



# The Collective Conversation

Weekly Torah Essays from the  
Young Israel of Scarsdale Community



Sefer Devarim

Parshat Ki Teitzei

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## Parenting, Punishment, and Unpredictable Paths

By Robert Aeder

כִּי־יִהְיֶה לְאִישׁ בֶּן סוֹרֵר וּמוֹדֵה אִיגֹנוּ שָׁמַע בְּקוֹל אָבִיו וּבְקוֹל אִמּוֹ וַיִּסְרּוּ אֹתוֹ וְלֹא יִשְׁמַע אֲלֵיהֶם: וַתִּפְּשׂוּ בּוֹ אָבִיו וְאִמּוֹ וְהוֹצִיאֻהוּ אֶתְּוֹ אֶל־זִקְנֵי עִירוֹ וְאֶל־שַׁעַר מִקְדָּשׁוֹ: וְאָמְרוּ אֶל־זִקְנֵי עִירוֹ בְּנֵנוּ זֶה סוֹרֵר וּמוֹדֵה אִיגֹנוּ שָׁמַע בְּקוֹלֵנוּ זֹלָל וְסָבָא: וְרָגְמָהוּ כָּל־אֲנָשֵׁי עִירוֹ בְּאֲבָנִים וְנָתַתְּ הָרַע מִקִּרְבְּךָ וְכָל־יִשְׂרָאֵל יִשְׁמְעוּ וַיִּרְאוּ:

*If a householder has a wayward and defiant son who does not heed his father or mother and does not obey them even after they discipline him, his father and mother shall take hold of him and bring him out to the elders of his town at the public place of his community. They shall say to the elders of his town, "This son of ours is disloyal and defiant; he does not heed us. He is a glutton and a drunkard." Thereupon his town's council shall stone him to death. Thus you will sweep out evil from your midst: all Israel will hear and be afraid.*

The passage from *Devarim* 21:18-21 raises questions about the severe punishment prescribed for a wayward and defiant son. This son, who disobeys his parents even after discipline, faces stoning by the town's council. A common question arises: what actions truly warrant such a harsh penalty, and why isn't there room for rehabilitation?

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Commentators, including Rashi and Ramban, delve into this topic. Rashi suggests that the description of a "glutton and a drunkard" refers to specific behaviors that could lead to family destruction and societal harm if allowed to persist. Ramban draws parallels between this case and other capital offenses, such as conspiring witnesses and a quiet peddler of *avodah zarah*, explaining that such actions undermine fundamental societal structures and must be dealt with swiftly and decisively.

Curiously, the parents' perspective is often overlooked. This oversight is surprising, considering the emotional turmoil they must experience. I would assume all those in parental roles must feel this on their behalf. Imagine the frustration of exhausted efforts and the failure of parenting techniques.

This disobedience is so extreme that it leads to the tragic decision to end their child's life.

This scenario, though extreme, strikes a chord with all parents. The fear of inadvertently fostering a wayward child is a universal concern. Dr. Yuko Munakata, a psychologist at UC Davis, addressed this concern in a 2021 TEDx Talk. She challenged the common notion that parents are solely responsible for their children's outcomes.

Shelves of parenting books promise to show people how to address the difficult decisions that parents face every day and how to achieve the best outcomes.

Whether they're about tiger parenting or free-range parenting, parenting like the Dutch, or parenting like the Germans, these books share one consistent message: If your child isn't succeeding, you're doing something wrong.

As it turns out, the science supports a totally different and ultimately empowering message: Trying to predict how a child will turn out based on choices made by their parents is like trying to predict a hurricane from the flap of a butterfly's wings.

If you are a parent, you are the butterfly flapping your wings. Your child is the hurricane, a breathtaking force of nature. You will shape the person your child becomes — just like the butterfly shapes the hurricane — in complex, seemingly unpredictable, but powerful ways. The hurricane wouldn't exist without the butterfly.

Scientific research supports this view. Studies show that parenting does have an impact, but its effects are intricate and multifaceted. Munakata's argument aligns with the Torah's approach, as seen in the collective accountability of the community when a wayward child faces death. The broader community's involvement implies that while parents play a significant role, the entire community shares the responsibility of upbringing.

Furthermore, towards the end of the *parsha*, among the myriad laws and statutes, another statement is included as to the relationship between accountabilities of parent and child:

לֹא-יָוִמְתוּ אָבוֹת עַל-בְּנֵי וּבָנִים לֹא-יָוִמְתוּ עַל-אָבוֹת אִישׁ בְּחַטָּאתוֹ יוּמָתוּ:

*Parents shall not be put to death for children, nor children be put to death for parents: they shall each be put to death only for their own crime. (Devarim 24:6)*

This statement of principle that each individual is accountable for their own choices reinforces the idea that while parent and child are interconnected, they are ultimately on distinct paths.

The story of the wayward and rebellious child delves into the complexities of parenting, punishment, and the unpredictability of human paths. It reminds us that while parents shape their children's lives, the outcomes are influenced by an intricate web of factors. The Torah's approach and contemporary psychological insights align, emphasizing that parenting's impact is significant but not deterministic, and a collective effort shapes the individual's journey. May we all work to be a community that can raise children to be upstanding members of the Jewish community — flipping the story from communal failure to communal joy and celebration of our successes.

**Robert** and Sara moved to Scarsdale in 2017 and have three children in shul — and we hope they are not disturbing you as you read this. Having been here for six years, the Aeders now consider themselves part of the 'old guard' of the community and are grateful to see such an influx of new faces. Professionally, Robert is responsible for many of the marketing emails that end up in your inbox daily; please don't unsubscribe :-)

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