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MOTHERS AND FATHERS: A CONCEPTUALIZATION OF PARENTAL ROLES

The passages in Exodus (20:12), “Honor thy father and thy mother” and in Leviticus (19:3) “You shall fear every man his mother and his father,” are the most direct references in the Bible illustrating the nature of parental roles in the family. Simply stated, the passages make direct references to the children’s responsibility to honor and fear their parents. The commandment to honor states father first and mother second, whereas the commandment to fear reverses the order and places the mother first and father second.

This distinction is noted and elaborated upon in the Talmud (*Kiddushin*, 30b—31a). In discussing the reversed order of parents in each passage they suggest that an attempt was made to encourage that response on the part of the child that was considered least likely to be forthcoming—given the expected manner the respective parent related to the child.

The Talmud suggests that a mother would more naturally be the recipient of honor because “she sways him with words”;¹ the Torah, therefore, gave precedence to the father in the passage commanding honor, in an attempt to encourage honor towards father. On the other hand, since a father “teaches him Torah,” he would naturally and more likely be the recipient of fear from children. Therefore, mother was given precedence in the passage commanding fear, with the intention of attempting to encourage fear of the mother.

This early rabbinical interpretation of two biblical commandments offers some insight into what was once believed to be the nature of parental roles, and parent-child relationships in the family. A mother was expected to “sway her children with words,” and a father was expected to “teach his children Torah.”

The Mishnah in Talmud *Kiddushin* (29a) and the accompanying Gemara is another source that can be used to understand parental roles. This source states the responsibilities of parents to children, as well as the aforementioned responsibilities of children to parents. In discussing parental responsibility, it is only the father who is commanded with responsibilities towards his children, not the mother. A father must redeem and circumsize his son, teach him Torah, a worthy profession—and some claim that he must teach his son how to swim as well. With these responsibilities clearly delineated, we may conceptualize the role of father, albeit in crude terms, as that of teacher.

The absence of any clearly delineated responsibility for the mother is striking,² especially when thought of in the context of much of the contemporary literature about the “woman’s role in Judaism/halakhah.” This literature suggests that women’s exemption from commandments associated with time is “to assure that no legal obligation would interfere with the selection by Jewish women of a role which was centered almost exclusively in the home.”³ Yet, despite these suggestions, the mother is neglected in the Mishnah that enumerates familial responsibilities.

Despite the statements of all the previously quoted sources, the mother’s role remains undefined.⁴ It is possible to infer a particular role from the biblical passages, but the Mishnah’s interpretation leaves us with an unclear and nebulous conception. An exploration of parental roles from a psychological perspective will increase the clarity and coherence of these puzzling sources.

The most meaningful attempt to understand parental roles would be the exploration of the relationship between parents and their children at its earliest, most incipient stage.⁵ A well-established body of psychological research on infancy has demonstrated a wide range of perceptual, cognitive, and social competencies that are either present at birth or acquired by infants in the first few weeks of life.⁶ Many of these competencies of the infant functionally elicit caregiving from adults, and have contributed to the conceptualization of the infant as active rather than passive in seeking the love and protection necessary for survival.⁷

These revelations have led investigators to study the mother-infant interactions with the assumption that the newborn infant not only actively seeks caregiving from parents, but is capable of eliciting caregiving and social responses as well. According to the investigators of these studies, a mutually reciprocal relationship

begins during the first few months, and even weeks, of an infant's life.⁸

Investigators in the child research community have recently focused their attention on the father's role in infancy, in addition to the mother's role. It is a small but growing group of investigators who are exploring the impact of fathers on child development, attempting to distinguish the similar and distinctive features of his social interaction with his young child from that of a mother's. In a review of this literature, Gunsberg stated that mothers and fathers offer different and complementary organizations of the world to their infant.⁹ It is these differences and similarities that have been reported in this recent body of research that will shed light on the understanding of parental roles.¹⁰

Beginning researchers reported a high degree of similarity in both parents, in the types of behaviors they direct toward their infants, and their sensitivities and responsiveness to infant cues.¹¹ They determined that while feeding their newborn infants, fathers were just as nurturant as mothers in that they touched, looked, vocalized, and kissed their newborn just as often as mothers did. In a small study of parents and their infants, Michael Yogman reported other types of similarities in the parent-infant interaction.¹² He described both parent-infant interactions as being mutually regulated and cyclical in nature, with both mothers and fathers building to a peak of attention and involvement, and coming down in an orderly fashion.

Just as significantly, if not more so, have been the reports from studies that have highlighted the differences in parent-infant interactions. In the study as cited, as well as further studies, Yogman reported that distal, visual games were more common with mothers than with fathers, whereas fathers more often than mothers engaged the infant in attention arousing tapping games.¹³ In general, Yogman characterized the father-infant interactions as reciprocal, smoothly modulated, and contained. In a longitudinal case study of parent speech to a newborn, it was reported that the father generally provided a speech environment considerably more challenging, diversified and stimulating than the mother's.¹⁴

Other studies of parental interaction with infants and toddlers further substantiate the differences in which mothers and fathers mediate the social interaction with the infant (i.e., their relationship with their child).¹⁵ Father's interactions were characterized as brief in nature, involving physical proximity, and being social rather than structured around a toy or object. Mothers' interactions, relative to

fathers', were more likely to involve nurturant and caregiving physical contact, play with toys and verbal conversation.

The reason for these particularly distinctive parental styles of interaction has yet to be conclusively established. There are some investigators who advance the idea that the fathers' physical play style and the mothers' more nurturant, caregiving activity, though culturally supported, may have a strong biological basis.¹⁶ They hypothesize that the musculature in males favors frequent changes in activity and more rigorous responses, versus repetitive, more modulated activities for females. In addition, it is emphasized that the pregnancy, childbirth, and subsequent nursing experience of females contributes toward a special "biological connectedness" of mother and child.¹⁷ On the other hand, there are investigators who claim that the distinctive playing styles, as well as child care roles, are merely a function of the socially acceptable, and often imposed, sex-role differentiation, therefore, there are no biological constraints leading toward particular roles.¹⁸

The most conclusive evidence, arguing against the cultural nonbiological position in support of the sociobiological view, are the studies of fathers as primary caregiver—in nontraditional families in which the father is the parent who stays home and is primarily responsible for the infant's care.¹⁹ The results of these studies suggest that biological gender rather than social role or involvement in caregiving has the major influence on the style of parental behavior. In all the other reported cases, irrespective of caregiving experience, the reported findings were similar to those observed in previous comparisons of maternal and parental behavior—that mothers proved more likely to vocalize and express affection, whereas fathers proved more likely to stimulate and be physical. Though not definitively conclusive because the fathers in the studies were not raised in nontraditional, non-sex-typed fashion themselves, the results certainly suggest that gender differences are not readily or easily amenable to social influences.

Investigators have attempted to conceptualize the potential effects and meanings of the reported distinctive parental styles.²⁰ The mother's distinctly maternal and empathic relationship with her child helps foster an internalized sense of trust and security, as well as a contact with a world experienced as safe and understanding. They interpreted the distinctive aspects of the father's relationship with the infant as encouraging an expansion of the infant's environment and

as promoting an awareness that interesting and responsive people exist outside of the close, symbiotic world of the mother. It is speculated that the differential expectancies the child needs to establish between parents equip the child for interaction in a richer and broader social world, and increase the variety and novelty of the child's experiences.

These two parental roles become more coherently understood when viewed in the context of their appropriate fit to the psychological (emotional) needs of the infant. The two differentiated parental roles that were highlighted in the research literature each relate to different emotional needs of the developing child.

These needs are a complex mesh of feelings and psychological drives that the human being struggles with from birth to death. Primarily, they are the feelings of loneliness and helplessness, as well as the concomitant psychological drives to master and achieve, and to love and be loved. Some thinkers have suggested that these feelings and drives are at the core of the present human condition.²¹ It is a condition that can be understood through the writings of these great religious and psychoanalytic thinkers.

In his major essay, "The Lonely Man of Faith," Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik explored the present condition of the contemporary man of faith.²² In referring to the Bible's two differing accounts of the creation of man, he considered the Adam of each account as symbolically representative of two aspects of humanity. He describes Adam of the first account as a bold, aggressive, and creative being who is given the mandate to subdue nature. The uniqueness of his humanity, his identity, is discovered and unfolded when he attains dignity. For Adam the first, dignity means a glorious, majestic position vis-a-vis his animate and inanimate environment. In his attempt to succeed at his task of subduing nature and attaining dignity, Adam the first is plagued by feelings of helplessness and inadequacy. He does not feel capable of achieving his goals by himself. Thus, the helplessness impresses him to make use of a social community in order to subdue and conquer along with him, as well as to serve as reflections for his attainment of dignity.

Adam the second, on the other hand, is a reflective, redeeming individual. He lives in the subjective, esthetic, and spiritual world, exploring life qualities. In the realization of his "I" identity, the discovery of his uniquely perceived humanness, he simultaneously realizes his own loneliness. He realizes his existence as a unique, separate, existential being unlike any other in the cosmos. In an

attempt to overcome his existential loneliness Adam the second seeks love and companionship. He attains this love and companionship by sacrificing part of himself.

Thus, Rabbi Soloveitchik characterizes the contemporary man of faith as divided in primary feelings and in the manner he relates to the world. Adam the first uses his comrades in the world in an attempt to attain grandeur (mastery) and dignity, whereas Adam the second reaches out and communicates with his companions in the world in an attempt to attain love and security.

In a memorial lecture in which he further elaborated upon this typology, Rabbi Soloveitchik developed concepts that can be used to understand the relationships between parents and their children.²³ He explained the relationship of Adam the first to God as that of a son to a father, and the relationship of Adam the second to God as that of a child to his mother. In this view, man relates to God as father by whom he is being raised as a son to become independent of Him, and responsible for his own destiny while pursuing a creative role vis-a-vis the world. On the other hand, man relating to God as mother feels encouraged toward a personal, intimate, and dependent relationship. Each Adam feels fulfilled in his relationship with God, which is particularly suited for him.²⁴

This fundamental characterization of man by Rabbi Soloveitchik as majestically dignified (Adam the first) as well as sacrificially loving (Adam the second), is reflected in the psychoanalytic work of Margaret Mahler.²⁵ Mahler closely observed infants during the first few years of life and suggested a theoretical structure for understanding the psychological birth of the young infant based upon those observations. Through her work, it is possible to recognize that the infant struggles with the needs, feelings, and drives that are the seeds of what adults struggle with later in life. In better understanding these needs of the child, it is easier to conceptualize what might be the most beneficial roles parents can play in the lives of their developing children.

The major theme that emerged from Mahler's observations concentrates on the developing infant as an organism that curiously reaches out to the world around it while gradually separating from its secure and nourishing mother.²⁶

The important first state is the symbiotic phase of development. It is a time, during the first three to four months, in which the infant experiences the mother as a reflection and extension of its pleasing and displeasing sensory experiences. It is a time in which the infant's

exploration of its world is primarily restricted to the visual (and oral) modality.²⁷

At four months of age a stage of differentiation begins in which the young infant starts a more tactile means of exploration. This starts with an exploration of mother, and then spills over into interest in inanimate objects. This exploration is facilitated by the infant's ability to store in memory the early comforting maternal experiences, and to recognize maternal patterns and expectations. The child gradually explores the world around it at a physical distance from its mother, but always maintains a secure contact, be it visual and/or auditory.

During these periods of development when the mother is taken for granted as a "home base" for periodic refueling, the father comes to stand for distant "non-mother" space—for the "elated exploration of reality."²⁸

By 16–25 months of age, the infant's maturational ability and cognitive growth have stimulated him toward a greater differentiation from its mother and interest in the outside world, to the extent that it begins to realize it must cope with the world more or less on its own. Yet, as its awareness for separateness grows, it begins to realize its insignificant, powerless position and feels helpless and lonely. The helpless and lonely feelings seem to increase its need and wish to share its experiences with its mother. At this stage the child struggles with its attempt to explore and master its world as a separate individual and its need to feel attached and secure to a love object.²⁹

During this stage of differentiation when the mother is characterized as familiar, secure, and comforting, the father becomes the first and most familiar of the "different adults"—the initial contact with the novel world of external reality. As such, he comes to reflect the exuberant push toward active exploration and autonomous functioning.³⁰

The work of Rabbi Soloveitchik and Margaret Mahler makes it possible to characterize contemporary man, both adult and child, as being lonely and helpless, and driven to feel security and love, as well as dignity and mastery. Parental responsibility must be delicately balanced toward encouraging the developing child to be able to independently and adequately satisfy those drives. This delicate balance is considered best served by offering both a nurturant, protective environment that matches the infant's developmental capacities, and an environment that encourages the infant to become

independent, to explore and learn about the world as an autonomous individual.³¹

Given the greater awareness of the needs and drives of man, as well as the differences reported in parental social interaction, it is possible to more clearly understand the impact of both mother and father on the child, and the primary model of interaction (role) that would best suit each of them.

The necessary nurturant, protective model of interaction with the child seems primarily suited for mothers, whereas a stimulating, demanding model of interaction with the child seems primarily suited for fathers. The mother's rhythmic and consistently expectable manner of relating to her infant, as well as her biological tie through pregnancy, childbirth, and nursing, makes her most appropriate as a more nurturant and secure figure, which the young child can experience as reassuring and comforting. The comfort and security of her empathic responses quells the child's loneliness and encourages the feeling that the child is loved and attached to others in its world. On the other hand, the father's arousing and idiosyncratic interactive style makes him most appropriate as a stimulating, demanding figure. As such a figure, he presents a different means of relating to the world, and helps the child develop a path toward independence and mastery, while overcoming helplessness in the process.

In light of this understanding, it is important to note a limited number of studies that have shown that the greater the nurturance and stimulation of both parents, and the greater the involvement of the father with the infant, then the greater the experimentally measured cognitive and social competence of the child.³² This suggests that though the distinctive parental styles serve an important developmental function, mothers and fathers would be in a more advantaged position if they adopted a style of interaction that included distinctive characteristics of their spouse. It is as a consequence of each parent's acceptance of primarily, and not exclusively, different functions and modes of interactions, that they help their children develop into individuals who can indulge and adjust on their own to the most exhilarating and traumatic of life experiences.

This conceptualization makes the halakhic treatment of the father more well-defined and coherent. It seems that the father's primary role consists of being the parent who helps guide and negotiate the child's initial interaction with its world. As a result, the

halakhah assigns to the father the responsibility as teacher, to ensure that the child learns basic life-sustaining functions (e.g., learning a trade, how to swim). In a more fundamental sense, the father is a model and teacher who helps the child understand its halakhic relationship with God and how to lead its life according to His principles.

Given this definition of the father's role, the mother's seemingly neglected and undefined halakhic role stands out more distinctly. This distinction may be explicable not only in terms of different actions on the part of both parents, but in terms of reality for the child.

In fulfilling his role as a stimulating, demanding figure and halakhic model/teacher, the father functions in the objective, concrete world of reality, whereas the mother functions within a subjective, emotional world. In such a world, the mother is not only sacrificing part of herself, but in providing the child with empathic love and affirmation, she becomes absorbed in the inner life of the child. She and the child become a functioning symbiotic unit, in which her separateness is absorbed, while she responds rhythmically and contingently with her infant.³³ It cannot be commanded of a woman to attain such a quality of absorption with her child, and the halakhah, therefore, makes no such demand. A command would be experienced as an artificial intrusion that interferes with the unfolding and developing symbiotic relationship. It is possible, then, to categorize a mother's halakhic responsibilities as comforting, understanding, and caregiving in nature.

In understanding the father as a demanding, challenging teacher, and the mother as an empathic, understanding caregiver it is now easier to understand the Midrash. The father's demands and challenges, which addresses the child's drive to mastery, are expected to elicit fear in the child. The child fears that it will not live up to either its own internalized expectations of accomplishment, or its father's, and be considered a failure as a result. The perception of father is a reminder, whether conscious or unconscious, of the drive to achieve and master, of the goals one has expected to reach, and the accompanying fear that you might not and will end up a failure.

The mother's empathy and understanding, which addresses the child's drive for a love attachment with another, are expected to elicit honor, or the caregiving it implies.³⁴ The child's caretaking is an expression of love, a reflection of the care and love of its mother. The perception of mother reminds the child, whether consciously or unconsciously, of the close attachment experience and the loving care

that was related and associated with it. Thus, both mother and father, each nurturing different developmental drives, elicits differing responses in their children.

The conclusions suggested by this article raise questions when viewed in the light of the recent changes in ideological perspectives regarding sex roles, and their impact on the traditional nuclear family. In particular, the halakhically conscious woman who chooses to enter the professional work force may wonder about her ability to function as a primarily nurturant, caregiving figure. Based upon the previously quoted research studies, the amount of time a mother or father spends with their infant, as a primary or secondary caregiver, does not change their particular distinctive way of relating to their infant.³⁵ Therefore, it can be understood that a working woman does not forfeit her primarily nurturing function. Yet it is essential for the halakhically conscious working woman, who needs to delicately balance her professional life with her parental and marital relationships, to keep in mind her responsibility as a nurturing figure. As such a figure, she cares for her child's psychological and emotional, as well as physical needs.

The secular changes in childbirth practices and child care roles have significantly affected fathers as well as mothers. Fathers' involvement with their children has increased. When fathers incorporate nurturing and caregiving characteristics with primarily stimulating functions during these periods of increased involvement, research studies have reported a more beneficial effect on the developing child.³⁶

In addition to these secular changes, the Orthodox Jewish community has seen an increase in the number of women interested in continuing their Torah education after high school—a testament to this increase is the number of yeshivot and study centers in Israel and New York that have opened and flourished in the past decade. One may wonder whether a woman committed to learning Torah, who enjoys spending time learning with her children, is neglecting her primarily nurturant, caregiving function. The research studies previously quoted suggest that by doing this mother is not neglecting her primary role nor taking over that of her husband, but rather, she is contributing a more positive Torah environment.³⁷ A mother who teaches and stimulates in addition to serving a primarily nurturant function contributes more to her child's growth development.

The support and encouragement to fulfill their respective functions that each parent gives their spouse is the foundation for all aspects of effective parenting. Without mutual commitment and un-

