

Sermon 7.28.18

Honor Your Father and Your Mother

In this week's parsha, Va'etchanan, Moses repeats the ten commandments. The commandment to respect your parents appears in our parsha as: "kaved et avicha v'et imecha" -- "honor" your father and your mother.

But we also have another version of this mitzvah in the Torah. Moses says: "Ish, imo ve'aviv tira-u" that you should "revere" your parents.

The rabbis in the Talmud (Kiddushin 31b) ask: What is the difference between "honor" and what is "revere"? The answer given is that "revere" means that a child must neither stand nor sit in his father's place, nor contradict his words in public, nor side with his father's opponent in an argument.

Honor means that a child must give his parents food and drink, clothe and cover them, and lead them in and out when they are old and are in need of help.

When I was in Israel I saw a book called "Horim Tovim Miday" (translated as "Parents Who are Too Good") where the authors argue that in today's world, especially in Israel, children have lost all respect for our parents.

Here's a joke example about parents needing to be tougher on their kids:

A Jewish mother charges into her son's room. "You've got to get up for school, Bernie."

Bernie pulls the blanket over his head. "I don't want to go to school."

"You have to go," the mother says.

"I don't wanna. The teachers hate me, and all the kids make fun of me."

The mother pulls the blanket down. "Bernie, you don't have any choice. You have to go to school."

Yeah, Bernie says. "Give me one good reason."

"You're fifty two years old, and you're the principal."

Sometimes you just gotta be tough. "Horim Tovim Miday," the book I mentioned, really lays it on the line. You want to tame teen violence and wild kids we keep hearing about in the news these past few weeks -- want to deal with the growing problem of drugs in school age children or address kids having less respect for teachers and parents?

Then (according to the book) we need to re-introduce our young people to two words that have fallen out of favor in the last decade or so -- the words are "punishment and rules."

A lack of boundaries, they say, is the problem; and the way to fix it is by restoring parental authority, setting boundaries for children and insisting that they be respected.

Punishments and even a well placed "patch on the tuchus" can do a world of good, say. I would actually say that they have gone too far on this one. It may be a generational thing, but most people my age would not agree that some hitting of kids is okay.

So I think the model makes me uncomfortable — but I do agree that there is some merit to the approach of being more strict with children.

It's actually the same model that we use to look at the children of Israel -- that Tisha B'av, the destruction of the our first and second temples as a punishment from God -- for not behaving as we should.

The idea is that God destroyed the Temple because we treated each other with "sinat chinam" -- causeless hatred. We ignored our prophets telling us -- if you are keep the rituals of my sacrifices but do not care for one another then you will lose your Temple.

But our model has a great redeeming quality that I think was missing in the book about parents being too good to their children. Maybe God and parents do need to lay down solid rules -- keep Shabbat, be home by ten, whatever the rules are -- it gives us structure and even shows us that the authority figure cares enough to set standards..

And perhaps we do need to understand that their will be consequences for our actions.

But in Judaism, after Tisha B'av (the punishment) we have Shabbat Nachamu — the Shabbat of consolation. The message is that God may get angry, but there is a time for making up -- for God to say -- I am still here in a relationship with you. I am still here for you.

Just as a parent says to a child -- I will always love you -- even if I don't like what you do sometimes.

Shabbat Shalom