

Jewish Teaching Regarding Children and Conflict

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At the foundation of the Biblically rooted Jewish social world-view are the propositions that the human being is created with a unique inalienable and sacrosanct character; that not only are our lives not ours to dispose of but that we are obliged to protect the life and dignity of all human beings; and furthermore that we are all in this world to serve, develop and protect the integrity of our environment and most crucially within it - the social fabric of society.

Even more fundamental than these propositions is that of the belief in a Deity who is not only Lord of Creation and History, but is of ultimate moral character. In human anthropomorphic language, He is compassionate, merciful, loving and gracious. Accordingly He calls on us to be like Him in these regards, for the sake of our own character, well being and purpose and accordingly for the welfare of society at large.

While God cares for all people (Psalm 145.v.9) - all created in His Image, i.e. with inalienable dignity and sanctity, His very "character" (aforementioned) demands His special care for the vulnerable and calls upon us to be similarly specially concerned for and attentive to them. While the Bible also refers both to the stranger and widow as such, the ultimate paradigm of vulnerability is the orphan - the child victim of misfortune and often conflict and violence.

The Hebrew child had a comparatively enviable position in the ancient world where vulnerability was more often than not seen as a reason for disregard. The Roman historian Tacitus thus records disparagingly that for the Jews "it is even a crime among them to kill a child"! For Judaism, not only are children human beings created in the Divine Image affording them all human dignity that must be protected from abuse, but precisely their vulnerability makes them more deserving of our regard and obliges us with greater responsibility towards them. How much more so then, when the child is a victim of misfortune and/or adult misbehavior. The Bible accordingly lays down special legislation requiring both individuals and

community to provide for their livelihood and welfare for the vulnerable, (Deuteronomy 16 v.11-14; 24 v.12-13). Moreover, together with these injunctions, the Israelites are reminded that we were once slaves, so that the historical memory of vulnerability may thus inspire and animate our moral conduct towards the vulnerable.

Obligations upon parents laid down in Jewish laws, to provide for the children's daily care - their physical and emotional well-being - also include the responsibility to provide them with education, a trade and the skills of self-protection. Judaism accordingly lays down specifications not only for parents in relation to their offspring, but also for the community in relation to its children -especially those who do not enjoy parental protection; to provide for their food, clothing, health and education, as well as the means, as they mature, to marry and establish a family.

The obligation to ensure the physical and emotional maturation of the child free from the scars of conflict is arguably the reason behind the Biblical age limit of twenty, before a young man could be enlisted into military service (Numbers 1 v.3). While war is seen in Jewish tradition based on the Bible as an undesirable necessity when faced with a violent threat, nevertheless the extensive ethical checks and limitations on combat (cf. Maimonides." Yad, The Law of Kings", chapter six) accordingly prohibit the use (let alone the abuse) in such context of those who are vulnerable - children in particular. The implications of the duties that parents and the adult community bear toward minors are that the former are morally responsible for the actions of the latter. There is this no question that adults who send children to perform violent acts are not only guilty of a criminal act in doing so, but also bear moral responsibility and must therefore face accountability for such war crimes performed by their children.

In addition to standard duties towards children, Maimonides in his Code, lays down even more demanding ethical behavior in relation to child victims in keeping with the aforementioned Biblical "bias". He rules that we must address them with particular tenderness and courtesy: be especially careful not to subject them to hard labor nor wound their feelings with harsh speech. We must take even greater care of their persons and property than we would even

with our own; "for it is a more serious transgression to cause them distress, anger or pain, than even any other person, let alone to, God forbid, tyrannize them, cause them physical harm or humiliate them".

While it is taken as axiomatic in Judaism that the child as a human being must be especially protected physically and emotionally, precisely because of the special vulnerability in physical and emotional formation; that very process of development is seen as requiring much more than attending only to the material and even emotional needs of the child. Judaism affirms that young persons are more than the product of an older generation - they are the guarantors of their posterity (see below). It is this recognition of children's potential for renewal and continuity that led the sages of the Talmud to describe them as "the Messiahs of humankind".

To this end enormous emphasis is placed not just upon education for skills and material self-sustenance, but upon spiritual sustenance and the religious moral values imperative for such.

Thus Jewish tradition understands Abraham's yearning for his own progeny despite is increasingly large following (Genesis 12 v.5) to reflect the recognition that no framework is more crucial and powerful for the transmission of the most profound moral and spiritual values than the family - and thus the health of the family determines the health of society.

Accordingly Judaism is overwhelmingly family orientated. In fact while Judaism can function even without synagogue and school, it cannot function without family. The focus, therefore, on the formation of children is seen as critical for society as a whole.

Already at the Biblically mandated public reading of the Divine Revelation and Instruction by the King (Deuteronomy 31, v.10-12), not only the men and women but all the children are present as well. This idea served as the basis for the practice during the late Second Temple period of encouraging little children to be present in the synagogue (Babylonian Talmud, Hagigah, 3a). Indeed the quintessential affirmation of Jewish Faith (Deuteronomy 6, v.4-9) is immediately related to the educational formation of the children.

"Hear O Israel the Lord you God, the Lord is One. And you shall love the Lord Your God with all your heart with all you soul and with all your might. And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart. And you shall teach them diligently to your children...".

This idea is further embellished powerfully in the homiletical lore (Midrash Tanhuma, Vayigash) that declares that when God was about to give the Revelation to Israel, he asked them for guarantors. The children of Israel offered the Patriarchs and then offered the prophets, but God did not accept any of them as adequate guarantors. But when the children of Israel offered their children as guarantors, God accepted them and gave them the Revelation.

In as much as religion seeks to give meaning and direction to who we are, these texts empahsize not only the obligation to provide children with strong religio-ethical identities and values for life, but that to do so is in fact as much our obligation to ourselves as well as to posterity. It is a reflection of our own values and commitments. As mentioned above, at the heart of these values is the concept of the sanctity of life - the preservation of lie; of one's own and of that of the other.

Genesis 32, v. 8 concerning Jacob who, on the way home, is confronted with his brother Esau marching to meet him with hundred men. And the text declares that "Jacob was very afraid and distressed". Our ancient sages in their didactic manner ask why the text needs to add the second verb- obviously if Jacob was very afraid he was distressed. They answer that Jacob was very afraid lest he be killed and he was distressed lest he would have to kill. This is the moral education that we are called upon to impress upon our children, namely that the very thought of even killing in wars of self-defense must always be distressing. Indeed if that thought does not cause us distress, then we will not be able to preserve the reverence for human life and dignity within our own midst. If that thought does not cause our children distress and they are drawn in as players in violent conflict and accept such as normal, then we have failed them in our religio-ethical duty as parents and educators. Above all it is the

responsibility of religious leadership not only to reiterate this supreme social value but also to articulate the Divine priorities I referred to above.

In the midrash - the ancient rabbinic homily on Psalm 62 on the opening verse "let the Lord arise and scatter His enemies and may those who hate Him flee from before Him", it is stated:-

"(in the book of Psalms we find that) on five occasions (King) David calls on God to 'Arise and scatter His enemies' and yet there is no mention (in Psalms) that God arises (in response). When do we find (mention of) God arising? "Because of the oppression of the poor and the groans of the needy, Now will I arise, saith the Lord" (Psalm 12 v 6).

This midrash brings to mind the comment attributed to Abraham Lincoln when asked on the eve of battle whether God was on their side. "The question is", Lincoln is reported to have replied, "whether we are on God's side". What the midrash is saying is that even if you are God's anointed himself; even if you are King David, you may not assume that God is on your side. When is God on your side? When you are on His. And what is His side? It is above all the side of the needy and vulnerable. The extent to which society addresses itself to these, is the extent to which it is godly, and the extent to which it fails is the extent to which it is condemned.

In summary, it may be stated that while Judaism obliges us to ensure that all children enjoy physical and spiritual health; a sense of worth and identity; educational development and opportunity; the Jewish Biblical perspective based on the Hebrew Bible makes it clear that the child victim of violence and misfortune is the ultimate litmus test of our own religious values. The extent to which we respond to his or her needs is the extent to which we are true to our religious heritage.