

Parashat *Eikev*

פרשת עקב

Book of Deuteronomy

This week's Torah portion, Parashat *Eikev*, deals with the conditions of the contract – the human contract. I see in this the contract between a leader and his community, between a parent and his children – a kind of Biblical “Dr. Spock” if you will. Fittingly, my commentary is based, in part, on the prologue of psychologist Chaim Amit's book Parents as Leaders – Becoming an Influential Parent.

In the Book of Deuteronomy, in the contracts between the people of Israel and G-d, the people of Israel are repeatedly portrayed as the child with G-d as the parent. G-d is shown to be a party in the contract – a kind of stern, cautionary and chastising character, always promising and threatening. I almost feel G-d's accusing finger for most of the chapters of this portion, threatening “If...then” and “Don't say that I did not tell you so...”.

Some examples: “If you keep my commandment, you will live.” ... “If you heed my laws, and obey them...then G-d will honor his covenant and his promise of benevolence made to our forefathers and foremothers.”

Let's consider the approaches of many modern parenting experts: Alfred Adler (who determined that the best way to socialize a child was to provide him with hope and trust) or Carl Jung (who discovered the healing powers of the soul alongside the dark and destructive sides of the subconscious) or Dr. Benjamin Spock who wrote in his best-selling parenting guide (whose sales for twenty years were surpassed only by sales of the Bible), “You know more than you think. Don't be overly intimidated by the experts. Better to be natural and listen to your instincts and make a mistake than to anxiously do everything by the book.” Spock calmed parents and encouraged them to act out of love and not to be afraid of expressing emotions in parenting. He called for parents to moderate the strict education that was popular at the time with forgiveness and unconditional love towards their children.

I do not believe that Adler, Jung or Spock would agree with G-d's parenting as presented in this week's portion.

In his best-selling book The Psychological Care of Infant and Child written at the beginning of the 20th century, psychologist and behaviorist John Watson decreed, “Never kiss your children...never sit them on your lap, never rock them in their cradle. If you must, kiss them once on the forehead when your child wishes you good night and shake his hand in the morning”. (Watson, J.B. (1928). *Psychological care of infant and child*. New York: Norton. p.81).

Psychologist Chaim Amit writes that this educational approach was rigid and obsessive. Parents, just like commanders in basic training, tried to first break their children's spirit in order to build up the “perfect” adult – ambitious, moral, serious and obedient. Parents were determined to nip their children's bad habits in the bud. Perhaps Watson's parenting theories were taken from the “parental” approach G-d demonstrates in this week's portion?

While over-strictness, rigidity and parents who did not listen enough characterized the educational approach at the beginning of the 19th century; the late 20th and early 21st centuries are plagued by a total breakdown of parental authority.

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Many parents find themselves acting quite differently as parents than they had expected. They dreamed of a united and harmonious family, yet modern family life is hardly that when each family member has his/her own separate agenda. They imagined a family whose lifestyle would be determined by their parents' values and traditions, and find themselves living according to their children's TV and computer schedules. They wanted to raise their children to be independent people, yet find themselves in bitter power struggles with their children over basic personal habits (teeth-brushing, homework, cleaning their rooms...). They wanted to help their children be happy and feel good about themselves, yet they feel their children's alienation and estrangement daily. They wanted to help their children develop positive relationships; yet find themselves continually admonishing their children and creating resentment and animosity.

Once it became clear that the permissive parenting approach was "bankrupt", opposing voices began to call for balancing the liberal-democratic education with firmer treatment and more authority on the part of teachers and parents. Experts began to loudly call for the return of "parental authority" and the affirmation of "teacher's authority" and for clear definition of "parental rights" alongside the rights of the child.

In the midst of these unstable social times, Chaim Amit offers the model of the parent as leader. This is a model that bridges between the extremes of the overly-authoritative approach as seen in G-d's treatment of the Jewish people, the approach of the parent as a commander – with the softer model of the spineless and overly-permissive parent.

On the one hand, the family is an organization in need of leadership, just as all organizations – including our community and our society. If parents do not lead their families, their children are likely to do it for them – as happens, sadly, in all too many families today.

Parents must understand that it is both their right and obligation to set the family's rules and boundaries. It is important for parents to listen to their children, to understand their needs and difficulties, but not compromise on the "big picture" of the greater needs of the family, the "organization".

Today's parents are required to make a greater effort than ever to shape the family reality and not be shaped by it, to lead their children and not be led by them. Parental leadership takes into account the children's needs, yet leaves the management of the family in the hands of the parents. It is critical that parents understand that in order to correctly lead their family, they must listen intently not just to themselves, but also, and perhaps mainly, to their children. It is important that parents remember that in order to successfully lead their families, they must have their children's trust.

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No doubt that G-d's approach to leadership, as portrayed in this week's portion, is one that favors minimalizing the child while strengthening the parent, one that accepts parental authority as absolute and rewards good behavior. I ask myself how *Parashat Eikev* would have been written in light of the changing educational approaches of the last 200 years?

How, in our time, do we learn how to guide without coercion, how to influence without force? I see this as the challenge facing modern leadership in general and communal and parental leadership in specific.

Shabbat Shalom!

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