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KORAH

BITTUL TORAH OR A TASTE OF THE WORLD TO COME? FATHERS AND YOUNG CHILDREN

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Introduction

Recently, I was leafing through a biography of R. Shlomo Zalman Auerbach *zt"l* and came across a section that described his life as a father to young children. His wife, Rebbetzin Chaya Rivka, was incredibly dedicated to R. Shlomo Zalman's Torah study and accordingly "took complete charge of raising the children."¹ At times, she would not even tell him that one of their young children was sick so as not to distract him. Once, R. Shlomo Zalman discovered that his child was running a high fever from a chance meeting with his sister-in-law in the street.

While the author of the biography included these stories to highlight the Rebbetzin's piety, a different angle on these anecdotes stood out for me, a father to four children ages nine years to nine-months. How did R. Shlomo Zalman conceive of fatherhood such that he did not make sure to know that his child was sick? Or even more practically, how much time did he spend daily with his young children such that his wife was able to hide an illness from him?

On a personal level, my life differs regarding both of these points. Practically speaking, no fever would pass without my knowledge. My wife has a career, and accordingly our children occupy a significant percentage of my waking hours (and sometimes hours that should not be waking hours). Somewhere between feeding, bathing, playing, reading, and doing drop-offs and pickups I would notice sick behavior. Also, as a father who feels responsible to take care of his children, I cannot imagine not being aware of a fever.

My goal is not to judge R. Shlomo Zalman's parenting decisions. By all accounts, his interpersonal sensitivity is legendary and can only be matched by his encyclopedic knowledge of Torah. But the gap between our experiences of fatherhood forced me to think about what Torah sources actually say about the role of a father vis-à-vis his young children.

This essay is a partial summary of my initial research and musings. The first section will outline several rabbinic passages about parenting young children and the second section will discuss the

¹ R. Yechiel Michel Stern, *Reb Shlomo Zalman*, [trans. into English](#) by R. Avrohom Yaakov Finkel (New York: C.I.S. Publishers, 1996), 50.

intersection or lack thereof between the Talmudic picture of a young father and the lived reality of many fathers in today's world.

A Mother and Her Young Children

In the Talmud young children, usually defined as six years of age and below, are practically found and meant to be with their mothers. This can be seen from several *sugyot*, but perhaps most notably from the discussion in [Eruvin 82a](#). The background to this *sugya* is that on Shabbat each person has their own "tehum," or an area around their living space within which they are permitted to walk on Shabbat. One can extend his *tehum* in a specific direction by creating an *eruv tehumim* via placing sufficient food for two meals before Shabbat at the edge of what normally would be one's *tehum*. Generally, each person is treated as an individual and one person's *eruv* does not impact the *tehum* of the rest of the family.

The only exception, however, is a mother and her young children. The Talmud ([Eruvin 82a](#)) asserts that if a mother makes an *eruv tehumim*, any child aged six or below is automatically included in her *eruv*. Rashi ([ad loc. s.v. yotzei](#)) explains with the following comment:

She can take [the child] with her as he is like her body and there is an assumption that she intended for him as well since he cannot function without his mother.

Rashi's double formulation ("he is like her body" and "she intended for him") is arguably ambiguous, and the commentators debate if he means to assert that the mother and young child are considered to have a single legal identity ("he is like her body") or just that the child is covered by her *eruv*.² At the very least, there is a strong rabbinic presumption that young children need to be with their mothers, to the extent that novel laws are formulated to accommodate this reality. Importantly, the Talmud is clear that if the father makes an *eruv* in one direction and the mother in another, that the child follows the mother's *eruv*.³

² See *Teshuvot Yad Efraim, siman 5, se'if katan 41*. Even if one focuses on the clause "and she intended [to include] him," there is still a novelty in the connection between a mother and her young children. Generally, if a person makes an *eruv* for himself and someone else, he must place the equivalent of four shabbat meals to establish the two separate *eruv*s. In this case, however, Rambam ([Hilkhos Eruvin 6:21](#)) and others note that the mother does not have to create an additional *eruv* for her child. Rather, the child is automatically subsumed under her *eruv*.

³ It is important to note an opinion that possibly mitigates the extent of the young child's association with the mother. Rosh ([Eruvin 8:2](#)) rules that the father's presence in the city lowers the maximum age of the child being subsumed under the mother's *eruv* to age 5 as

The Talmud does not treat this as an isolated quirk in the laws of *tehum* but uses it as a model for other areas of Halakhah. According to Talmudic law, a husband is obligated to provide a food-stipend for his wife. The Mishnah ([Ketubot 64b](#)) records that if the wife is nursing then the husband must provide more food than the norm. Surprisingly, the Talmud ([Ketubot 65b](#)) extends the duration of this additional support to the first six years of the child's life, and as a justification cites the above law that a young child automatically follows the *eruv* of his/her mother.⁴ Ran (28b s.v. *be-eruv*), seemingly taking his cue from Rashi's above-cited comments, explains: "a six year old still needs his mother and they are like a single body."⁵

In the medieval period, this concept became a crucial determinant for child custody in situations of divorce. Even though generally boys are placed in custody of the father and girls with the mother,⁶ Rambam⁷ ([Hilkhot Ishut 21:17](#)) rules that an exception is made for boys under the age of six who should live with their mother. [Maqqid Mishneh](#) notes that Rambam's source is the above laws regarding *eruv tehumim* and the duration of the wife's increased food stipend.

Father-Teacher

This normative assumption that young children are meant to be with their mothers seems to fit with the Talmud's conception of fatherhood. As traditional⁸ and academic⁹ scholars have noted, the few explicit Talmudic passages that discuss a father's responsibility to

opposed to age 6. This already indicates that a boy begins to associate with his father to a degree at that age.

⁴ Even though the Gemara suggests a rejection of this proof, the final ruling stands as cited above. Accordingly, Rif ([28b](#)) omits the rejection of the proof. For an explanation of why the Mishnah uses the more limited time frame of when the child is nursing, see [Ritva on Ketubot 65b s.v. mai taima](#).

⁵ Ran (28b in pagination of Rif). See, however, *Mishneh le-Melekh* ([Hilkhot Ishut 12:14](#)) and *Avnei Milu'im* (72:1) who cite *Rishonim* who understand that the father has an independent obligation to feed his children ages six and below that is not connected per-se to his obligation to support his wife.

⁶ This is the default position of Halakhah as cited in *Shulkhan Arukh* ([Even ha-Ezer 82:7](#)). However, the best interest of the child is an overriding factor and is usually the primary determinant for a custody arrangement. For an elaboration, see R. Yehoshua Pfeffer, "[Child Custody: A Halachic Appraisal](#)."

⁷ This is cited in [Shulkhan Arukh 82:7](#). Ra'avad, however, argues that a boy under six must be placed with his father since the father has an obligation to teach him Torah. This role of the father will be addressed in the next section.

⁸ See R. Soloveitchik (below); R. Shlomo Aviner, *Hinukh be-Ahavah*, 348-351; R. Mordechai Greenberg, "[Halukat ha-Tafkidim bein ha-Av le-Eim be-Hinukh](#)."

⁹ Mara H. Benjamin, [The Obligated Self: Maternal Subjectivity and Jewish Thought](#) (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2018), 62-63; Hagith Sivan, [Jewish Childhood in the Roman World](#) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 105. Sivan refers to the obligation of the father to teach his child Torah as "the heart of paternal obligations." It is important to note, though, that Sivan, *Jewish Childhood*, 94-96, understands the *Brit Milah* as removing the boy from the maternal and feminine domain and marking the baby as a male and future man. It seems that this "marking" had little ramification on the day to day life of child-care, which still fell on the mother. For a partial support of her theory, see [Rashi to Kiddushin 74a s.v. kol shivah](#).

his children are primarily concerned with his role as a pedagogue. One of the central sources defining the legal obligations of a father to a child is the following Tosefta:¹⁰

A father is obligated with regard to his son to circumcise him, and to redeem him if he is a firstborn son who must be redeemed by payment to a priest, and to teach him Torah, and to marry him to a woman, and to teach him a trade. And some say: A father is also obligated to teach his son to swim.

With the exception of specific rituals and milestones (circumcision, redeeming the firstborn, and marriage) the father's primary long term obligations fall into the realm of teaching: to teach him Torah, a trade and perhaps how to swim.¹¹

Recently, this perspective of fatherhood has been forcefully articulated by R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik. In his essay, "Parenthood: Natural and Redeemed,"¹² the Rav differentiates between two tiers of parenting. In the "natural" community, where children are simply born and must be cared for, "the woman is more concerned with motherhood than the man with fatherhood."¹³ It is the mother who undergoes the physiological and psychological pains of pregnancy and birth, and afterwards she deals with the "caretaking of and attending to the youngster."¹⁴ The father, on the other hand, has a role of "minimal significance"¹⁵ as he is free to come and go as he pleases, unfettered by bonds to the child.

In contrast, "redeemed" parenthood consists of "the great educational commitment to the mesorah... to pass on to the child the covenant, a message, a code, a unique way of life."¹⁶ It is in this tier that the father becomes "father-teacher" and is thrust from the periphery to the center of the child's life. Similarly, the mother is elevated from being a simple caretaker to being a "mother-teacher," responsible for both the material and psycho-spiritual upbringing of her child.¹⁷ From R. Soloveitchik's writing it is clear that he conceives of the mother as sacrificing her freedom to care for her young children,¹⁸ while the father's primary role is "attained through education."¹⁹

If fatherhood is primarily conceived in pedagogical terms, it follows that the father will be less involved at the early stages of his child's life. Six years of age roughly corresponds to when the Talmud recommends a child begin to receive formal schooling and lessons,²⁰ and therefore that will be the age at which a father becomes a more

¹⁰ [Kiddushin 29a](#). All translations of Talmud Bavli are from [sefaria.org](#).

¹¹ Similarly, see [Kiddushin 31a](#) that it is more natural for a son to fear rather than honor his father since "his father teaches him Torah."

¹² R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, [Family Redeemed](#) (New York, NY: Toras HoRav Foundation, 2000), 105-125.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 106.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 107.

¹⁷ R. Meir Soloveitchik in his essay "[The Jewish Mother: a Theology](#)" *Azure* 20 (Spring 2005) develops R. Soloveitchik's models to explain the meaning behind matrilineal descent.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 110-111.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 122. Both R. Soloveitchik, [Family Redeemed](#), 109, 121-123, and Mara Benjamin, [The Obligated Self](#), note the rabbinic expansion of fatherhood to one's students is indicative of the role of an actual father.

²⁰ [Ketubot 50a](#); [Bava Batra 21a](#).

dominant force in a child's life.²¹ This is especially true if we are to follow R. Soloveitchik's understanding that the paternal educational role primarily consists of teaching Torah as "an intellectual discipline" and a "system of thought" as opposed to the mother who transmits the "experiential" and "romantic" side of Judaism.²² The formal study of texts is usually beyond the capabilities of a young child and therefore the father must wait until the child is over six years old to assume a dominant role in his child's life.

In summary, the Talmudic father seems to be removed from his young child on two levels. First, the father's role is to educate his child and not to be a caretaker, a task which falls upon the mother. Second, even the form of education that falls within the father's purview is generally not relevant to a young child.²³

Fatherly Involvement

However, it is important to note that the lack of a formal legal obligation does not necessarily mean that, in rabbinic sources, fathers practically ignored their young children. For example, rabbinic literature contains stories and anecdotes which demonstrate that even great rabbis were invested in their children's play. In one passage ([Yoma 78b](#)), Abaye cites his mother that at a certain developmental stage, a child must have "a vessel to break" for play and enjoyment. The Talmud affirms this statement by relaying a story about Rabbah who "bought cracked ceramic vessels for his children, and they broke them for their enjoyment." While we do not know if Rabbah himself partook of the fun, it appears evident that he was aware of his children's needs and brought them toys.

Going one step farther, a midrash ([Midrash Tehillim 92:13](#)) records the following amusing story:

There was a person who wrote in his will²⁴ "my son shall not inherit anything from me unless he becomes a fool (*shoteh*)."
R. Yosi b. Yehudah and Rabbi went to ask the law from R. Yehoshua b. Karhah. When they reached his house they saw him on his hands and feet with a straw in his mouth and he was crawling after his son. When they saw him they hid themselves. When they entered they asked him their question. R. Yehoshua b. Karhah began to laugh and said to them "I swear – your question was just happening to me!" He continued: "When a person has children he acts as if he is a fool."

R. Yehoshua b. Karhah interpreted the meaning of the will based on his own experiences as a father. Parenthood engenders silly

²¹ The choice of the gender-neutral word "child" follows R. Soloveitchik who, in the above-cited essay, consistently speaks of a father's obligation to educate "the child" and does not differentiate between sons and daughters. In the Talmudic period itself the formal obligation of education was legally and practically limited to sons. See, [Kiddushin 29b](#) and Sivan, *Jewish Childhood*, 146-151. However, see Judith Hauptman, "A New View of Women and Torah Study In the Talmudic Period," *JSIJ* 9 (2010): 249-292 for a series of rabbinic passages where women have halakhic knowledge and are assumed to be familiar with the halakhic discourse by their male relations.

²² [Family Redeemed](#), 114-115. See, also, his "A Tribute to the Rebbitzin of Talne."

²³ However, we do find that for items that require less maturity and cognitive capabilities, such as the recitation of Shema and learning Hebrew, a father's obligation begins at a younger age ([Sukkah 42a](#)).

²⁴ The word used is דיייתיקי. For the technical meaning of this term, see [Bava Metzia 19a](#).

behaviors in the context of playing with one's child, and therefore the clause that the son should receive the money when he "becomes a fool" really refers to when he becomes a parent. We see both from R. Yehoshua b. Karhah's behavior and from his concluding statement that it was considered normal for a father to let down his adult guard and play with his child in a silly manner.

Moving from play to emotional attachment, there is at least one source which assumes it was standard for young boys to feel very attached to their fathers. When listing various accessories that are considered a form of clothing and therefore not subject to the prohibition of carrying on Shabbat, the Mishnah ([Shabbat 66b](#)) teaches that "young boys (*banim*) may go out on Shabbat with knots." After a discussion about the identity of these knots, the [Gemara](#) concludes:

Rather, what are these knots? Like that which Avin bar Huna said that Rav Hama bar Gurya said: A son who has longings for his father and has a difficult time leaving him, the father takes a strap from the right shoe and ties it on the boy's left arm as a talisman to help the child overcome his longings.²⁵

It is clear from this passage that it was normal for young boys to feel separation anxiety when leaving their father's presence. This would seemingly indicate that fathers were a major presence in their young boys' lives, although the age of the child under discussion is unclear. Perhaps the Talmud only refers to children who are seven and above who generally spend more time with their fathers, which would make the direct relevance of this passage for our discussion of children six and below questionable.

Young Children as a Distraction

Notwithstanding the above passages, there are sources that seem to actively discourage a father from spending too much time with his young children as they will distract him from more pressing obligations. Most prominent among these sources, according to one interpretation, is the Mishnah in [Avot \(3:10\)](#) which lists "*sihat yeladim*" (literally: "the talk of children") amongst the items that remove a person from this world. [R. Ovadyah Bartenura](#) offers the following comments: "[The talk of children] distracts their fathers from studying Torah." Spending too much time talking with one's young children is considered *bittul torah*.²⁶

Bartenura's explanation of the Mishnah might be rooted in the following Talmudic passage ([Shabbat 33b](#)). The Talmud asserts that the sickness of *askara* strikes people due to the sin of *bittul torah*. This is challenged from the fact that children, who have no obligation to study Torah, still suffer from this illness. The Talmud responds: "They are punished because they cause their fathers to be idle from the study of Torah." While the *sugya* does not explicitly tell fathers to limit the time spent with their children, it is arguably the implication.

Musings

Let us take a step back to summarize the picture painted by the above sources: The Talmud assumes that young children need to be with their mothers, which has a variety of halakhic ramifications. This

²⁵ This translation and interpretation follows [Rashi's](#) understanding of the passage. [Rabbeinu Hananel](#), however, interprets it in a manner that renders the *sugya* irrelevant for the current topic.

²⁶ Even though Rashi and [Rabbeinu Yonah](#) interpret the Mishnah differently, the parallel passage in [Avot de-Rebbi Natan \(Hosafah 2, nus'ha 1, perek 9\)](#) seems to support R. Bartenura's approach.

fits the Talmud's conception of the father as a teacher and pedagogue, a role which begins at a later developmental stage. And although there are anecdotes of rabbis playing with their young children, other sources warn of the dangers of *bittul torah*.

While the above picture might fit the reality of some people, an increasing number of fathers are heavily involved with their young children's care in a manner even equal to or exceeding that of the mother. And this is not just a progressive phenomenon. According to several studies, even in the more conservative Hareidi community, fathers are sharing the burden of childcare to a much larger degree than ever before.²⁷ How are we to think about this phenomenon? Should we ideally aspire towards a R. Shlomo Zalman Auerbach type of reality instead?

I would like to briefly outline several ideas for how a heavily involved father might understand the gap between the Talmudic sources and their lived reality.²⁸ These points often overlap with each other, but as each is theoretically distinct, I will present them independently.

1) In a study conducted by Dr. Dvora Wagner,²⁹ Kollel husbands who were heavily involved with domestic care (including but not exclusively taking care of small children) were asked about their domestic arrangements. Several of them responded that ideally, domestic care should be mainly the role of their wives. However, due to the earning limitations placed upon them by Kollel study, their wives need to take jobs that are time-intensive. Therefore, they (the husbands) were stepping in for their wives.

Though practically this is certainly a shift from the traditional norm, it breaks little conceptual ground. These husbands were affirming that really the care of young children falls into the mother's domain. However, the value of remaining in Kollel is of such significance that it forces the father to substitute for the mother.

2) Even as the Talmud describes traditional gender roles regarding the parenting of young children, this may be descriptive and not prescriptive. In other words, despite the clear assumption in rabbinic literature that the mother will care for her young children, there are no hard and fast *halakhot* prohibiting an alternative parental arrangement in which the husband spends more time with the young children. As R. Aharon Lichtenstein wrote in the context of the proper relationship between the spouses in a marriage, while there are sources in the Talmud that deal with such matters, "as far as full-blown normative models are concerned, I believe the harvest is scant."³⁰ Here, too, perhaps the Talmudic descriptions are not

²⁷ See, for example, Maayan David, "[The Myth of the Charedi Superwoman](#)" in *Tzarich Iyun* (March 2019).

²⁸ For a similar analysis regarding the gap between the Talmudic view of the ideal relationship between spouses and the lived reality of many couples today, see this author's earlier contribution to Lehrhaus, "[She Should Carry Out All Her Deeds According to His Directives: A Halakhah in a Changed Social Reality.](#)"

²⁹ Dvora Wagner, "Concealed Parental Involvement: Hareidi Fatherhood" in [Gender, Families and Transmission in the Contemporary Jewish Context](#), ed. Martine Gross, Sophie Nizard and Yann Scioldo-Zurcher (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017), 31-32.

³⁰ R. Aharon Lichtenstein, "[Of Marriage: Relationships and Relations](#)," in [Gender and Relationships in Marriage and Out](#), ed. Rivkah Teitz Blau (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 2007), 3.

obligatory, and parents can decide upon a model that works for them based on their life choices and values.³¹

3) R. Steven Weil in his article "[The Primacy of the Jewish Family](#)" argues that the Jewish family, which has always been the most important institution for continuity of Torah and *mesorah*, is now being challenged by a host of societal forces. Therefore, in today's day and age, it is crucial for parents to spend not just "quality time" but also "quantity time" with their children.³² While he does not address the specifics of parenting roles per-se, presumably one can argue that spending time with one's children from the youngest of ages creates the positive relationship that is necessary for the family unit to remain strong and Torah-oriented going forward.

4) Another approach would be to admit that a gap exists between what the sources dictate and how many fathers conceive of fatherhood and live their lives. For people who live by the Talmud and find it authoritative, this approach would only be possible if this gap can fit into an appropriate model for evolution and change in Halakhah. There is precedent for viewing other areas of Halakhah in this way. R. Nahum Rabinovitch³³ and R. Jonathan Sacks³⁴ have taught that institutions such as polygamy and slavery, despite being enshrined in the halakhic system, are not the Torah's ideal. Rather, they were technically permitted in an earlier period due to the nature of society at the time, but God's educational plan is to slowly move us away from these institutions and towards a more idealistic vision. Perhaps, extremely rigid gendered parental roles should be thought of similarly and, accordingly, God does not want us to be trapped in an earlier model.

Alternatively, maybe we can recourse to the gender theory popularized in certain Hasidic and Religious Zionist³⁵ circles which

³¹ This approach opens a whole new set of questions. How can we be sure that the Talmud is being descriptive and not prescriptive in the above sources? After all, some of them are associated with *halakhot* that are codified in *Shulhan Arukh*. In a situation where the father is the primary caretaker, would his *eruv* be the one that is decisive for his young care? I do not know the answers to these questions, but they are important to be raised.

³² Similarly, see R. Shlomo Wolbe, *Zeri'ah u-Binyan be-Hinukh*, 16-17 who argues that a warm relationship with parents from a young age is important in and of itself and a crucially important factor in the child's *hinukh* going forward.

³³ R. Nahum Rabinovitch, "The Way of Torah," *Edah Journal* 3:1 (2003): 2-34.

³⁴ R. Jonathan Sacks, "*Mishpatim* 5772 - The Slow End of Slavery"; "*Beshalach* (5769) - The Role of Time in Social Transformation"; "Faith Lectures: The Messianic Idea Today."

³⁵ Many trace this idea to the Alter Rebbe of Habad in *Torah Ohr*, 44d and *Likkutei Torah, Shir Ha-Shirim*, 15c. For an elaboration of the social changes that the last Lubavitcher Rebbe associated with this kabbalistic prediction, see Eldad Weill, "[Tehilatah shel Tekufat ha-Nashim: Nashim ve-Nashiyut be-Mishnato shel ha-Rebbi mi-Lubavitch](#)," *Akdamos* 22 (2009): 61-85 and Elliot Wolfson, [Open Secret: Postmessianic Messianism and the Mystical Revision of Menahem Mendel Schneerson](#) (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 200-23. This argument is also the main thesis of Devorah Heshelis (Fastag), [The Moon's Lost Light](#) (Southfield, Michigan: Targum Press, 2006). It also appears, with a variety of interesting ramifications, in the writings of mainstream figures in the Religious-Zionist world. See, for example, R. Eliezer Melamed, "[ha-Ma'alat ha-Nashit ha-Nisteret](#)," [Peninei Halakhah, Tefilat Nashim 3:6, Peninei](#)

understands kabbalistic literature as predicting a breakdown of rigid gender roles as we approach the messianic era. Though many of these sources focus on women regaining an equal place in marriages and society, presumably this would also require a male adoption of more traditionally feminine characteristics like involved parenting.

At times, when I read stories of the great rabbis of yesteryears, I feel a rush of anxiety regarding my own productivity levels. It can be deflating to read how knowledgeable or accomplished a certain rabbi was by age forty. But one thought that often percolates in my mind is (hopefully, though, not as an excuse): how many times was this person awake at 2 a.m. not to learn, but to feed and soothe a crying baby? How many pickups and drop-offs did he do? How many hours of his life did he spend in parks or reading to his three-year-old child? One ramification of our changed social reality and the new choices that are available for women, which I see as a blessing, is that we cannot expect fathers to professionally accomplish as much as their parallels in years of yore. Hopefully, though, the family as a whole stands to gain.

Earlier this year, I began taking my toddler with me on Friday night to *shul*. While for a period of time this arrangement worked surprisingly well, one week my son had trouble sitting still and we had to leave *shul* in the middle of the service. As we walked home together (or more accurately, I walked while he ran laps around me), I met R. Judah Mischel, a friend and mentor who is steeped in the teachings of Hasidism. If I am reconstructing our conversation correctly, he commented that it was a beautiful scene to see a father and child walking together on Friday night in the streets of the Land of Israel. When I objected that my child had just made me leave *shul* early, he responded: "Do you think *olam ha-ba* will be sitting by yourself at a *shtender* learning Gemara? It is also playing on the floor with your young child. It is Shabbat now, you can experience *me'ein olam ha-ba*."³⁶

May those of us who merit to be the parents of young children have the wisdom to savor the moments of bliss (and the patience to weather the moments of frustration), and may those who want to be parents but have not yet merited soon have the opportunity to experience their own *me'ein olam ha-ba*.

Halakhah, Berakhot, 17:13:6 in Harhahot; R. Uri Sherki, "*Manhigut Nashit be-Idan Ge'ulah*"; R. Yehoshua Shapira, "*Ishah Kesheirah Osah Retzon Ba'alal*."

³⁶ For a beautiful description of the significance, responsibility, and joy of parenthood, see the following summary of R. Aharon Lichtenstein's talk "[On Raising Children](#)." Thank you to Yosef Lindell for the reference.

FROM KAYIN TO KORAH: THE FELLOW FOUNDERS OF FOMENT

SHLOMO ZUCKIER recently received his PhD in Ancient Judaism at Yale University and a member of Yeshiva University's Kollel Elyon.

The insurgency of Korah and his followers against Moshe and Aharon is halted by the earth itself, which opens its mouth to devour the rebels. As remarkable as this physical phenomenon is, the Gemara in [Sanhedrin 37b](#) points out that this is neither the first nor the only place in the Torah where the earth opens its orifice.

Indeed, the first killing in history, Kayin's murder of Hevel, also features the ground opening up. God informs Kayin ([Genesis 4:11](#)) that he will be cursed "by the [very] land that opened its mouth to accept the blood of your brother," condemning him to a life of toil and wandering." As Rav Yehudah the son of Rav Hiyya puts it, the land opens its mouth "for good," receiving Hevel's unjustly spilt blood and softening its metaphorical screams ([Genesis 4:10](#)). The very earth that provided respite for Hevel could offer no rest for his murderous sibling.

The Gemara there asserts that "from the day the land opened its mouth and accepted the blood of Hevel, it never again opened." But, asks the Gemara, what about the famous story of Korah, in which the earth opened wide to quash the rebellion? The Gemara concedes that, indeed, the earth opened again in the Korah episode. But the opening of the earth for Korah was "for bad," serving as a punishment, while the opening for Hevel's blood was "for good," its purpose to bury Hevel's blood.

It is no coincidence that, in this [foundational underground narrative](#), the earth opened its mouth to both swallow Hevel's blood and devour Korah's body. Their very names attest to their association with the earth's open mouth, indicating their destiny to be swallowed. *Hevel* means "open air," and *hevel peh* refers to breath. Hevel's blood, his very life force, was taken in by the earth, subsumed into its breath, the air of its mouth. (Incidentally, we know from Jewish law that *hevel*, or subterranean air such as that present in trenches, can be lethal; see [Bava Kamma 51b](#); this is a continuing echo of Hevel's death, preserved in nature.) Korah means "bald" or "empty"; the patch of land cleared away and replaced by the Earth's mouth was a fitting place for Korah to call his permanent, desolate home.

The Gemara's juxtaposition of the Kayin and Korah episodes is not accidental. These are the two cases where, in an extraordinary deviation from nature, the earth opens its mouth. The Gemara obviously didn't "forget" about the Korah story, only to come up with the distinction that the Kayin-Hevel story was "for good" while the Korah story was "for bad." The oft-repeated swallowing of Korah's rebellion by the earth ([Numbers 16:30,32](#), [26:10](#), [Deuteronomy 11:6](#)) would not have escaped Rav Yehudah's attention. Rather, Rav Yehudah is drawing a connection between these two stories of men whose actions motivated that same reaction by the earth.

Kayin's murder was the first purposeful destruction of a living human, and it was carried out by one sibling against another—the destruction of a family. Korah's rebellion was the first effort to destroy the fledgling peoplehood of *am yisrael*, perpetrated by one member of the nation-family against his brethren—the destruction of a people. In a sense, Korah's rebellion aimed at murder, an attempt on the life of the body politic, targeting the personified republic and everything

it stood for. The Gemara therefore gestures at the parallel between the original actions of each of these categories: the first murder and the first rebellion.

The actions of Kayin and Korah share more than the crime of “attempted murder.” Each aggressor experienced a certain confusion as to how best to carry out his destructive act. That [same Gemara](#), and the same Amora, Rav Yehudah the son of Rav Hiyya, assert that “Kayin inflicted multiple wounds, multiple gashes, in his brother Hevel, because he did not know where the soul exits the body, until he reached his neck.”

Korah’s rebellion was similarly confused. The rebellion was not a single, focused campaign, but a disjointed coalition of malcontents rising together against the status quo. That’s why the leadership was so fractured, including not only Korah but also Datan and Aviram, as well as On ben Pelet and 250 leaders from across the Jewish people. Each faction needed its own opposition leader.

Their claims were also disparate: some factions decried the leadership of Moses and Aaron ([Numbers 16:3](#)), other groups believed they were going to die in the desert ([Numbers 16:13](#)), and still another group wanted priesthood for all Levites ([Numbers 16:10](#)). Was the purpose of the rebellion to usurp spiritual leadership from Moses and Aaron, or was it to improve the nation’s physical circumstances?

As [Ibn Ezra](#) (to Numbers 16:1) describes it, the rebellion comprised all of the above: an amalgamation of people upset about the ascendancy of Moshe and Aharon, the leadership of Kehat among the Levites, the replacement of Reuven with Yosef as the tribe with the rights of the *bekhorah*, and the replacement of the firstborn with the Levites. Different individuals upset about different things (including some mutually exclusive complaints) banded together to launch simultaneous attacks against different targets in their society. The disjointed nature of this rebellion might be why some interpretations of [Avot 5:17](#), including [Malbim to Numbers 16:1](#), see Korah and his followers as pitted against one another as well.

Both the first murder and the first rebellion, then, aimed to achieve their destructive goals through “death by a thousand cuts.” Lacking any precedent or “how to” guide for fomenting rebellion, both Kayin and Korah threw everything they could at their target, hoping their violent actions would find success. Thus, both the body of Hevel, and the body politic of Israel, were riven with cuts and divisions as a result of these primal attacks.

These attacks – one more successful than the other – constituted more than just a glitch or a divergence from normal functioning. They represented no less than a fundamental break in the natural order. By definition, murder and rebellion aim to destroy humanity and society, and the attendant trauma reverberates far beyond its immediate target. Such actions, when lacking necessary justification, tear at the very fabric of civil society and obliterate the harmony necessary for human flourishing. Not all violent actions have such negative consequences; in some cases, such as Pinhas’ zealous act against Zimri (appearing several chapters later in Numbers), an act of violence can be deployed in service of a [greater restorative end](#). Kayin’s and Korah’s actions, however, had no such redeeming value.

So consequential were Kayin and Korah’s actions that the natural order itself rebelled. In each case, the earth ripped itself open, gaping its mouth as if in a primal scream. The foundations of the world could not continue their usual function amid such violent personal and

communal rifts. That fissure in the ground – the opening of the earth’s “mouth” – represents that fracture and the thousand cuts that spurred it. These consequences of these violent acts extended far beyond the wildest dreams of their authors.

And, at the same time, the earth did what it could to regain its grounding. Whether that meant swallowing Hevel’s blood, to minimize the atrocity that had already taken place (acting “for good”), or consuming Korah’s rebels and averting the carnage before it could happen (acting “for bad”), the earth did what was necessary to restore some degree of equilibrium.

As the Gemara tells us, “From the day that the land opened its mouth and accepted the blood of Hevel, it never again opened its mouth... until it swallowed Korah.”

The destructive actions of Kayin and Korah, the founders of foment, shook the very foundations of the world. Both Kayin and Korah had their genealogical lines wiped out: Kayin’s descendants perished in the flood, and Korah’s progeny may well have been wiped out in the aftermath of his revolt (see [Megillah 14a](#); but see [I Chronicles 6](#)).

We are enjoined “not to be like Korah and his congregation” ([Numbers 17:5](#), [Sanhedrin 110a](#)), and instead to build a world of peace and stability. And, in doing so, we are charged to redeem the very earth that swallowed Kayin’s and Korah’s carnage, to restore a harmonious natural order.

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