

Suing for Grandchildren

Category: Bamidbar, Bamidbar

“Honor your father and your mother.” The question is: to what extent?

A couple in India is suing their only son. The reason: The 35-year-old son has been married for six years and has not fathered a child, depriving them of the title “grandfather” and “grandmother” — as every person their age wants to be. The parents presented their son with an ultimatum: If they do not have a grandchild within a year, they will demand compensation of \$650,000.

The parents’ unusual lawsuit was filed on the grounds of “mental harassment.” They claim that their son and wife do not intend to give birth to a child — whom they had hoped to enjoy as grandparents after retirement.

The parents decided to sue for \$650,000, claiming that they had spent all their life-savings on raising and educating their son and funding his beautiful wedding. In return, they asked their son and daughter-in-law to bring a grandchild as soon as possible. “If we at least have a grandchild to spend time with, our pain will be bearable,” the parents claim in the lawsuit.

They are demanding the amount they spent on their son’s lavish wedding at a five-star hotel, a luxury car worth \$80,000, and the money they spent on the young couple’s honeymoon.

The parents also claim that they paid \$65,000 for their son to train as a pilot in the United States, after which he returned to India and didn’t work, forcing them to continue supporting him for another two years. The couple is demanding financial compensation from their son for his “mental cruelty — it’s every parent’s dream to be a grandparent.”

Obligations to a Parent

Tomorrow, on Shavuot, we will read the Ten Commandments.

The fifth commandment is, “Honor your father and your mother.” The question is: to what extent is it the duty of the son or daughter to respect the parents? Is it

the duty of a son to bring children into the world so that the parents will have a grandson to play with?

There is no doubt that parents should be respected; that is, they should be treated with devotion and never embarrassed or contradicted. But if a mother orders her teenage son, “Wear a sweater because it’s cold outside,” and he is embarrassed to wear a sweater around his friends, must he listen to her?

The same question is relevant regarding important decisions: If the parents dream of their son being a doctor, and he insists on studying music — and they claim that he is sending them to their graves in grief — must the son listen to his parents?

And on the topic of marriage: A story is told about a famous rabbi, from a very famous rabbinical family, who studied at the University of Berlin in the 1930’s. He met a young Jewish woman at the university and decided to marry her. He wrote about it to his parents, who at the time had immigrated to the United States, but his father wrote back to him that he strongly opposed the match.

Shortly afterwards, his father, who was a Rosh Yeshiva in New York, came to his yeshiva one day and told his students the whole story — that his son knew a Jewish girl and wanted to marry her but he, his father, objected. But, he added, his son wrote to him that the halachic ruling (Yoreh Deah 240) is that a son is not obligated to listen to his father with regard to marriage.

The Rema writes clearly that if a father objects to the son’s choice, he is not obligated to listen!

The Rosh Yeshiva declared to all his students: “My son is right! My son is right!”

Grandchildren

Clearly, honoring a father and mother according to Halacha applies only to issues that directly concern the parents. When it comes to the personal life of a son or daughter, they are not obligated to heed their parents’ advice.

But when it comes to the issue of grandchildren, it is a little more complicated.

The Rebbe once said, “A father reaches wholeness and perfection when he has

grandchildren, as the verses say, 'and you shall see children to your children...' and, 'Grandchildren are the crown of their elders.' When a person has only children, he has yet to reach that stage of perfection, and it also impacts his fulfillment of the mitzvah to be fruitful and multiply. This is also evident from the teaching of our sages: 'If a person is a Torah scholar, and his son is a Torah scholar, and his son's son is a Torah scholar, the Torah will not cease from his progeny...'" (Toras Menachem vol. 38 pg. 176).

In other words, one's decision to have children has a "religious" impact on the parents, because he is considered whole only when he has grandchildren, and furthermore, Halacha says that in order to fulfill the mitzvah to be fruitful and multiply, he must give birth to a son and daughter — and then he fulfills the mitzvah on the condition that the son and daughter are able to have children of their own. If they cannot have their children, he has not fulfilled his obligation! (Even Ha'ezer 1:6)

In this case as well, although the young couple in India are not required to give grandchildren to their parents, they are still obliged to have children, as part of G-d's commandment of "*lasheves yitzarah*." This obligation, to establish a civilized society, is a commandment which obligates non-Jews as well (see the Rebbe's conversation with the Sadigura Rebbe, *Siach Sarfei Kodesh* p. 274). Therefore, they have the personal duty to bring children into the world.

But obviously, it's a bit much to sue your son in court for the \$650,000 you invested in him. It is true that you weren't obligated to finance his studies in the US and buy him a \$80,000 car, but he never stipulated that it was on condition that he bring grandchildren! Perhaps, if the parents had pampered their son a little less, he would have behaved a little more like a human being...

Spiritual Grandchildren

My friends, the Rebbe, said many times that the obligation to be fruitful and multiply is not only a physical mitzvah to bring biological children to the world. There is a spiritual dimension as well, and we read it in this week's Torah portion:

The Torah says, "These are the progeny of Aaron and Moses... these are the names of Aaron's sons..." Rashi points out that the sons of Moses are not

mentioned. Why was Moses included in the verse? Because he taught Torah to Aaron's sons. "This teaches us that if one teaches Torah to his son's friend, the Torah views him as if he gave birth to him." (Bamidbar 3:1)

Moreover: in the first section of the Shema, on the words, "and you should teach it to your sons," Rashi says: "this refers to students; we find all over that students are called sons, as the verse says, 'you are sons to G-d,' ... and likewise, Hezekiah taught Torah to the entire Jewish people and he called them sons... and just as students are called sons... teachers are called 'father.'"

Rashi is teaching us that a person is not done fulfilling his obligation to be fruitful and multiply the moment he has children. Rather, his obligation continues: he must teach Torah to others.

This raises the question: why did the Torah bother using the terminology of children, only for the sages to interpret it to mean students? Why didn't it simply state that we are obligated to teach Torah to students — as the Mishnah does in Ethics of our Fathers, "Establish many students..."?

The Torah wants to teach us that we should love and care for our students as if they are our own children. You are not just a teacher; the moment they become your students, they become your children — and you need to treat them as such.

Tomorrow, we will read the Ten Commandments at the synagogue. Every person should make every effort to bring his children, or any child to the synagogue. Every child who hears the Ten Commandments becomes your student — and in essence, becomes your child.