



HANDOUT

How Children are Valued in the Jewish Tradition

In this thought-provoking essay, Rabbi David Rosen discusses the centrality of children in the Jewish tradition.



Rabbi David Rosen, KSG, CBE is the former Chief Rabbi of Ireland and currently serves as the director of the American Jewish Committee's Department of International Interreligious Affairs.

Judaism views childhood as a period of purity, joy, and beauty to be valued and cherished. The Talmud states that, "childhood is a garland of roses" and that, "the very breath of children is free of sin." (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 152, 119).

As Judaism recognizes that a child does not have the cognitive ability to fully distinguish good from evil, the parent has the ultimate responsibility of guiding the child in keeping with the words in Deuteronomy 11:19, "And you shall teach them (the words of God) to your children ... in order that you may lengthen your days and your children's days upon the earth." Similarly Proverbs 1:8 enjoins, "Listen my child to the instruction of your father, and forsake not the teachings of your mother."

Children are regarded as the hope of the future in every society, yet among the Jewish people this concept is enhanced by the view that children are a Divine trust and guarantors of the future. The Book of Psalms (127:3) declares, "Children are an inheritance from the Lord", and in the ancient homiletical tradition, we read that Rabbi Meir said, "When the Children of Israel stood at Mount Sinai to receive divine revelation, the Holy One, blessed be He, said to them: 'Bring me good guarantors that you will keep my revelation and then I will give

Best Practice 2

Create Opportunities for Community Dialogue

Goal 1

Root Your Work in Jewish Tradition

OBJECTIVES

Read and discuss Rabbi David Rosen's essay on the centrality of children in the Jewish tradition.

SETTING

Committee meeting, chabura text study, shiur/class, sermon, other community dialogue

TIME

20 minutes to read together, 30 minutes to respond to questions and discuss.

it to you.' They replied: 'Sovereign of the Universe, our ancestors will be our guarantors.' Said God to them: 'Your guarantors need guarantors themselves, for they have not been without fault.' They answered, 'Our prophets will be our guarantors.' God replied: 'They have also not been without fault.' Then the Israelites said: 'Our children will be our guarantors.' To which God replied: 'In truth these are good guarantors. For their sake I will give it to you.'" (Canticles Rabbah 1:4)

Since Judaism teaches that all human beings are created in the Image of God, human life is therefore sacrosanct and the Talmud (Shabbat 151b) rules accordingly, "One desecrates the Sabbath for the sake of a babe of one day, but not for the dead body even of David, King of Israel." Thus, the sacredness of human life is applied to the infant as soon as she or he is born. The need to enable every child to recognize his or her own dignity and value is expressed in the teaching that "every individual should perceive the world as having been created for his/her own sake." (Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 37a). As a logical consequence of this conception, each child is entitled to be loved and cared for in order that he or she may have the possibility of developing to his/her maximum capability.

Jewish law specifies the rights of children which are the primary obligation of the natural parents, but which in the latter's absence, incapacity or failure, become the responsibility of the community. These include not only the right to life, dignity and freedom; but also to be provided with the skills to survive natural dangers as well as to earn a living and be self-sustaining. They also include the right to establish an independent marital home upon reaching maturity, which requires the provision of a dowry for a girl, as well as property rights (Babylonian Talmud, Kiddushin, 30; Code of Jewish Law, Choshen Mishpat, 149).

While the most basic needs that parents and community must provide for children are those of food, clothing, and protection (Babylonian Talmud, Ketubot 49; Maimonides, Yad, Hilchot Ishut, 12) education has a special place of importance (Mishnah, Chagigah 1:1; Babylonian Talmud Sukkah 42 & Shabbat 121) as providing the values by which children learn to live a holy, spiritual, and moral life, and subsequently pass on the heritage to future generations.

Even in this context, let alone generally, the abuse of children is prohibited even to parents and teachers with good intentions. This especially applies to orphans for whom the community bears responsibility for their needs (Babylonian Talmud Ketubot, 50); Maimonides (Hilchot Deot, 6:10) declares "A person must be especially heedful of his behavior toward widows and orphans, for their souls are exceedingly depressed and their spirits low. Even if they are wealthy, even if they are the widow and orphans of a king, we are especially enjoined concerning them, as it is written, "You shall not afflict any widow or orphan" (Exodus 22 :21). How are we to conduct ourselves toward them? One may not speak to them other than in a tender manner. One must show them courtesy; one must not hurt them physically with hard toil, nor wound their feelings with hard speech. One must take greater care of their property than of one's own. Whoever irritates them, provokes them to anger, pains them, persecutes them, or causes them loss of money, is guilty of serious transgression, and all the more so if one beats them. The One who created the world by God's word made a covenant with widows and orphans that when they cry out because of violence they are answered; as it is written, "Beware of afflicting them in any way, for if they cry at all unto Me I will surely hear their cry!"(Exodus 22:22).

This importance of care for orphans in Judaism is beautifully expressed in the ancient rabbinic homily (Exodus Rabbah 45) that describes the Almighty showing Moses all the treasures prepared in Heaven for the righteous and telling him that the most valuable treasure is reserved for those who bring up orphans.

Precisely in light of modern technology that can so easily circumvent traditional structures of protection and render children vulnerable to manifold dangers, it may be argued that the above mentioned category and teachings apply to all children today.

In addition to the intrinsic value of the child and our responsibilities accordingly, Judaism recognizes that the wellbeing of society as a whole is determined by our treatment of children. Moreover just as we were beneficiaries of such consideration, we are obliged to demonstrate such for future generations. In this regard, Rabbi Yochanan relates in the Talmud the story of a man who planted a carob tree, which is known to bear fruit only after seventy years. When asked whether he thought he would live to eat from the tree, the man replied: "I am doing as my ancestors did. Just as they planted a carob tree for their children, I am planning for my children." (Babylonian Talmud, Ta'anit, 23).

References

Below are the sources cited in Rabbi David Rosen's essay, "How Children are Valued in the Jewish Tradition", for your reference or more intensive text study.

Sources compiled on Sefaria.org.

Shabbat 152a

It was taught in a *baraita* that Rabbi Yosei bar Kisma says: The two feet of one's youth are better than the three of old age, when one walks with a cane. Woe to the one who goes and does not come back. What is this referring to? Rav Hisda said: Youth. Similarly, when Rav Dimi came from Eretz Yisrael to Babylonia he said: Youth is a crown of roses; old age is a crown of thorns.

שבת קנ"ב.

תניא רבי יוסי בר קיסמא אומר טבא תרי מתלת
ווי לה לחדא דאזלא ולא אתיא מאי היא אמר רב
חסדא ינקותא כי אתא רב דימי אמר ינקותא
כלילא דוורדא סבותא כלילא דחילפא

Shabbat 119b

Rav Yehuda said that Rav said: What is the meaning of that which is written: "Do not touch My anointed ones and do My prophets no harm" (I Chronicles 16:22)? "Do not touch My anointed ones," these are the schoolchildren, who are as precious and important as kings and priests (Maharsha); "and do not harm My prophets," these are Torah scholars. Reish Lakish said in the name of Rabbi Yehuda Nesia: The world only exists because of the breath, i.e., reciting Torah, of schoolchildren. Rav Pappa said to Abaye: My Torah study and yours, what is its status? Why is the Torah study of adults worth less? He said to him: The breath of adults, which is tainted by sin, is not similar to the breath of children, which is not tainted by sin. And Reish Lakish said in the name of Rabbi Yehuda Nesia: One may not interrupt schoolchildren from studying Torah, even in order to build the Temple.

שבת קי"ט:

אמר רב יהודה אמר רב מאי דכתיב אל תגעו
במשיחי ובנביאי אל תרעו אל תגעו במשיחי אלו
תינוקות של בית רבן ובנביאי אל תרעו אלו
תלמידי חכמים אמר ריש לקיש משום רבי יהודה
נשיאה אין העולם מתקיים אלא בשביל הבל
תינוקות של בית רבן אמר ליה רב פפא לאבבי
דידי ודיך מאי אמר ליה אינו דומה הבל שיש בו
חטא להבל שאין בו חטא ואמר ריש לקיש משום
רבי יהודה נשיאה אין מבטלין תינוקות של בית
רבן אפילו לבנין בית המקדש

Deuteronomy 11:19

(19) and teach them to your children—reciting them when you stay at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you get up;

דברים י"א:י"ט

(יט) וְלַמְדַתֶּם אֹתָם אֶת־בְּנֵיכֶם לְדַבֵּר בָּם בְּשִׁבְתְּכֶם
בְּבֵיתְכֶם וּבְלַקְחְכֶם בְּדֶרֶךְ וּבְשׁוּבְכֶם וּבְקוּמְכֶם:

Proverbs 1:8

(8) My son, heed the discipline of your father, And do not forsake the instruction of your mother;

משלי א:ח

(ח) שְׁמַע בְּנִי מוֹסֵר אָבִיךָ וְאַל־תִּשְׁחָט תוֹרַת אִמְךָ:

Psalms 127:3

(3) Sons are the provision of the LORD; the fruit of the womb, His reward.

תהלים קכ"ז:ג

(ג) הִנֵּה נַמְלֵת ה' בְּנִים שְׂכָר פְּרִי הַבֶּטֶן:

Shir HaShirim Rabbah 1:4

Rabbi Meir said, "When the Children of Israel stood at Mount Sinai to receive divine revelation, the Holy One, blessed be He, said to them: 'Bring me good guarantors that you will keep my revelation and then I will give it to you.' They replied: 'Sovereign of the Universe, our ancestors will be our guarantors.' Said God to them: 'Your guarantors need guarantors themselves, for they have not been without fault.' They answered, 'Our prophets will be our guarantors.' God replied: 'They have also not been without fault.' Then the Israelites said: 'Our children will be our guarantors.' To which God replied: 'In truth these are good guarantors. For their sake I will give it to you.'"

שיר השירים רבה א:ד

אמר רבי מאיר בשעה שעמדו ישראל לפני ה' סיני לקבל התורה, אמר להם הקדוש ברוך הוא אלעיקי אני נותן לכם את התורה, אלא הביאו לי ערבים טובים שתשמרוה, ואני נותנה לכם. אמרו לפניו רבונו של עולם, אבותינו ערבים לנו. אמר להם אבותיכם צריכין ערבים... אמרו הרי בנינו ערבים אותנו. אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא הא ידאי ערבים טובים, על ידיהם אתננה לכם.

Shabbat 151b

Incidental to the Gemara's discussion of corpses, it cites that which was taught in a baraita: Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel says: For a living day-old baby, one desecrates Shabbat to save his life. Yet for the deceased David, king of Israel, one does not desecrate Shabbat.

שבת קנ"א:

תניא רבן שמעון בן גמליאל אומר תינוק בן יומו חי מחללין עליו את השבת דוד מלך ישראל מת אין מחללין עליו את השבת תינוק בן יומו חי מחללין עליו את השבת

Rabbi Rosen, Value of Children in the Talmud

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Sukkah 42a

It is taught in the mishna: A minor who knows how to wave the lulav is obligated in the mitzva of lulav. The Sages taught: A minor who knows how to wave the lulav is obligated in the mitzva of lulav; one who knows how to wrap himself in a garment, is obligated in the mitzva of ritual fringes; if he knows to preserve the sanctity of phylacteries in a state of cleanliness, his father buys him phylacteries; if he knows how to speak, his father immediately teaches him Torah and Shema.

סוכה מ"ב.

קטן היודע לנענע: ת"ר קטן היודע לנענע חייב בלולב להתעטף חייב בציצית לשמור תפילין אביו לוקח לו תפילין יודע לדבר אביו לומדו תורה וק"ש

Mishneh Torah, Human Dispositions 6:10

A man is obliged to watch out for orphans and widows, for their soul is very lowly, and their spirit humble even though they be wealthy in money, even though they be the widow and orphans of a king, we are charged concerning them, for it is said: "Ye shall not afflict any widow or fatherless child" (Ex. 22.22.). What, then, are the rules of conduct toward them? One must not speak to them save in soft words; not to treat them in any way, save in an honorable way; not to pain their body with labor, nor their heart with hard words; to be careful with their money more than with the money of one's own self. He who worries them, or vexes them, or pains them, or masters them, or causes the loss of their money, violates a prohibitive commandment, needless to mention one who smites them or curses them. This prohibitive commandment, notwithstanding that the punishment of flogging is not inflicted for its violation, behold, the punishment therefor is plainly stated in the Torah: "My wrath shall wax hot, and I will kill you with the sword" (Ibid. 22.23).

שפלה למאד ורוחם נמוכה אף על פי שהן בעלי ממון. אפלו אלמנתו של מלך ויתומיו מזהרים אנו עליהן שנגמר (שמות כב כא) "כל אלמנה ויתום לא תענוו". והיאך נוהגין עמהן. לא ידבר אליהם אלא רכות. ולא ינהג בהן אלא מנהג כבוד. ולא יכאיב גופם בעבודה וליבם בדברים קשים. ויחוס על ממונם יותר מממון עצמו. כל המקניטן או מקעיטן או הכאיב להן או רדה בהן או אבד ממונן הרי זה עובר בלא תעשה וכל שכן המכה אותם או המקללן. ולא זה אף על פי שאין לוקין עליו הרי ענשו מפרש בתורה (שמות כב כג) "וחרה אפי וחרגתי אתכם בחרב".

Taanit 23a

One day, [Honi] was walking along the road when he saw a certain man (Rabbi Yochanan) planting a carob tree. Honi said to him: This tree, after how many years will it bear fruit? The man said to him: It will not produce fruit until seventy years have passed. Honi said to him: Is it obvious to you that you will live seventy years, that you expect to benefit from this tree? He said to him: That man himself found a world full of carob trees. Just as my ancestors planted for me, I too am planting for my descendants. Honi sat and ate bread. Sleep overcame him and he slept. A cliff formed around him, and he disappeared from sight and slept for seventy years. When he awoke, he saw a certain man gathering carobs from that tree. Honi said to him: Are you the one who planted this tree? The man said to him: I am his son's son.

תענית כ"ג.

יומא חד הוה אזל באורחא חזייה לההוא גברא דהוה נטע חרובא אמר ליה האי עד כמה שנין טעין אמר ליה עד שבעין שנין אמר ליה פשיטא לך דחייט שבעין שנין אמר ליה האי [גברא] עלמא בחרובא אשכחתייה כי היכי דשתלי לי אבהתי שתלי נמי לבראי יתיב קא כריך ריפתא אתא ליה שינתא נים אהדרא ליה משוניתא איכסי מעינא ונים שבעין שנין כי קם חזייה לההוא גברא דהוה קא מלקט מינייהו אמר ליה את הוה דשתלתיה א"ל בר בריה אנא