after reading the

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

¹²⁸ Reinhartz, *Parents and Children*, p 76.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 74-75.

¹³⁰ Ben Sirah 22:3.

¹³¹ *Ibid* 30:1

beginning of Chapter Thirty in Ben Sira, that the author was advocating the beating of children in the course of disciplining them. Further, the pattern and cadence of the verses are similar to verses discussing the musar (מוסר) of a child which are scattered throughout Proverbs. It is easy to come to the conclusion that Proverbs also endorses hitting the child in order to enforce discipline.

The Talmud is also quite specific. One is instructed that it is a *mitzvah*, an obligation to strike one's son on occasion.¹³² The proof text cited for this is Proverbs 29:17, "Chastise your son and he will bring you rest, and he will bring delights to your soul." The word for chastise is the Hebrew root "יסר" which is the root of the word "musar." The Talmud is clear that in this case "chastise" means "to hit."

In midrash, musar is often interpreted as hitting because of its link to the word "staff" within the context of Proverbs 13:24, "He who spares the staff hates his son, he who loves him disciplines him early." Discipline (musar) is the action in the second half of the verse, in which the staff in the first part of the verse is engaged. Midrash Proverbs on 13:24 explains that if a person does not spank his son for a violation of Torah, then it is as if he hates his son. If, however, he does spank him for violation of words of Torah, he is regarded as one who loves his son. As such, Proverbs 13:24 is often used in midrash to prove that hitting is necessary to keep a son from evil ways. Note the following example:

"He who spares the staff hates his son" (Proverbs 13:24a).
This is Abraham; when he did not punish Ishmael, he went out to an evil culture. He would worship idols and spill blood and as soon as Sarah told him (Abraham) of his deeds, she said to him to expel him and his mother...He sent his son empty, rather that he went out to an evil culture he

¹³² B.T. *Makkot* 8a.

hated him and turned away from him. This establishes what is said (in the verse), "Who spares the staff hates his son."¹³³

In this midrash the second part of Proverbs 13:24 is never referenced. The focus is on the idea of the staff and Abraham's failure to use the staff to strike Ishmael and to prevent him from becoming evil. Abraham's reaction to his son, coming to hate him, is exactly what the book of Ben Sirach would have predicted, as Abraham did not follow the instructions outlined in Chapter 30 referenced above.

B. Hitting Endears One to God

Being struck, as a punishment, endears one to God and atones for sin; just as chastisements in general do. The following is commentary on Deuteronomy 25:3, the administering of the thirty-nine lashes, in Midrash Tannaim.

"Your brother is degraded" (Deuteronomy 25:3). Until he was not beaten, he was called "evil," as it is written: "If the wicked man is worthy to be beaten" (Deuteronomy 25:2). Here, from the beating, he is your brother. Until he is beaten, his behavior is shameful. The blows are endearing as they atone for his sins. Because of his evil, blows are appropriate to atone for his evil. The blows are endearing as they are from the love of man for the Father in heaven. As it is written, "And if he is asked, what are those sores between your arms, he will reply, from being beaten in the homes of my friends" (Zachariah 13:6). These sores caused me to love the Father in heaven. And it is written, "Discipline your son and he will give you peace; he will give pleasures to your soul" (Proverbs 29:17). "Discipline your son while there is hope" (Proverbs 19:18). "Instruct a lad in the way he should go" (Proverbs 22:6). "The one who spares the staff hates his son, the one who loves him disciplines him early" (Proverbs 13:24). "Do not withhold discipline from a lad, if you hit him with a staff he will not die" (Proverbs 23:13). "Beat him with a staff and you will save him from Sheol" (Proverbs 23:14).¹³⁴

¹³³ Bereshit Rabbati, to Genesis 21:11-14.

¹³⁴ Midrash Tannaim on Deuteronomy 25:3.

The midrash is a commentary on a verse in Deuteronomy that is describing the administering of the thirty-nine lashes to someone deserving of punishment. In this case the punishment of striking resolves a crime that one person commits against another person, that is, human to human. This midrash casts the blows of this punishment as being based on man's love for God, the desire to execute God's laws among men. In trying to prove that the blows serve to atone for the crime, and therefore has salvational power, a series of proof texts from Proverbs is used. These proof texts are all examples of how a parent should discipline a child. The use of these verses and their arrangement make it clear that the discipline meant by the word musar is the act of hitting.

C. Focus on the Word Musar

In the text just cited from Midrash Tannaim, six verses from Proverbs are used as proof texts. In all but two of them (22:6 and 23:14), a form of the Hebrew root "יסר" is used. Proverbs 23:14, however, can be seen as a continuation of 23:13, in trying to establish the equivalence between "discipline" and "hitting." The key point about these verses from Proverbs, and many others that refer to the disciplining of the child, is that their plain sense meaning is instruction to a human parent on how to raise a child. This is attested to by the commentaries on the verses. Ibn Ezra, in commenting on Proverbs 13:24, "He who spares the staff hates his son, he who loves him disciplines him regularly (or early)," translates "שחרר" as "early," and states that the verse means the discipline should come in the son's youth. Rashi says the chastisement should come in the morning. In commenting on Proverbs 19:18, Gersonides says that the discipline (מִיָּסָר) will result in the boy crying or making noise, but in the end he will "stand happy" that he received it. Metzudat David, commenting on Proverbs 23:13 says that the boy will merely experience

a little pain. While Proverbs 22:15 is not used as a proof in the above midrash, it is one of a series of related verses. It reads, "Foolishness is bound in the heart of a child, but the staff of discipline will drive it from him." Gersonides states that a child is quick to do what is self-gratifying, and is not able to consider what is appropriate. Therefore, the "staff of discipline" (שֵׁבֶט מִוֶּסֶר) is appropriate to drive out his foolishness.

D. Musar in Proverbs

Despite the fact that verses using the word "musar" are used to prove that striking is an appropriate and endearing form of punishment, and despite the occasional pairing of the words *shevet* (staff) and *musar*, there is a strong sense in rabbinic literature that *musar* means something far more than strict discipline. Further, a case can be built that hitting is not the preferred method of the sages. The application of the verses from Proverbs in the commentary on Deuteronomy 25:3 is very narrow and is a diversion from what "musar" means within the context of the parent/child covenant as a refraction of the God/Israel covenant.

A survey of the use of the word *musar* in Proverbs, and the corresponding commentary, reveals a wide range of applications and meanings. The most important is that "musar" is something mental or intellectual and not physical. Proverbs 6:23 says, "For a commandment is a lamp and the Torah is a light, and disciplining (*musar*) rebukes are the way of life." The obvious point here is that rebukes (חִוּכָּהוֹת) are verbal, not physical. Further, the "disciplining rebukes" are linked to Torah and commandments. Proverbs 8:33 reads, "Listen to discipline and become wise." The discipline is something that is being heard. One can learn wisdom after hearing the discipline. This is related to the idea in Proverbs 12:1, "The one who loves discipline, loves knowledge." In the

previous two examples, “musar” has been translated as “discipline.” However, it would be more accurate not to translate the word at all, but let it stand as a quality that is connected to wisdom, knowledge, and, of course, Torah as their Jewish source.

The correlation between *musar* and Torah is confirmed by Proverbs 1:8, “My son, heed the *musar* of your father and do not forsake the Torah of your mother.” The parallel structure of this verse equates musar with Torah. Rashi, in commenting on this verse, states that *musar* is the instruction given by God, specifically the oral and written Torah. A look at the flow of Proverbs 23:12 to 14 is instructive:

Bring your *lev* to discipline and your ears to wise sayings

(12)

Do not withhold discipline from a child, if you beat him with a rod he will not die. (13)

Beat him with a rod and you will save him from the grave.

(14)

Proverbs 23:12 says to apply one’s “lev” (לב) to discipline (musar). The word “lev,” while many times translated as heart, is actually seen by the rabbis as the realm of the intellect. Gersonides states that musar is necessary to bring the person to the point of understanding, that this is a mental discipline that leads to knowledge. Seeing Proverbs 23:12 as the lead into Proverbs 23:13 and 14, allows for a new reading of verse 23:13 and 14, which were used in the citation from Midrash Tannaim. The “musar” which one is not supposed to withhold from a child is a quality of instruction and discipline which mentally prepares the child for knowledge. The “staff” with which one beats him is the staff of Torah,¹³⁵ which will certainly not kill him. In fact, as Torah is the “tree of life,” it is the vehicle which will save the child from Sheol.

¹³⁵ Midrash Proverbs 19:18.

If indeed *musar* is connected to Torah, which is the heritage for Israel from God, then *musar* itself is connected to God. This is confirmed by Proverbs 3:11 and 4:1, which read: "Do not reject the discipline of the Lord, my son, do not abhor His rebuke" (3:11), and "Sons, heed the discipline of a father; listen and learn understanding" (4:1). Clearly, the covenant between God and Israel provides the means for the parent to fulfill the covenant between himself and his child. The quality of *musar* is a quality that connects the actions of a father to The Father.

Musar, then, is a word with a wide range of meaning from the sense of correction, to strict discipline, to instruction. The implication in the verses where it is used is that it defines a unique quality that combines all three meanings holistically. Interestingly, there is a word in classical Greek, "paideuo" which expresses the same range of meanings "I teach," "I correct," and "I discipline."¹³⁶

E. The Meaning of Musar in Midrash

There are many rabbinic texts which look to mediate the severity of any punishment. Mercy is the counterbalance to strict judgment. The Talmud states simply, "When you have to hit a student, hit him only with a shoelace."¹³⁷ The point of the striking is solely to get the student's attention. There is no purpose to hitting harder. Rashi, commenting on Proverbs 19:18 "Chasten your child while there is hope," says not to strike him a death blow.

Proverbs 19:18 is used in the following midrash to reiterate the idea that one should not punish out of anger:

¹³⁶ Goldman, *Children and Childhood*, p 64.

¹³⁷ B.T. *Baba Batra* 21a

"Lord, chasten me only in measure" (Jeremiah 10:24). That is "Lord, chasten me only with moderate punishments." So, too, it is written, "Chasten your son while there is hope" (Proverbs 19:18), as if to say, chasten him but not unto death. Take care that in chastening you do not destroy him: "only set not your heart on his destruction" (ibid). Therefore David said, "Chastise me not in Your wrath" (Psalms 38:2). A rebuke is good, as it is said, "Who the Lord loves He rebukes" (Proverbs 3:12), but only when the rebuke is not given in wrath. Therefore David said, "Lord, rebuke me not in Your wrath." He also said, chastisement is good, as it is written, "Blessed is the man whom you have chastened, Lord" (Psalms 94:12); but we cannot long suffer it.¹³⁸

The common Hebrew word to the citations from Jeremiah 10:24, Proverbs 19:18, Psalms 38:2 and Psalms 94:12 is the root of "musar" (יָסַר). However that root might be translated (chasten, rebuke, punish, or instruct), the message in the midrash is clear. It is not to be done out of anger. The midrash links the word "יָסַר" with another key word, which is the operative word in the proof text from Proverbs 3:12, "יָכַח." The range of meaning of this root includes to argue, to prove, to rebuke, to dispute, to judge and to correct, sometimes by punishment. The realm of the word "יָכַח" is overwhelmingly verbal, not physical. In this midrash, at least, the action of "יָסַר" is being softened to the level of the verbal. Not only is the correction to be softened, it is not to be done out of anger. The midrash also links God's actions and human actions to each other. The end lesson is for the parent to shape his or her behavior on the model of God's qualities of mercy and patience.

¹³⁸ Midrash Psalms 38:1. Note that a similar midrash with the same proof texts appears in Yalkut Shimoni, Part 2, *Remez* 733.

Psalms 6:2 expresses the same idea as Psalms 38:2 cited in the above midrash, in almost the exact same wording, that God should not reprove in anger, not chastise out of wrath. The verse's parallel structures equate the words "יָסַר" and "יָכַח". The midrashic commentary on Psalm 6:7 gives the same lesson; that chastisement not given in anger is good. The proof texts used in this midrash are from Proverbs verses 23:13, 23:14 and 16:14 "The wrath of the King is as messengers of death". The midrash labels anger and wrath as executioners, and the midrash ends with the statement, "Chastisement is good, but I have not enough strength to withstand anger or wrath."¹³⁹

The proper method of reproof is the teaching of Torah. It is through Torah that God's child, Israel, obtains discipline, wisdom, and correction. It is the activity described by the word musar that transmits the Torah to the child. This is a refraction of God's actions with Israel.

"He who spares the staff hates his son" (Proverbs 13:24). If there is a man who hates his son, it is because he did not reprove him through Torah and wisdom and derech eretz; he will hate him in the future. But, if he reproves him, he will be made to love him, as it said, "he who loves him disciplines (musar) him early." And thus the Holy One, blessed is He, because He loves the righteous, chastises them in this world through chastisements...¹⁴⁰

Reproof through Torah provides hope for the future, just as God's chastisement of the righteous results in atonements that they might reach the world to come. Reproving through Torah links past, present and future.

Rabbi Ishmael said: Great is the Torah for she is greater than priesthood and greater than kingship. For kingship is acquired through thirty qualifications, while the Torah is

¹³⁹ Midrash Psalms 6:7.

¹⁴⁰ Yalkut Shimoni, Part 2, Remez 950.

acquired through forty-eight....loving one's fellow creatures, loving rebukes, admitting the truth, freely sharing knowledge of legal tradition, and handing one's child over to the study of Torah. Such a one may have hope for the future, as it is said, "Musal (discipline, correct, instruct) your son while there is hope and do not set your heart on his destruction" (Proverbs 19:18).¹⁴¹

Rather than as a justification for striking a child, the above two midrashim show how Proverbs verses, such as 13:24 and 19:18, are used as a call to bring the child to Torah.

F. Musar as a Synonym for Torah

Finally, some midrashim teach that the word "musar" is not the process of coming to Torah, but is synonymous with Torah. Torah itself is seen as the body of moral and religious instruction.

"My son, heed the musar of your father" (Proverbs 1:8a) - every matter in the Torah handed down to you on Mount Sinai directly from the mouth of the Almighty. "And do not forsake the Torah of your mother" (Proverbs 1:8b) - all that was made explicit in the Torah on the fitness of what is fit, and on the unfitness of what is unfit, and on the prohibition of what is forbidden and on the permission of what is permitted.¹⁴²

The opening of this same midrash defines "musar" as all which was commanded at Sinai, and then in another interpretation specifically relates "musar" and "Torah" to the commandments to honor one's mother and father. This is all considered to have been "taught" (יָדָה) (same root as Torah). As pointed out earlier, the parallel structure of Proverbs 1:8 equates Torah with musar.

¹⁴¹ Midrash Proverbs 19:18.

¹⁴² Midrash Proverbs 1:8.

The same verse (Proverbs 1:8) is used in Midrash Sifre on Ha'azinu as a proof text that the "doctrine" (לִקְחָ) referred to in Deuteronomy 32:2 is words of Torah. This midrash is essentially a series of three proof texts, all drawn from Proverbs. The first is Proverbs 4:2, "For I give you a good doctrine, do not forsake my Torah," in which the two words being related, "Torah" and "doctrine" (לִקְחָ) both appear. Torah in part b of the verse is parallel to "doctrine" in part a. The second proof text is Proverbs 8:10, "Take my instruction rather than silver." The word "musar" is translated here as "instruction." Sifre then comments, "instruction means words of Torah."¹⁴³ The proof text for this assertion is Proverbs 1:8, which, as previously stated, places "Torah" and "musar" as parallel elements to each other. Here, the midrash assumes that the reader knows the relationship between Torah and musar, which is what allows the leap between the reference to Torah in the first proof text, Proverbs 4:2, and the word musar which is translated as "instruction" in the second proof text, Proverbs 8:10. The sequence of the proof texts makes "musar" parallel to "Torah."

Proverbs 22:6 does not use the word "musar," but its use in a midrash on the verse helps to inform the meaning of "musar" as a process which is dominated by education and Torah.

"Train a child in the way he ought to go, he will not swerve from it even in old age" (Proverbs 22:6). R. Eliezer said, "If you educate your child in words of Torah while he is yet young, he will continually grow up according to them, as it is said, 'He will not swerve from them even in old age.' It is like the tendril of a vine. If you do not train it when it is still moist, once it dries out you will be unable to do so. R. Joshua said, 'Train a child in the way he ought to go' why so? 'he will not swerve from it even in old age.' It is like

¹⁴³ Sifre Devarim, Piska 303.

an ox that has not been taught to plow. In the end it is too difficult to learn how. Hence Scripture says, "If folly settles in the heart of a child," (Proverbs 22:15a) who will remove it? R. Zebida said: The staff of Torah will remove it from him, as it is said, "the staff of *musar* will remove it from him" (Proverbs 22:15b). If one does not merit being of the tribe of moral instruction (*shevet musar*, שבט מוסר), then the staff of correction will be the royal court.¹⁴⁴

The midrash turns on the phrase "shevet musar." This is commonly rendered as the "staff of discipline." However, "shevet" is also the word for tribe. The instruction in Torah is the difference between being in the tribe of Torah or being disciplined by the staff. Both meanings exist in the phrase and the appropriate action determines which is applicable. In addition, by connecting Proverbs 22:6 with 22:15, this midrash teaches that "musar" is the process of education of the child. The word for "to train," or "to educate" is the first word of Proverbs 22:6, "חנך." This illuminates Proverbs 13:24 differently. "Who spares the staff hates his son" can mean that the one who does not use the staff of Torah to educate his son will come to hate him. This is logical as the child will not have learned the necessary means to continue the heritage of the covenant. "Who loves him employs musar on him early" means that the educational process should begin at a young age. This is in line with Rashi's reading of the verse.

Perhaps the best way to define the word "musar" would be as the educational function of a parent. In the minds of the sages that would particularly be the father. But the word is filled with tension. Verses in which it appears in Proverbs provide proof texts for a wide range of beliefs. One such belief is the idea that blows were proper and just discipline which endear one to God. Certainly the rabbis would not question the "justice"

¹⁴⁴ Midrash Proverbs 22:6.

which God has meted out to Israel over the centuries in whatever form the sages would have conceived Midrash must cast these "blows" as being out of love. Conversely, rabbinic thinking might not even cast these chastisements as "blows," but as a method of God's instruction, and it is only Israel's perspective as the unwilling student that forces Jews to see this instruction as painful.

The essence of the parent/child covenant would demand that instruction be the main element of the parent/child relationship. As such, musar must be a multi-faceted quality that includes discipline, correction, and instruction. Musar is the state of mind through which one generation transmits Torah to the next.

Conclusion

From this study of rabbinic literature and secondary sources, we have learned that from the perspective of Jewish tradition, Jewish children are not merely trained to become good and obedient citizens of a particular society. They are participants in a relationship that is best defined by the word "covenant." While children, they are the recipients of a cultural, moral, religious, and historical heritage which is meant to define not only their relationship with other people, but with God. Ideally, the Jewish child is trained to participate in the Jewish community's covenant with God. Covenant intrinsically links what happens in the parent/child relationship to God, and therefore defines this relationship as holy.

God is seen as a participant in the formation of and raising of a child. At the same time, the honoring of parents by a child is given equal status as the honoring of God. In rabbinic literature, likewise, God's actions concerning the people Israel are consistently defined by the parameters of the parent/child relationship. The historical disasters which befell Israel were seen as chastisements, administered out of God's parental love for Israel, and the proof texts used for this idea often come from verses in the Book of Proverbs, which describe how a parent should raise a child.

From the parent's perspective, God's actions concerning Israel act as the perfect model for the parent's own actions in raising his/her child. The very act of parenting is recognized as difficult and considered as a highly charitable act. Children are important because parents can gain redemption through them, be it a guarantee of survival after death or a way to guarantee entrance into the world to come. Therefore, the training of children in the details of the covenant is paramount. Torah is the instruction manual for both parent and child. It is the document which defines the covenant, and one's duties

within the covenant. It is the link between the individual Jew, the community of Israel, and God. To study it is of utmost importance, to the point that the instruction of a child in Torah is seen as the equivalent to the initial revelation at Sinai.

Although Torah is revealed to Israel at Sinai, in the perspective of rabbinic literature, Torah was already in the possession of the patriarchs. The story of the transmission of the Jewish covenant is one that actually begins in the patriarchal narratives of Genesis. The parent/child tensions in Genesis focus mainly on which child is worthy of carrying on the heritage of the covenant. Each patriarch (and matriarch) is concerned that the covenantal relationship with God continues. The book of Genesis ends with Jacob (at least in midrash) invoking God as the ultimate parent of his sons, and bequeathing to them the "*Shema*" as a reminder of their relationship with God.

The wilderness experience of the Israelites sets a paradigm of the God/Israel relationship as essentially a parent/child relationship. God's emotions concerning Israel are depicted as multifaceted, that is Israel is at one and the same time the beloved child, for whom God will do anything, yet is also the rebellious child who is never satisfied with what God, the parent, gives to him. The difficulties that Israel experiences in the wilderness are essentially a form of *musar*, chastisement, discipline, or instruction, which are a necessary part of Israel's coming to Torah. God's actions as the parent of Israel the wayward child of the Exodus, provide the model for the actions of all parents.

All parents need to engage in *musar*, which is best defined as an overall methodology of instruction. This *musar* must be strict, yet administered with mercy, and is actually the equivalent to Torah itself. The exact content of the actual instruction is wide ranging, from religious instruction, culture, history, and the practical things a child

will need as a responsible adult who will have to support himself and a family. All of this insures the continuity of the greater covenant of God and Israel.

There are many ways in which the ancient Greek's attitudes towards children coincide with the perspectives of rabbinic literature. The hierarchical structure of the family is certainly the same. Both cultures posit a process of child development to which age appropriate training is assigned. Further, attitudes of the child's obligation to respect the parent and the need for strict discipline as part of the educational regimine. The key difference, however, is in the whole purpose of the training. For the Greeks, the child was to perfect those qualities necessary to become a good citizen of the state. Jewish children are trained within the context of continuing the Jewish covenant with God.

There are always areas that have not been covered in a research paper due to either scope or time restraints. In this case, perhaps the most important of these would be a closer study of the Book of Proverbs and midrashim connected with it. As noted in Chapter Six, the word *musar* appears thirty times in Proverbs. It would be useful to check if any of the ones not cited in this paper are used as proof texts in midrashim, and if so, where and how. In addition, there are other verses in Proverbs which speak to either the parent/child relationship, or to the comparison of the parent/child relationship to the God/Israel relationship.

Further, the wisdom of Ben Sirah has many similarities to the Book of Proverbs. A closer, more complete reading of Ben Sirah, and the passages which touch Proverbs regarding both the parent/child and God/Israel relationships would be useful in tracing the development of ideas between the Biblical book of Proverbs and rabbinic literature.

Another relatively unexplored area in this thesis is the obligations that a child has to their parent. In particular, what does it mean to say that one must honor his or her parents? How is this related to the way one is supposed to honor God? These two are considered equivalent. That statement alone points to a need to find out more details of how and why honoring one's parents and God are considered equivalent. Aristotle says that parents love their children more than children love their parents. Is there a parallel attitude in the Jewish world? Are the obligations to honor one's parents an equivalent expression of love to the duties outlined of a parent to a child? Some of these obligations are outlined in Philo's writings, and there are passages in the Talmud which detail the concepts of honoring parents, but a study of relevant midrash tied to the key Biblical verses would complete this study.

Finally, in this thesis I have made no attempt to relate the attitudes uncovered in rabbinic literature to current parenting issues. To do this, a study of current theories of discipline and education is required. While this might prove to be useful, I will admit that my own prejudice is that much of the day to day details of parenting is a combination of instinct and common sense. Jewish tradition as reflected in the writings of the sages, seems to contain the basic truths about the nature of the parent/child relationship, and tries to elevate them to the level of the sacred. One may often disagree with the methods of the sages, but perhaps the simple truth that the parent/child covenant is holy, is the only one that ultimately matters, because it provides a distinct quality to the parent/child relationship which should infuse all of its interactions.

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