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Kol Rinah
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As some of you know, I've been listening to a lot of Taylor Swift the last month or two. She has a song (which I won't sing) called, "Never Grow Up," on her 2010 album *Speak Now*. The second verse reads,

You're in the car on the way to the movies
And you're mortified your mom's dropping you off
At fourteen, there's just so much you can't do
And you can't wait to move out someday and call your own shots
But don't make her drop you off around the block
Remember that she's getting older, too
And don't lose the way that you dance around
In your PJs getting ready for school

From the teenager's perspective, the parent is, as Taylor Swift puts it, mortifying. Just the presence of a parent can be an embarrassment. The thrust of the song, as per its title, is "Never Grow Up," because life is simple and safe when you're a child.

As parents, we can relate to that sentiment too—a part of us doesn't want our children to grow up because they are delicious and present, safe and innocent now. And when they grow up, they are sweaty and less delicious, less present, not always safe, and perhaps not so innocent.

Little kids can hurt us, their parents, and embarrass us, but only to a limited extent. Older and adult children can hurt us much more deeply—physically, God forbid, but emotionally too. We can be much more ashamed of our adult children than are likely to be of our toddlers.

The mitzvah of honoring our parents applies to adult children (or at least of b'nai mitzvah age), not little kids, because that's when kids are responsible for the mitzvot, but also because perhaps because that's when the way our children can act can really be considered dishonoring.

The case of the wayward and rebellious child is a famous example of a disrespectful child, but much of the conversation about it is not about how it affects the parents, but rather, about how the child is on a bad path.

We have a very different situation in this week's parasha. Leviticus 21 focuses on the ways the kohanim (priests) must preserve their holiness. There are rules about which relatives they can become ritually impure to bury. There are laws about who kohanim can marry, and what disqualifies a kohen from serving.

And we also have Leviticus 21:9,

(ט) וּבַת אֵישׁ כֹּהֵן כִּי תִהְיֶה לְזָנוֹת אֶת־אֲבִיהָ הִיא מְחַלֶּלֶת בְּאֵשׁ תִּשְׂרֹף: {ס}

(9) When the daughter of a priest defiles herself through harlotry, it is her father whom she defiles; she shall be put to the fire.

The JPS Torah Commentary somewhat unhelpfully explains:

Baruch Levine, *JPS Torah Commentary: Leviticus on Leviticus 21:9*

it is her father whom she defiles; she shall be put to the fire. The behavior of a priest's daughter reflects on her father's sacral office. Death by fire indicates the seriousness of the offense. When Jacob's son Judah learned that Tamar, his daughter-in-law, was pregnant at a time when she was awaiting levirate marriage, he said, "Bring her out... and let her be burned." (Gen. 38:24). It seems, therefore, that it was the custom to impose death by burning in the case of serious sexual offenses.

This provides a bit of context, but it does not really help us understand this challenging verse.

The Talmud (Sanhedrin 52a) explains that the verse saying that "the daughter profanes the father teaches that "if initially they would treat her father in a sacred manner, now they treat him in a profane manner. If previously they would treat him with honor, they now treat him with degradation. They say: Cursed is the one who bore this daughter, cursed is the one who raised this daughter, cursed is the one from whose loins this daughter emerged."

This is all to say a priest whose daughter engages in harlotry is treated much worse because of his daughter's transgression.

The daughter is in this situation is called "a wicked person," and her father, based on her actions, is called "a wicked person" too, even if he had previously been considered righteous, argues the Talmud.

This phenomenon, of parents being embarrassed, criticized, branded and ostracized because of their adult children's intimate relationships is familiar from so many contexts.

I listen to a lot of audiobooks, and I'm currently listening to *Kristen Lavransdatter*, a trilogy of historical novels written in the early 1920s by Norwegian Nobel Prize Winner Sigrid Undset about a 14th century Norwegian woman. So much of the story is driven by Kristen's efforts not to embarrass her parents and bring shame to them, despite (spoiler alert) her love of a man who is not who her parents have engaged her to.

And here's an example that proves the rule, from a story in the New Yorker a couple of weeks ago. At the third annual Christopher Street Liberation Day March, the scrappier, more revolutionary precursor to the New York City Pride Parade,¹ in 1972, Dr. Spock (who was very liberal, for his time), was marching, but he didn't get the biggest reaction from the crowd. It was the woman marching next to him, Jeanne Manford, a Jewish mother from Queens whose 21-year-old son Morty was gay. She held a sign that said, "parents of gays: unite in support for our children." "She had no idea that the crowd was cheering for her until total strangers started running up to thank her. They asked if they could kiss her; they asked if she would talk to their parents; they told her that they couldn't imagine their own mothers and fathers supporting them so publicly, or supporting them at all."

Soon after, she and Dr. Spock began PFLAG, Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays. This was a radical idea, because of the expectation and reality at the time that parents would and should be ashamed of having children who were lesbian or gay.

¹ <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2023/04/17/how-one-mothers-love-for-her-gay-son-started-a-revolution>

Our children have the unique ability to hurt us, because we see ourselves in them, because we raised them, because we think they operate with our values, and if they do something we don't approve of, it must be our fault. And so often we let assume the same of other parents and children—that the parents bear responsibility for their children's faults.

Jeanne Manford realized that was not exactly the case. Kristin Lavransdatter realized it too—that it wasn't her parents' fault that she loved the wrong person.

And Jewish tradition, if you dig deep, has evolved on this too. Priests don't officiate at the Temple in Jerusalem anymore—their role is very limited and mostly ceremonial now, and so the concern that a kohen's daughter's infidelity or apostasy could affect his holiness is less relevant. But kohanim still get certain honors—the first aliya, the responsibility of blessing the congregation during with the priestly blessing (aka *birkat kohanim* or *dukhening*).

By the early modern period, halakhic decisors ruled that a kohen whose daughter apostasized or engaged in sexual improprieties was not prohibited from doing his priestly duties.²

The Torah here reflects a cultural and social norm that hasn't entirely changed. But it's started to. And we can help it. So much of the stigma that comes to us from our children's actions comes as a result of the way our peers and our community view and talk about our children and us. Jeanne Manford began a movement of removing stigma around having gay and lesbian children. How many other stigmas and embarrassments still exist that we still judge adult parents of children for? We can be a part of the solution, by affirming parents, when their kids don't follow whatever we might think is "typical" or "normal," or when people's adult children make poor decisions, or are actively hurtful.

We are arriving at a sense that while our children can hurt us, we shouldn't be embarrassed by them, and need not let them affect our reputation, whether they are actually bad, or just not like everyone else's kid.

To paraphrase Taylor Swift, we shouldn't be mortified dropping them off at the movies.

² See Shulchan Arukh, Orach Chayim 128:31; Mishna Berurah 128:154; Shayyerei K'nesset HaGedolah HaGahot Beit Yosef Orach Chayim 128:23; especially Sh"Ut Divrei Shalom Orach Chayim 1:85.