

## Do Not Harm My Anointed

*by Rabbi Mark Dratch*

The blessing of children comes with great responsibility. Rabbinic tradition invokes the biblical warning, “Do not injure My anointed” (I Chron. 16:22) as an admonition against harming children (Talmud, Shabbat 119b). Parents and teachers are responsible to protect their physical, emotional and spiritual welfare and in instructing their charges in the Word of God—“and you shall teach them to your children” (Deut. 6:7)—and to pass on the values and traditions of their faith community to the next generation: “teach them to your children, and to your children’s children; [about] the day when you stood before the Lord your God in Horeb” (Deut. 4:9-10). No one—family, teacher, friend or stranger—is permitted to cause harm.

Parents have frequently dedicated their lives, often at great sacrifice, to provide for their children, living their lives for their welfare. The famous account of Honi, the circle maker, the Talmudic Rip Van Winkle who slept uninterrupted for seventy years, illustrates this devotion. Honi once saw a man planting a carob tree and asked him how long it takes for such a tree to bear fruit. The man replied, “Seventy years.” He then asked him whether such activity was not in fact futile: “Are you certain that you will live another seventy years to enjoy the fruit?” The man answered him, “When I was born I found ready-grown carob trees in the world for my own benefit; just as my ancestors planted these for me so I too plant these for my children” (Talmud, Ta’anit 23a).

Nurturing the souls of future generations requires more than care for religious instruction and inspiration; it requires care for and protection of their physical well-being. Without healthy bodies, healthy psyches and healthy self-esteem, spiritual and religious growth is impossible. So while it is a religious imperative not to cause harm—physical, sexual or emotional—to anyone, there is a special religious duty not to abuse innocent children. A child who is made to feel violated, unworthy and unsafe—especially when abused by adults they need to respect and on whom they must rely—is just not capable of accepting the love of God and is not able to be open to the instruction of doctrine and faith. Physical, sexual and emotional abuse harms not only their bodies, but harms—and even destroys—their souls as well.

There are those who invoke biblical teachings and religious doctrine as justifications for child abuse. They cite verses such as “He who spares his rod hates his son; but he who loves him disciplines him early” (Prov. 13:24) and “Foolishness is bound in the heart of a child; but the rod of correction shall drive it far from him” (Prov. 22:15) as mandates to hit their children. This is an abuse of biblical doctrine. First of all, these verses are dealing with a parent’s obligation to discipline a child; they are not a license for neglect or sexual abuse or wanton physical violence. Second, these verses refer to corporal punishment as a form of training and discipline; in most cases physical violence is excessive and beyond any educational value. Third, many experts today feel that physical punishment is by its very nature counterproductive and does not fulfill the goals

of education and discipline for which it was ostensibly mandated. In fact, the Psalmist views the rod in a positive light: “Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me” (Ps. 23:5). While discipline is essential for the healthy development and functioning of children, it must be achieved in an encouraging and nurturing way.

It is the practice of observant Jews to recite blessings before the performance of many ritual acts, acknowledging that God has sanctified our lives through the observance of the commandments. There is a unique and unusual blessing recited prior to the study of Torah (the Bible and Jewish teachings). It states in part, “Make pleasant the words of Torah in our mouths and in the mouths of our children and of our children’s children.” There is no other petition for pleasantness prior to the observance of any other commandment. Throughout the centuries many explanations have been offered for this declaration. One which resonates with this discussion suggests that in order for our children to embrace our traditions, the study and understanding of our religion must be meaningful, interesting and pleasant. Without these elements, our children will most likely abandon our teachings and look elsewhere for meaning and fulfillment. This idea is reinforced in the words of the Psalmist, “Taste and see that God is good” (34:9). Only when God is perceived as good, and only when religious practice is seen as meaningful and pleasant, will the tradition continue through the next generation. Abusive parents, rabbis and teachers do nothing to make God appear pleasant or good.

None of this is to suggest that the only reason that we should treat our children well and refrain from abusing them physically, emotionally or sexually is in order to “save their souls” or to advance the interests of our faith communities. Our children, by their very humanity, have the right to demand respect and safety, and, by the image of God in which they were created, have the right to demand security and protection. Nevertheless, we people of faith have the additional concerns of spiritual well-being.

Elsewhere I have written about issues that stand in the way of protecting our children: concerns about public opinion; the desire to protect the interests of our religious institutions; concerns for defamatory speech; distrust of civil authorities, law enforcement and the justice system; and the honor and deference generally due to parents, teachers and religious authorities. It is impossible to imagine that a compassionate and loving deity, religious systems that promote decency and morality, and teachings that were given in order to transform the world into the divine Kingdom, could enable victimization of children and sacrifice innocence and innocents.

Our religious duty is to protect God’s anointed and to give them the chance to achieve their God given potential. Anything less is sacrilegious.

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