

## Foundations for a Thoughtful Judaism

### Leader's Guide

#### Foundations of the Ethical Unit 4: Ethics of Family

In previous Ethics units, we discussed the notion of obligations that apply to community and even to family. In this unit, we delve more deeply into the ethical obligations between parents and children.

- **Unit Key Ideas:**

- Parents and children have specific obligations to one another.
- The act of having children entails obligation, and Judaism requires specific ways to follow through on them.
- Often dilemmas arise around differentiation of children from their parents.

- **Unit Essential Questions:**

- Why would one choose to be a parent? Is the choice to do so born out of desire? Obligation? Both?
- Why do Jewish approaches to the ethics of family say about Jewish values?
- Should there be limits to our obligations to our families? When should they apply? Do these texts make space for such limits?

#### Class #1: Why be a Parent?

- **Introduction / Framing**
  - In our culture, there are many roads to becoming a parent: biology, adoption, science, etc. This class will explore the value of choosing to become a parent regardless of how.
  - It is worth noting that the Jewish tradition takes for granted that people will want to have children, and this too is not always the case in reality.
- **Source 1: Genesis 1:27-28**
  - **Background:** This comes at the very end of the first creation story, where God creates the whole world and then creates people last. When God creates the world, the requirement to have children is

the first command given to humanity. This becomes part of what it means to be created in God's image (which we studied in Unit 1, Class 1.

▪ **Key Ideas:**

- All people are created in the image of God, and this is linked to procreation.
- Be fruitful and multiply is the first commandment in the Torah
- God links having children with having dominion over the earth.

▪ **Suggested Discussion Questions:**

- What is the connection between being created in the image of God and the obligation to have children?
- What does it mean when God tells people to fill the earth and master it?

○ **Source 2: *Genesis 2:23-24***

- **Background:** Chapters 1 and 2 of Genesis present two versions of the creation of the world. These verses come at the end of the second version of the creation story in Genesis. Here, people are commanded to not only be intimate with God, but also to be intimate with each other.

▪ **Key Ideas:**

- Having children can be a way to strengthen the bond between the two parents. A child may be considered the "one flesh" that is the synthesis of the parents.
- Child bearing and rearing may be the ultimate form of intimacy.
- In the case of biological parenting, it is literally the joining of two bodies to make a new person (see Rashi Gen. 2:24)

▪ **Discussion Questions:**

- Why does the Torah imagine having children as being one of the most effective methods of getting parents to cleave to one another?
- What is the imagined relationship between parents and children on one hand, and spouses on another? Why does the Torah make this connection?

- **Source 3:** *Genesis 3:19-20*
  - **Background:** After Adam and Eve eat from the fruit in the Garden of Eden, causing God to expel them and take away the promise of immortality, Adam refers to Eve as the mother of all living beings.
  - **Key Ideas:**
    - Having children becomes a replacement for eternal life: you cannot live forever, so you ensure your legacy lives on by parenting children.
    - As Chava becomes mortal, she also becomes somewhat immortalized by being the mother of all.
  - **Suggested Discussion Questions:**
    - Why is having children connected to (im)mortality? Is this a good reason to parent children?
    - How does Adam's understanding of Eve change after they are expelled from the garden?
  
- **Source 4:** *Genesis 18:18-19*
  - **Background:** The context of this passage of God's decision to tell Abraham of plans to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. God's reasoning is that Abraham will become a great nation, and therefore should know about Abraham's plans.
  - **Key Idea:** Sometimes we parent to pass down what we believe are transcendent and even covenantal values. Abraham's ability to bless the world is directly tied to him having children. It is through his progeny that he can pass on the values of justice and righteousness to the rest of the world. In this way, children are also students, and parents are also teachers.
  - **Suggested Discussion Questions:**
    - Why should Abraham have children to ensure that his values are handed down? Can they be transmitted in another way?
    - What does it mean for one's children to be able to bless the earth?
  
- **Source 5:** *Genesis 17:9-13*
  - **Background:** God appears to Abram in a vision and changes his name to Abraham because he will be the father of many nations. This is right before three angels visit Abraham and Sarah and tell them that they will have a son.

- **Key Idea:** There is a particularism to Abraham having children, one that is about those who are members of the covenant in particular. This is somewhat different from the previous source, which is about spreading the blessing across all nations.
  - **Suggested Discussion Questions:**
    - Compare this source with the previous one. What is distinct about each source?
    - How is covenant related to progeny?
    - What does it mean to have children to perpetuate the covenant?
- **Enduring Understandings:**
    - The Torah presents a number of different models for the value of parenting children. The ideas are not mutually exclusive, and different people will have different reasons for having children.
    - Sometimes children are about legacy more than they are about an individual person or family
- **Class Discussion Questions:**
    - How do these texts help you understand why Judaism puts such emphasis on having children? What are the different values the Torah presents for parenting children? Are any of them compelling to you? Are any of these reasons particularly resonant with you? Are any problematic?
    - Do these reasons still apply today? Are there any arguments against them?
    - What does it mean to have children because you feel an obligation to something beyond yourself?

## Class #2: Mutual Obligations--Parents and Children

Framing/Introduction: In the previous class, we examined various Jewish approaches the reasons to parent children. In this session, we will explore obligations between parents and children outlines in Jewish thought.

To start the conversation, write down three important responsibilities of parents to their children and children to their parents. (e.g., parents to children: providing food, shelter, access to healthcare and education; children to parents: obedience, honesty, taking care of them in old age.)

- **Source 1:** *BT Kiddushin 29a*
  - **Background:** This text comes in the middle of a larger discussion about the obligation to honor one's parents. Although parents are granted certain rights in terms of their children, the rabbis note that parents have particular obligations towards their children as well.
  - **Key Ideas:** Parents are not only obligated to their children in general, there are specific obligations laid out in the texts. The goal is to give children the tools that they need to become productive adults in society with good Jewish knowledge and values.
    - **Suggested Discussion Questions:**
      - Why do you think the rabbis chose these six obligations? What is the relationship between the ritual and more practical obligations?
      - Why are feeding and clothing children not on the list? What might you add to the list?
- **Source 2:** *Deuteronomy 6:4-7*
  - **Background:** This is part of the Shema, which is recited twice daily. Its main themes are the acceptance of God's dominion and devotion to Torah.
  - **Key Ideas:** Parents serve as informal educators. This means that they should teach their children directly, but also through practice and experience – one the way, sitting at home, etc.
  - **Suggested Discussion Questions:**
    - When do you feel most like an educator when you are parenting, and when do you feel least like an educator?
    - What are the ways in which modeling behavior can sometimes be more effective than simply telling someone what to do?
- **Source 3:** *Mara Benjamin, The Obligated Self: Maternal Subjectivity and Jewish Thought*

- **Background:** Mara Benjamin is a professor at Mt. Holyoke. She works on Jewish Thought and the relationships between gender, philosophy and religion. She wrote a book considering motherhood and family relationships through a Jewish lens.
  - **Key idea:** Parenting introduces a sense of obligation which can be all encompassing.
  - **Suggested discussion questions:**
    - What does it mean to feel obligated to someone?
    - Do you get to choose that sense of obligation or not?
    - What does it mean to feel obligated before you can really understand what that obligation entails?
- **Source 3:** *Deuteronomy 5:15*
- **Background:** This is one of the Ten Commandments. The version here is from the retelling of the Commandments from Moses, but a parallel version appears in Exodus. This is one of the only commandments that has a stated reward for keeping it.
  - **Key Idea:** Children are obligated to their parents, but their obligations are slightly more amorphous. Rather than having to do a defined set of particular actions, children must act in a way that conveys honor, but that will mean different things for different people. Honoring one's parents is an obligation that carries with it a promised reward if long life and prosperity.
  - **Suggested Discussion Questions:**
    - Why does this commandment have a reward attached, unlike almost all the others?
    - Is it better to do something because you want to, or because you are commanded? What about being rewarded or not being rewarded?
- *Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Laws of Rebels 6:3, 5*
- **Background:** Maimonides was a medieval Jewish philosopher and legal scholar. The Mishnah Torah was his legal opus, striving to compile all the laws in the Talmud by subject so they would be more easily accessible to the non-elite.

- **Key Idea:** In this source, the obligation to honor one's parents is not amorphous. Instead, it is translated into concrete actions which show respect for parents. Taking care of and honoring one's parents is not optional.
- **Discussion Questions:**
  - Why is it important to Maimonides to delineate behaviors, when the Torah did not?
  - Why does Maimonides make a distinction between honor in general and honoring one's parents in particular?
  - Are there circumstance in which honor should *not* be required? What if you feel that your parents are not deserving of respect?
- *Philo, Special Laws II 229 – 231*
  - **Background:** Philo was a Jewish Egyptian philosopher who lived in Alexandria in the first century of the Common Era. He was known for his interest in harmonizing the Bible with Greek philosophy.
  - **Key Ideas:** Parents are ultimately benefactors to their children, so children have no choice but to show them gratitude. Without their parents, they would literally be and have nothing. The obligation toward one's parents a result of appreciation of benefit.
  - **Suggested Discussion Questions:**
    - What do you make of the fact that Philo calls the parents benefactors? Do you agree with this categorization?
    - What are the implications of saying that children have no choice but to serve their parents?
    - Is it better to do things for your parents out of love, or out of obligation?
    - Should parenting be altruistic, or should it carry the expectation of reciprocity?
- **Enduring Understandings:**
  - Parents have particular obligations to their children, and they are not necessarily what we would intuitively expect. Children have particular obligations to their parents, and they are not necessarily what we would intuitively expect.

- Obligations from parents to children and vice versa may stem from different roots.

- **Class Discussion Questions:**

- What do you think is the hardest time to be a parent? The hardest time to be a child?
- What do you owe your parents, and what do they owe you?
- Is there space in this framework for children or parents who are not worthy of care or honor? How would you think about that in this system?
- Why would Judaism want to legislate obligations between parents and their children? (Why) are those responsibilities not obvious or intuitive? Why do parents have concrete obligations while children's are more based in emotion?
- Why is it important that these responsibilities are reciprocal?

### Class #3: Dilemmas in Parenting

Introduction/Framing: In the previous class, we described the obligations of parents and children to one another. In this class we will examine some dilemmas that parents experience.

Opening questions: When do you experience dilemmas or tension in parenting?

- **Source 1:** *Susannah Heschel, Religious Nobility, Hadassah Magazine, June-July 2002, page 17*
  - **Background:** Susannah Heschel is a Jewish studies scholar who teaches at Dartmouth. Her father was Abraham Joshua Heschel, one of the most important Jewish philosophers and moral voices of the 20th century.
  - **Key ideas:** Being a role model can be difficult, as your children see you in situations that are often out of the public eye. And yet, Susannah Heschel argues here that respect for parents should be earned, not simply granted. Parents will be honored when they act in a way that is honorable. Parents cannot expect respect no matter what



they do. Instead, they should act in such a way that it becomes natural for their children to respect them.

- **Suggested Discussion Questions:**

- What does Heschel see as the relationship between living a life of Torah and acting honorably?
- What sort of role does a parent have in making sure that he or she is properly honored?
- How does Heschel understand the best ways to teach children to follow the Torah?
- How difficult is Heschel's demand for role modeling to achieve in reality?

- **Source 2:** *Yehuda Amichai, My Father taught me the 12 Commandments*

- **Background:** Yehuda Amichai was an Israeli poet laureate whose poetry reflected deeply on both Jewish and Israeli experiences. He was born in Germany and moved to Israel in 1936, where he became one of the most important voices in Israeli art until his death in the year 2000.
- **Key Idea:** One of the greatest challenges of parenting is both wanting our children to follow their paths and wanting our children to live according to our values. Finding ways to strike a balance is both challenging and deeply important.

- **Suggested Discussion Questions:**

- Consider a concrete case: You raised your child with a sense of civic engagement and a duty to engage in the political process. During her college years, she begins to work for a political candidate/party that you deeply disagree with. When you ask her about it, she credits your values as motivating her volunteerism. What do you make of that?
- Consider a second case: You raise your child with a deep sense of Jewish identity, and as he grows up, he decides he wants to shape his Jewish identity radically differently than yours. His lifestyle mimics

those Jews who make you deeply uncomfortable, and yet he feels more passionate and committed to his Jewish identity because of it. Do you approve and support his decision?

- Why does Amichai frame this poem in terms of the Ten Commandments? Why does he think the role of the parent is just as important as those commandments?
- How does Amichai talk about learning through watching his father and having experiences? What does this mean about how we teach our children?
- Why does Amichai imagine his father disappearing at the end of the poem?

▪ **Source 3:** *Andrew Solomon, Far From the Tree*

- **Background:** Andrew Solomon is a writer and lecturer on psychology, politics and the arts. He wrote *Far From the Tree* to examine families in which parents and their children have vastly different identities.
- **Key Idea:** People have identities and identifying traits that they inherit or learn from their parents (vertical identities), and they also have identities and identifying traits that they acquire or that reflect greater affinities with their chosen peer groups (horizontal identities). For instance, a person may be born into a family of hearing people and may themselves be deaf. Or a person may be born in one religion and decided to pursue a different religion. In both cases, a person develops their identity not only based on what they “grew up with,” but based on how they develop their peer group. At times, vertical and horizontal identities may conflict with one another, causing deep tensions between parents and children.
- **Suggested Discussion Questions:**
  - Can you recognize in yourself some of your vertical identities and some of your horizontal identities? What roles do each play in your understanding of who you are? Are any of these identities in conflict with one another?
  - Can you recognize in your child(re) vertical identities and horizontal identities? What roles do

each play in their understanding of who they are?  
Does this cause any tension or conflict?

- **Source 4: *Proverbs 22:6***
  - **Background:** The Book of Proverbs is traditionally attributed to King Solomon. It is one of the books of the Bible considered to be Wisdom literature, and it addressed universal themes and questions of life.
  - **Key Idea:** Teaching of children must be done according to the path of each child rather than by a uniform standard. The approach of tailoring education to each child will ensure that as the child grows up, even into old age, s/he/they will continue to relate to the teaching.
  - **Suggested Discussion Questions:**
    - Can you offer a concrete example of when you taught two children differently from one another based on their individual personalities?
    - Why does this verse imagine that children will stay on a path if they are well educated?
    - Is this always true? What happens when this is not true?
  
- **Source 5: *Malbim, Commentary on Proverbs 22:6***
  - **Background:** Rabbi Meir Leibush Malbim was a 19th century commentator on the Bible and grammarian. He lived and died in Ukraine. While he wrote on a number of subjects, he is best known for his commentary on the Bible.
  - **Key Ideas:** Malbim understands that nurture cannot be independent of nature. Every child has different abilities, strengths, and weaknesses. And these are made clear by where children show interest and proclivities. Teaching a child according to their path means seeing her/him/them for who they are and teaching content and form accordingly.
  - **Suggested Discussion Questions:**

- Why does the Malbim interpret the verse this way? What point might he be trying to make?
- How would teaching our children according to who they are, rather than who we want them to be, make them more likely to follow the paths we hope they follow?
- What does the Malbim worry about happening with parents who can't follow this model?

**Enduring Understandings:**

- Sometimes being a parent or a child is more complicated than the ideals laid out in the previous class indicate.
- Even when relationships are healthy, there are complications and ambivalences inevitably involved in these close relationships
- Our job is to find a way to ensure that we transmit our values to our children, and also make sure they know that we want them to be their own people
- **General Discussion Questions:**
  - How do we know when we have succeeded as parents? What about as children?
  - How do we strike a balance between steering our children towards our values while still encouraging them to be who they are?
  - How do these texts help complicate some of the texts we saw last session?

**Closing Discussion Questions for full unit:**

- How does Judaism view the role of the family unit? Why is it so central?
- How would you think about these ideas for people in non-traditional families? What about in non-ideal family situations? Do they have anything to teach us beyond the heterosexual nuclear family they imagine?
- Why is it difficult to be a parent? How do these texts strive to help make it easier?
- Why is it difficult to be a child? How do these texts strive to make it easier?