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בס"ד

Parashat Yitro Part IV Visiting Iniquity of Fathers upon Sons

1. A Jealous G-d

After prohibiting all forms of idolatry, the second commandment continues with the following: “For I, Hashem your G-d, am a jealous G-d” (Exod. 20:5). The attribute employed, אֲנִי, invokes imagery of an enraged husband resentful of his wife’s directing her affections to another. Hashem’s covenant with Israel – although at this point it may not as yet have fully addressed the issue of the nonexistence of other deities – requires faithfulness and exclusive loyalty to Him; infidelity is construed as provoking His wrath as it does that of a jealous husband. (Marriage imagery associated with the covenant is attested a number of times in Scripture.)

The verse continues: פָּקֵד עֲוֹן אֲבוֹת עַל בְּנֵיהֶם וְגו', “who visits the iniquity of fathers upon sons, upon the third and upon the fourth [generations] to those that hate Me, and who does kindness to the thousands [of generations] to those that love Me and keep My precepts.”

Multigenerational retribution is attested four times in the Torah, in each instance connected with the most egregious of transgressions. In both Decalogue formulations it is invoked for idolatry. In Exodus 34:7, in the context of the reestablished covenant subsequent to the golden calf apostasy, Hashem includes multigenerational retribution among His attributes. In Numbers 14:18, Moses cited it in his prayer for forgiveness following the nation’s rejection of the promised land, also a major breach of the covenant. It appears that multigenerational retribution is only applicable to cases of major breaches of the covenant.

How is such retribution to be understood? Does G-d punish innocent children for the sins of their parents?

If so, even if such a policy is to serve as a deterrent, can it be reconciled with the natural, almost intuitive, human definition of justice?

At the outset it must be emphasized that the concept of multigenerational retribution in the Torah refers exclusively to retribution meted out directly by the Deity in His own legal justice realm. Regarding measures dispensed by a human court, the Torah states: “Fathers shall not be put to death for sons, nor sons be put to death for fathers; a person shall be put to death only for his own sin” (Deut. 24:16). This verse refers to the realm of earthly administration of justice. It appears amid a cluster of human responsibilities and is formulated as a directive to a human court; indeed, a statement concerning the divine court of justice at that point in the text would be anomalous. The key verb וְקָטַל is elsewhere always employed for execution at human hands. King Amaziah quotes this verse as the legal source that prohibits execution of the sons of his father’s assassins (2 Kings 14:5-6). Although speaking about the death penalty, this proscription has been understood as totally banning all human vicarious punishment.

Thus, in discussing “visits the iniquity of fathers upon sons,” we are theorizing about what the Deity does in His realm. Whatever explanation we give does not affect the reality of things since it does not relate to any action that may be undertaken by human initiative.

2. A Major Qualification

The Talmud (*b. Ber. 7a*; *b. Sanh. 27b*) significantly diminishes the scope of G-d’s punishment of “visits the iniquity of fathers upon sons.” It construes it as only applicable when sons continue in the evil ways

of their fathers. It cites a verse in the Leviticus execration that implies this principle: וְהִנְשָׂאֲרִים בְּכֶם וְיִמְקוּ בְּעוֹנֵיכֶם...וְיִמְקוּ בְּעוֹנֵי אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם אִתְּכֶם וְיִמְקוּ (‘‘And they that remain among you shall waste away in their sins...and even in the sins of their fathers that are with them shall they waste away’’ [Lev. 26:39]).

Although the Talmud does not cite it, some scholars detect this qualification in the Decalogue passage itself. The ‘‘visits iniquity’’ clause specifies לְשׂוֹנְאֵי (‘‘to those that hate Me’’). They view this as a reference to the sons that hate G-d, restricting retribution for fathers’ sins to such children. Similarly, His kindnesses that extend to future generations לְאַהֲבָיִם (‘‘to those who love Me and keep My commandments’’) also extends only to those children who maintain love for Him and are faithful to His commandments.

Others, however, understand ‘‘to those that hate Me’’ as referring to the sinning fathers, not their children. The syntax fits the fathers very well. Hashem warns: Do not engage in idolatry, for I am a jealous G-d who visits fathers’ sins on their sons, for those (fathers) who hate Me. That would imply that the sins of those who do not hate Him (less severe sinners) are not visited upon their children. This supports the distinction pointed out in the previous section between the major and all other transgressions. Either way, ‘‘to those that hate Me’’ restricts the scope of ‘‘visits iniquity.’’

In the two non-Decalogue Torah attestations of ‘‘visits iniquity,’’ the qualification ‘‘to those that hate Me’’ does not appear. The explanation may be that in those contexts ‘‘visits iniquity’’ is mentioned as one of a number of G-d’s attributes, not focused on a specific sin or theoretical sinner and therefore not calling for a possible qualification of the attribute.

It appears that support for the view that the Decalogue’s qualification ‘‘to those that hate Me’’ applies to the sinful fathers may be found in Deuteronomy 7:9. That verse paraphrases the multigenerational reward statement of the Decalogue in standard chiasmic fashion (with sequence reversal of the clauses): ‘‘to those who love Him and guard His commandments to a thousand generations.’’ In this case, ‘‘those who love Him’’ clearly refers to the parents. Analogously, although multigenerational punishment does not appear in that passage, the

Decalogue’s statement ‘‘to those who hate Me’’ would presumably also refer to the parents. (That this verse speaks of a ‘‘thousand generations’’ in contrast to the Decalogue’s ‘‘thousands’’ may be a result of the absence of the word ‘‘generations’’ in the Decalogue. Both mean ‘‘indefinitely.’’)

It appears that Jeremiah 32:18-19 supports the thesis that ‘‘visits iniquity’’ is restricted only to sons who continue in their father’s sinful ways. In the first of these two verses the prophet cites Hashem’s attribute of multigenerational reward and punishment and in the second he speaks of the principle of individual accountability.

18. Who does kindness to the thousandth (generation) and compensates the iniquity of fathers upon their sons after them....

19. ...whose eyes observe all the ways of men to give each according to his ways and according to the fruits of his doings.

In order that these verses not contradict one another – not to speak of complementing each other, which surely appears to be the intention – the first has been understood as referring to children who continue in the ways of their parents, the second to those who do not. The qualification need not be explicitly stated as these verses are within a context of the prophet speaking to G-d.

3. Interpretations

Concerning the matter of the justice of cross-generational retribution, many have found a ‘‘naturalistic’’ interpretation appealing. G-d created the world with a natural order that possesses a great degree of constancy and with the general effects of human behavior and tendencies as they are. Accordingly, consequences that ensue from this state of affairs may be considered as His doings. The reality of the world is that a man’s evil behavior usually influences his children, causing them to commit fresh offenses. A sinner places the burden of his behavior upon his children and to some extent upon their children also. Thus, by virtue of being the author of the natural order, it can be said that G-d visits the iniquity of fathers on sons.

Although all may agree that this reflects the prevalent reality of the world as we experience it, many have

considered it strained to assume that the Torah would translate so naturalistic a process – with its many exceptions – into so active and definite a verbal clause as “visits the iniquity of fathers upon sons.” Also, why then should cross-generational retribution only apply against those that breach the covenant, as appears to be the case? In addition, how would naturalistic influences account for the huge dissimilarity between four generations of punishment for the sinners and thousands of generations of reward for the faithful, a point the Torah stresses? Some have answered that negative behavioral influences are only overwhelming when the father is a flagrant violator. It also is often the case that in old age – as they observe their progeny – sinners do not advocate the errant path that they had tread and in the course of several generations positive societal influences neutralize his impact. And the complex workings of human free will in resisting negative influences cannot be ignored.

M. D. Cassuto proposed a more refined naturalistic argument in the following comments:

...the verse is directed to the [concept of the] totality of the nation being a united entity throughout time. Since man, particularly an Israelite man, is grieved at the afflictions of his children and grandchildren more than at his own afflictions, Scripture issues a warning, in order to keep man distant from sin: ...it is possible that children and grandchildren will suffer as a consequence of their fathers' or grandfathers' sins. From the other angle, Scripture moves our hearts toward the love of G-d by the guarantee that the beneficent results of such love will endure in the life of the nation and will be imparted upon children, grandchildren and their descendants till thousands of generations.*

He further stated: “The covenant between G-d and Israel is the essence of the nation’s identity and the foundation of its purpose. It is appropriate for every member of the nation to sacrifice a great deal for the opportunity to have this relationship with G-d. If the most potent way to assure the viability of the covenant in Moses’ time was for G-d to treat father and son to some degree as a single entity such that there is cross-generational reward and punishment, it is understandable.”

It is incorrect to construe the above as viewing cross-generational punishment as a case of “the ends justify the means,” punishing the son to benefit the father, which would set a precedent for a dangerous doctrine. As Cassuto interprets it, the system directly benefits everybody by providing a deterrent to all – sons usually are also fathers. In addition, even if the “natural order” interpretation is not accepted as the full intent of the Torah in this matter, it does describe a general evil that usually afflicts the sons of sinning fathers. Thus, G-d’s meting out multigenerational punishment is a deterrent that would ultimately redound to the son’s great advantage.

In any event, although the questions on a naturalistic interpretation seem to have been answered (especially since we are dealing only with G-d’s guidelines for Himself and He would always ensure that justice be done), many have rejected naturalistic approaches in favor of a view that “visits iniquity” depicts an aspect of G-d’s active dispensing of retribution.

Some have explained “visits the iniquity of fathers on sons” as associated with G-d’s mercy. In Numbers 14:18, in Moses’ prayer for forgiveness after the national transgression of refusing to go forward to the promised land, he includes the divine characteristic of “visits the iniquity of fathers on sons.” This may perhaps be understood as asking Hashem in His mercy to spread the full measure of retribution through the generations, to allow the present generation the opportunity to live and mend its ways or at least to keep the covenant extant. In this way, the future generations would also benefit. However, such an interpretation does not seem to fit the Decalogue’s tenor, where the statement is used to warn against idolatry.

The significance of four generations appears to be that an average, full lifespan usually extends through great-grandchildren. It is these descendants whom we assume the sinner cares about. The righteous, on the other hand, are different. They are not selfish and self-centered and are not limited in their concern to their immediate descendants. They identify with G-d’s goal for the betterment of the world and care about the welfare of future generations, even very distant future generations. They are particularly concerned as regards their descendants, even thousands of generations later, those future people that they caused

to be born into the world. It is great satisfaction to the righteous to know that through their behavior they helped someone, that they participated with G-d in instilling goodness into the world, even if they do not specifically know who the recipients will be.

This subject of “visits iniquity” is part of the larger and perhaps most difficult issue in religion, that of theodicy – the fairness of G-d’s system of dispensing reward and punishment. This matter was raised on several occasions by the prophets and discussed a number of times by the sages. Although it is not the primary topic of this study, several comments are in order.

4. Additional Comments

In the Talmud, Rabbi Johanan in the name of Rabbi Jose states that Moses asked G-d to reveal to him why some righteous receive a favorable portion in life while other righteous suffer and why some wicked receive a favorable portion while other wicked suffer (*b. Ber. 7a*). Rabbi Johanan asserts that the answer G-d gave was that it depends on the father – a righteous person may suffer because of his wicked father, etc. The Talmud, in an אָמַר מַר (“the master said”) analysis stemming from a later generation, rejects the possibility that Rabbi Johanan ever transmitted such a view and provides a different explanation as to what G-d answered Moses. Those righteous who receive a favorable portion in life are completely righteous while the righteous who suffer are not completely righteous and the same principle applies in reverse to the wicked.

The reason the Talmud took the unusual step of rejecting the “tradition” received from Rabbi Johanan and imputed a totally different explanation to his statement was because it accepted as an axiom that “Hashem punishes sons for the sins of their fathers only when they continue in their fathers’ ways.” Accordingly, it assumed that the original formulation cited in the name of Rabbi Johanan that he quoted Rabbi Jose had to be mistaken.

In that passage, Rabbi Meir is cited as disagreeing with the statement of Rabbi Johanan in the name of Rabbi Jose. He was of the opinion that Hashem never answered that question of Moses given that לֹא הוֹכֵל לְרִאזוֹת אֶת פְּנֵי (“you cannot perceive My countenance”

[Exod. 33:20]): the answer to Moses’ question is a matter beyond human comprehension. These varying statements cannot be reconciled as the sages clearly had conflicting opinions.

In the Talmud and within classic rabbinic tradition there is the view that G-d sometimes visits the iniquity of parents even on innocent children, but only when those children are very young. For example: “Ribi states: For the sin of violating one’s vows, one’s young children may die” (*b. Sabb. 32b*). Although the Talmud does not connect it to the clause “visits the iniquity of fathers on sons” some do view it as an application of it and of course only relevant for a violation in the sphere punishable by G-d.

The Rambam wrote: “There are transgressions for which the punishment is exacted from...one’s young children, for a person’s young children who do not yet have *da’at* (understanding) and did not reach the obligation of fulfilling the commandments are treated as the parent’s possessions” (*MT, Laws of Repentance 6:1*).

Abarbanel summarizes what he considers the primary rabbinical view:

[G-d “visits the iniquity of fathers upon sons”] when the sons are very young, before the age of accountability for their own actions, for they are then considered extensions of their fathers and may be punished for his sins...until the fourth generation, those that the original idolater may see in his lifetime...[for he] does not have a close feeling to later descendants...When older, they may be punished for their fathers’ sins only when they continue perpetrating those sins...and only in the case of idolatry. Concerning other sins, even if the son continues his father’s evil ways he will only be punished for his own sins.**

5. Individual Accountability

In Ezekiel 18, the prophet resoundingly proclaimed in Hashem’s name the principle of individual accountability. People in Israel used to quote a proverb in reference to the punishment of sons for the sins of their fathers: “Parents eat sour grapes and their sons’ teeth are blunted” (Ezek. 18:2). A short time prior to Ezekiel, in Jeremiah 31:28, amid a series of

consoling prophecies, G-d told Jeremiah that days are coming when this proverb will no longer be cited, but that each man will die in his own sin – he who eats the sour grapes, his teeth only will be blunted. It appears that at that point in the history of Israel it was not yet recognized to be the operative principle in theodicy, but there was an assertion of divine acknowledgement that a transition was in formation.

Ezekiel states in Hashem's name:

What is with you that you quote this proverb upon the soil of Israel, "The fathers eat sour grapes and the teeth of their sons are set on edge"? As I live, says the Lord Hashem, you shall no longer quote this proverb in Israel. Behold, all persons are Mine; as the person of the father, so the person of the son, [both] belong to Me; The person who sins, only he shall die... a son who has seen all the sins that his father committed but has considered and not done like them...he shall not die for the iniquity of his father, but shall surely live...and now you ask, "How is it that the son did not bear the iniquity of his father?" The son did what is just and right, he guarded all My statutes and fulfilled them, he shall surely live. The person who sins, he alone shall die. The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, nor shall the father bear the iniquity of the son; the righteousness of the righteous man shall be accounted to him, and the wickedness of the wicked man shall be accounted to him...And if the wicked man turns back from the wickedness that he practiced, and guards My statutes and does what is just and right, he shall surely live, not die. All the transgressions that he committed will not be accounted to him; in his righteousness that he has performed he shall live...Assuredly, O House of Israel, I shall judge each of you according to his ways...Cast off all your transgressions by which you have offended, and make for yourselves a new heart and a new spirit, for why should you die, O House of Israel? For I do not desire that anyone shall die...Repent and live (Ezek. 18:2-32).

This proclamation, which explicitly states that the righteous son will not share in the punishment of his wicked father, contradicts the biblical clause of "visits the iniquity of fathers upon sons," if the latter is taken without qualification.

In the Talmud (*b. Mak. 24a*), this contradiction is addressed in another manner:

Rabbi Jose the son of Haninah said: Four decrees Moses our master decreed upon Israel – four prophets came and annulled them...Moses said, "visits the iniquity of fathers upon sons" – Ezekiel came and annulled it, "the person who sins – only he shall die."

In Ezekiel's days Israel's situation had greatly deteriorated and was extremely bleak; indeed, the nation's very survival was in doubt. Whether this prophecy of Ezekiel was proclaimed after the Temple's destruction and the nation's dispersal or shortly before – after the exile of Jehoiachin together with the leaders, eleven years earlier – is not easily resolved, but in any case the people were in deep despair. They felt doomed by their fathers' sins and were beginning to give up all hope in a restoration. It was becoming impossible to maintain their commitment to the covenant without a modification on this critical point. The prophet empathized with their problem and represented their situation to G-d.

Rabbi Jose the son of Hanina's choice of words – that Moses decreed and Ezekiel annulled – is most unusual. This is a theological matter of the highest order, describing G-d's mode of governance in the world! Why does he term it Moses' decree? How can we understand this degree of relativity in G-d's governance?

When asked about such matters, Rabbi Solomon D. Sassoon commented along the following lines. Genuine prophets, fully dedicated to G-d's will, play a crucial role in matters of the world that fall into their sphere. Their input possesses cosmic significance. Their monumental efforts kept the covenant extant. G-d considers the prophets' comprehension of His mode of governance crucial to His decision-making and He may modify His methods according to their judgment. G-d taught this lesson to Abraham upon the latter's exemplifying his extraordinary care for strangers in need and in his obvious commitment to instill *derekh Hashem* ("the way of G-d") into the world through his descendants and followers. G-d asked: "Am I to conceal from Abraham that which I am doing?" (Gen. 18:17). He then revealed to Abraham His plans concerning the destruction of

Sodom. In the ensuing dialogue that He had with Abraham, He was receptive to the arguments of His faithful servant. A faithful servant of G-d, who works with total dedication to promote G-d's will, must have, and indeed is granted, a full measure of personal integrity. Abraham expected a standard of divine providence that human reason may sincerely embrace and Hashem agreed with him.

Life, humanity and society are complex and dynamic. The prophets' conceptions as to what is "just and appropriate" in G-d's relationship to the world may change from time to time, based on their sincere, egoless, position and the new circumstances and standards of society. Rabbi Jose the son of Hanina

teaches that G-d is ever sensitive to His faithful servants' honest conceptions and takes their views – which to a certain extent represent the thinking of the righteous and just elements of their constituencies – into account in His governance of the world.

Endnotes

* Commentary on Exodus, Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, third edition, p. 168 (Heb.)

** Commentary on Exodus, 20:5 (Heb.)

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