

Of Rods and Spoiled Children

- Basil Herring.

Fatherhood, Israel, and Torah come together in a marvelous way in a brief passage of the parsha: And you shall know in your heart, that just as a father disciplines his son, so the Lord your God disciplines you, that you observe His commandments, go in His ways, and fear Him. For the Lord your God brings you to a good land, a land flowing with water in the valley and in the mountain. Deuteronomy 8:5-7

On this Shabbas morning I will talk of several subjects close to my heart: fatherhood, Israel, and Torah. For, you see, they come together in a marvelous way in a brief passage of the parshah, and it is this:

And you shall know in your heart, that just as a father disciplines his son, so the Lord your God disciplines you, that you observe His commandments, go in His ways, and fear Him. For the Lord your God brings you to a good land, a land flowing with water in the valley and in the mountain. Deuteronomy 8:5-7

There are two texts that I would like to adduce, to help us understand these verses. The first, you might say, is from a rather unlikely source, a best-seller by a black comedian, entitled Fatherhood, by Bill Cosby. It reads as follows:

“Nothing is harder for a parent than getting your kids to do the right thing. There is such a rich variety of ways for you to fail: by using threats, by using bribery, by using reason, by using example, by using blackmail, or by pleading for mercy.... I succeeded once. It happened after my son, who was 12 at the time, had sent me on a trip to the end of my rope. He had taken up a new hobby: lying, and he was doing it so well, that he was raising it to an art. Disturbing letters were coming from school—disturbing to me, not to him, for he was full of the feeling that he could get away with anything; and he was right. “No longer are we going to ask you to do something,” I told him one day, “we’re going to tell you that you’d better do it. This is the law of our house: you do what we tell you to do. Do you understand?” “Yes Dad,” he said. A few days later I called from Las Vegas, and learned from my wife that this law of the house had been broken, and the outlaw was my son. A few days later, I came home, but I couldn’t find the boy. He didn’t make an appearance at dinner, and when I awoke the next morning he still wasn’t there. So I assembled my staff and solemnly said: “Ladies, where is my son?” “He’s around here somewhere, one of my daughters said. They were the French underground hiding one of their heroes from the Nazis. At last just before dinner, he entered the house, tired of wandering in the wilderness.

“Young man,” I said, let’s go over to the barn.” He may have been slow in his studies, but by now he must have suspected that I wasn’t planning a lesson in animal husbandry. When we reached the barn, I said “son, we are now going to have a little talk about breaking the law and lying.” As the boy watched me roll up my sleeves, his usual cool gave way to fear., even though I was a father with absolutely no batting average. I had never before hit him or any of the other children. Was I making a mistake now? If so, it would just be mistake number 9,763. “Dad I know I was wrong,” he said, “and I’m really sorry for what I did. I’ll never do it again.” “I appreciate your saying that,” I said, “and I love you; but I made a promise to you, and you

wouldn't respect me if I broke it." "O Dad I'd respect you, I'd respect you like crazy!" "Son, it's too late." "It's never too late!" He was reaching heights of legal eloquence, which didn't help him, because I've often wanted to hit lawyers too. "Just turn around," I said. "I want you to know that this is a form of punishment I truly do not believe in." To which he answered "I hate to see you go against your principles, Dad." Said I "I can make an exception. I also won't say that this will hurt me more than it will hurt you: that will be true only if I turn around and let you hit me. This is simply a barbaric form of punishment, but it happens to match your barbaric behavior." And then I hit him. He rose up on his toes in the point position and the tears began. "Now do you understand my point about never lying again?" "O yes, Dad!" he said, I've never understood it better." "Fine, now you can go." He turned around to leave, and I hit him again. When he turned back to me with a look of having been betrayed, I said "I'm sorry, I lied. Do you ever want me to lie to you again?" "No Dad," he said. And to this day, he has not lied again to me or my wife. Moreover, we received a letter from his school taking credit for having done a wonderful job on our son. I'm glad I had been able to supplement this work by the school with my own parent-student conference in the barn. Could I have done anything else to put him on the road to righteousness? My wife and I spent long hours pondering this question. The problem was that the reservoir was empty; we had tried all the civilized ways to redirect him, but he kept feeling he could wait us out and get away with anything. And we loved him too much to let him go on thinking that." Fatherhood, pp. 91-95.

"As a father disciplines his son, so the Lord your God disciplines you," indeed. Or as Solomon, the wisest of all men, put it in Proverbs 13:24 הֹוֹסֶקֶחַ שִׁיטּוֹ, sonei beno; ve'ohavo, shiharo musar: "the father who spares the rod hates his son, but if he loves him he will discipline him at times." It is, I know, a provocative issue. The very words used conjure up horror: Corporal punishment, child abuse, children who are beaten by enraged fathers or mothers, sometimes to the point of disfigurement or even death. And yet what are we to do, in light of our parshah that describes God Himself as inflicting physical pain on His otherwise incorrigible children, for their own benefit? What of the Solomonic advice against spoiling the child by sparing, or withholding, the rod, and that teaches explicitly, as Bill Cosby puts it, that sometimes you hit your kid because you love him so much, and can't let him get away with self-destructing behavior. One answer, I would say, is that there is indeed a time for physical punishment of an errant child: namely, after every other loving strategy has been tried and found wanting, and only once in a very long while, and only so as to inflict pain but not injury, and not at a moment of anger but of calm and measured response, and only when the child is old enough to understand right from wrong, but not so old when as a teen the action will likely have the opposite effect, then may one, in Imitatio Dei, strike a child—with love. The phrase some use, being "tough love."

I know that some will disagree with me. And perhaps it is my strict, British-oriented, un-American educational background that leads me to such a position. Indeed I can recall being caned on more than one occasion in school for my youthful excesses. I dare say, in retrospect, that I am the better for it. As are my children. I would submit as well, that many adolescent delinquents in this country would have been better off had they had a tough father like Bill Cosby, and school teachers like some of those I had. In this context, as we saw this week, the inability of parents to discipline their children effectively already makes law-enforcement in the US a nightmare: not the least being the need to spend \$30 billion dollars combating lawlessness

around the country, building more prisons, hiring ever more policemen, or expanding the number of death penalty violations to put fear in the hearts of criminals.

But my canvas this morning, as mentioned earlier, is somewhat broader than this particular issue of punishment, parental or otherwise. Here I would refer to a most suggestive text found in the Gemara Brachot 5a.

Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai stated: God gave three fine gifts to Israel, and all three can only be acquired through yissurin, or suffering. The three are Torah, the Land of Israel and the World to Come. Torah, because it says in Psalms 94: Barukh ha-gever asher teyasrenu kah, u-mi'toratekha telamdenu. "Blessed is the man whom God disciplines and who learns from His Torah." The land of Israel, because it says (in our parshah) "as a father disciplines his son, so the Lord your God disciplines you, that you observe His commandments, go in His ways, and fear Him," followed immediately by "For the Lord your God brings you to a good land." And the World to Come, as it says in Proverbs 6, Ki ner mitzvah ve'Torah or, ve'derekh chayim toh'akhhot musar. "Commandments are a candle, the Torah is light, and the path to eternal life is via disciplinary rebuke."

Listen to how Rabbi Ben Zion Firer explains this ma'amar: Hazal teach us (Shabbat 130a) that those mitzvahs which Jews suffer most for, are those which they continue to uphold and observe under the most extreme and difficult circumstances. When Roman oppressors forbade the bris on pain of death, the Jewish people insisted on maintaining that mitzvah, more than all others. Paradoxically, easy mitzvahs are the first to go, to lose their hold on the Jew. For this reason, says Rabbi Firer, it is fundamentally wrong to assume that tailoring the commandments to make them easier or more convenient for the Jewish masses, will cause assimilating Jews to observe them the better. It simply doesn't work that way. Making Judaism more convenient, diluting the discipline demanded by the life of mitzvah, leads not to more commitment by Jews, but less. Our contemporary experience indeed bears this out: today the branches of Judaism that flourish most, are the ones who require more, who make fewer compromises, who insist on greater halakhic discipline. (And in our own synagogue: when we make it easier to come and learn Torah from outstanding rabbis, such as we did this past Sunday evening, with a scintillating speaker and topic, only a few consider it important enough to make the minimal effort to attend.)

And if this is true of Torah, it is certainly true of the acquisition of the land of Israel. Yet again this week we have seen how much Jews everywhere are required to sacrifice and suffer for Israel: devastating bombs in Argentina and London, ongoing killings in Israel and the territories, and wrangling over Jerusalem, even as erstwhile enemies from across the Jordan shake hands in Washington. Such struggle over a territory so tiny; so much concession and renunciation of self and national interest, so that Jews can live in our ancient homeland with security and dignity. Shimon bar Yochai was right: God gave us that "good land," but not without real sacrifice and discipline in the bargain, not just in Moses' time, but in every generation, up to and including our own.

But if that is true, as it surely is, let us accept that difficult and challenging destiny as one decreed by our loving Father, Avinu she-ba-Shamayim, the Almighty Himself. If enjoying the benefits of Torah require of us that we shoulder the sometimes onerous yoke of the mitzvot, not just bris milah, but shabbas and yomtov, kashrus and tefilin, minyan and mikveh, then let us view them as we appreciate now, in retrospect, the impositions of our loving parents. And if, in

order to ensure the Jewish title to Eretz Yisrael, we are called upon to make sacrifices in blood or money, let us step up to the breach, and do what we can, to strengthen Israel and the Jewish people, in these extraordinary times for the modern history of Israel.

If we will find the inner strength to rise to the challenge; to accept lovingly and with courage the God-given disciplines of Torah and mitzvah, even as we respond selflessly to the often painful and onerous exigencies of modern Jewish life as committed Zionists and concerned fellow Jews, I have no doubt that the third reward of Rabbi Yohanan will be ours as well: to enjoy our heavenly Father's bountiful blessing of eternal life, filled with joy, and pleasure, and His radiance, rather than His rod, forever, extended over us and over our brothers and sisters, ah-einu kol beit Yisrael, Amen.