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Mishpachah: The Jewish Family in Tradition and in Transition

Leonard J. Greenspoon

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Mishpachah:
The Jewish Family
in Tradition and in Transition

Studies in Jewish Civilization
Volume 27

Editor:
Leonard J. Greenspoon

The Klutznick Chair in Jewish Civilization

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Uncovering the Ongoing Parental Role in Education in the Rabbinic Period

Susan Marks

Parents today involve themselves in their children's higher education in myriad, often contradictory ways. On the one hand, privacy laws now insist that eighteen-year-olds need not share college transcripts with their parents. On the other hand, many students rely on their parents to pay a portion of tuition, and twenty-first century "helicopter" parenting does not always end at high school graduation. From this perspective, we might wonder why we so often think of rabbinic disciples—many of whom were certainly younger than today's college students—as taught only by rabbis. Certainly, their mothers and fathers could have continued to play formative roles. Identifying those ongoing educational functions of the rabbinic parent is the aim of this essay.

Educating young adults is, almost by definition, a fraught affair. I happened upon a wonderful outside-the-classroom reminder of this at the newly renovated Salvador Dalí Museum in St. Petersburg, Florida. The audio tour first led us through Dalí's early paintings and then narrated the end of his art school career: he declined to take final exams because, he explained, none of his teachers knew as much as he did. Teachers will likely join me in recalling a student or two who felt that we had nothing new to teach them. Perhaps Dalí was correct, albeit not particularly politic, in his self-assessment. (Whether the self-satisfied students we have encountered could claim genius on the level of Dalí's I leave to our own recollections.) There is, of course, also another player in this educational equation: the one paying the bills and looking out for the future of the student and the family. Need I add that Dalí's father blew up at his son when he heard that his son withdrew? This is the relationship that interests me. The analogous dynamic deeply hidden within rabbinic literature—whereby a parent offers guidance, which is then met with the child's acceptance or rejection—is ripe for dissection.

The historic focus on rabbi and disciple obscures the teaching relationship between father and son.¹ Rhetorically, rabbis put their own importance as teachers ahead of fathers, a high valuation that culminates in a prescription requiring that if faced with such a dilemma, a disciple must redeem his teacher from captivity before his father:

If his father and his teacher were each taken captive, he must first ransom his teacher and afterwards ransom his father; but if his father was also a Sage he must first ransom his father and afterward ransom his teacher.²

Research into issues of redeeming captives examines the complexities of these prescriptions;³ here I want us only to recognize this attempted sleight of hand, which emphasizes that a father's authority should have limits.⁴ When we look behind this veil, the importance of the father can be appreciated.

Our sense of the significance of rabbis as educators owes something to the fame of the rabbinic schools of Sura and Pumpaditha. Nevertheless, recent research challenges the power of these so-called academies and the place of formal education in the earliest rabbinic periods as discussed in the Mishnah and talmudic literature.⁵ This research argues instead that teachers are taught not in academies but rather in small circles of disciples. Extending this line of interrogation, my research challenges us to consider another overlooked relationship revealed by this new model of more intimate education: the relationship of the father and son, which continued despite rabbi-centric rhetoric.

Concerning the dietary matter of waiting between eating meat and milk, one disciple invokes his father as a standard:

Said Mar 'Ukba, "In this matter of [waiting between eating meat and milk] I am lax compared with my father's stringency [*chala bar chamra l'gabai abba*]. For if my father were to eat meat now he would not eat cheese until the very hour tomorrow, whereas I do not eat [cheese] in the same meal but I do eat it in my next meal."⁶

Is the son accepting the greater knowledge of the father or challenging its appropriateness? Elsewhere also, these nuances have not been visible until the salient question concerning the pedagogical relationship of father and son was asked. Finding evidence that the son's relationship to his father continues to loom over his education requires a portrait of education capable of including this complexity.

Analyzing education and considering ritual and lived religion, I argue, reveals the ongoing, important, and ambivalent educational relationship between parent and child, refining our understanding of transmission of ideas in the rabbinic period. Our present examination of largely underappreciated dynamics is in line with recent studies that have destabilized the image of rabbinic education as formal, institutional instruction. If we also take into account certain ideas that are well accepted in social theory but have not yet

been applied to the study of education in the rabbinic era, we can come to a more nuanced understanding of how the sons in these narratives might perceive their world. These critical advances enable us to see anew the father-son relationships that have until now been hidden in plain sight.

INFORMAL INSTITUTIONS AND GENERATIONAL SHIFTS

When the ninth century Babylonian rabbinic academies of Pumbedita and Sura traced their own histories, they portrayed their institutions as dating back to the third century and perhaps even earlier.⁷ That backdated pedigree had been accepted until David Goodblatt spearheaded a recent move toward historical skepticism about these early academies, a skepticism that appears to be coalescing into a new consensus. A consideration of linguistic evidence began the challenge: why should we translate “yeshiva” or *metivta* as “academy” when other possibilities, such as “study session,” exist?⁸ The terms *beit midrash* and *bei rav*, Hebrew and Aramaic, respectively, for “house of study,” appear about five times as often as the terms “yeshiva” and *metivta*, so perhaps this “academy” concept is not as foundational as has been assumed.⁹

The scholars examining early Jewish higher education argue persuasively that by bracketing our own emotional investment in the image of the academy, we come to recognize it as an anachronism. Study circles would have been more fluid—powerful as long as a particular rabbi was teaching, and then at some point students would move elsewhere. The resulting analytical framework has already led to insights about early Jewish and Christian education, since the latter also seems to have not so immediately developed the formality once assumed.¹⁰ This paradigm shift opens a great many questions concerning how teachers related to their students, to one another, and to others—all are matters of communication and of power.¹¹

Given this focus on the more informal and direct dynamics between teachers and students, it is not much of a leap to insert the question of how parents figure into this picture. In the area of meal studies, where I have done much of my research, Gil Klein has recently argued for the importance of considering the banquet hall space as an important locus for halachic discussions.¹² He insists that the meal itself functions not only as a setting for communal reflection but also as an interactive space for the making of halachic decisions.¹³ Taken together, this suggests that we move our thinking from a model of academies to multiple and porous households as a context for law and, I would add, learning. Spilling over into mealtimes, this instruction was

hardly the classroom-bound phenomenon that earlier critics might have retrojected onto rabbinic-era settings.

The model of the removed and ascendant academy is being supplanted with more intimate alternatives. This is one step toward viewing the pedagogical relationship of father and son anew. Social science methodologies that examine community change over time, such as discussions of cohort replacement, provide additional steps, mapping the changing attitudes of new generations.¹⁴ In considering rabbinic literature, we do not have a mass of data, but these mathematically based methodologies do a service nonetheless: they reverse the landscape for us. They suggest that despite appearances to the contrary, rabbinic emphasis on transmission of tradition is only part of the story. They cause us to ask how rabbinic literature, as it conserves earlier wisdom, presents these moments of change. The tensions in rabbinic texts start to surface.

Of more help than simply revealing the underlying tensions, Pierre Bourdieu theorizes the self-reflexive aspect of acting from a differing point of view. Bourdieu expects us to look at change, but he also insists on our examining the structure that precedes this change as a prior moment. This is not, he explains, the Lévi-Straussian “structure” but instead is a continually revised “structuring structure” that will serve as social context for actions that will, in turn, restructure this context and so forth.¹⁵ In our case, these “symbolic struggles over the perceptions of the social world” mean that students understand, act, and develop social capital in a world that never overlaps entirely with that of their parents or teachers.¹⁶ Our challenge becomes recognizing this disjuncture or lack of overlap in the discrete points of view concealed or revealed when fathers and sons contest each other’s ability to know and act.

RABBINIC FATHERS AND SONS

In recent years, a *sugya*, or talmudic grouping from the Babylonian Talmud tractate Berachot, has received much attention because of the clues it offers concerning rabbinic ideas about women, asceticism, and the construction of gender.¹⁷ Despite this flurry of study, little attention has been paid to the ongoing appearance of fathers in this set of narratives. As explained above, researchers had expected education and learning to happen within the academy, so there was no need to examine these interactions as peculiar. Contrary to this expectation, each example depicts a different fraught teaching and learning relationship between father and son. I will examine these three cases

out of order so as to consider the most successful, the scariest, and, only then, the one with the most ambiguity.

Despite the fact that the father may send his son to a disciple circle, the father is responsible for helping the son find a bride. As becomes apparent below, this is a teachable moment. Or, in other words, the father persists in teaching his son about other aspects of life, including the importance of getting married:

Later he was engaged in preparations for the marriage of his son into the family of R. Jose b. Zimra. It was agreed that [the son] should spend twelve years at the house of study [*bei rav*]. When the girl was led before him he said to them, "Let it be six years." When they made her pass before him [a second time] he said, "I would rather marry [her first] and then proceed [to the house of study]." He felt abashed before his father, but the latter said to him, "My son, you have the mind of your creator; for in Scripture it is written first, 'You will bring them and plant them,' and later it is written, 'And let them make Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them.'"¹⁸

The father arranges for the chosen bride to pass before his hesitant son. When the son chooses marriage, he stands sheepishly before his father. And we do see the power relationship: the father has a hold on his son, and the son has filial obligations. In this particular glimpse, the father teaches his son about this balance of sexual relations and asceticism. His son does not know more than his father; the son comes to recognize a truth that his father has understood. Nevertheless, Bourdieu's insights concerning struggles over perception help us realize that the separate perspective he represents is not altogether absent: had he (or someone like him) not perceived this question of marriage differently and not thought that his need to go study trumped his need to marry, there would be no purpose to telling the story.

The peaceful communication of father and son concerning the balance of Torah and family characterizes the narrative. Toward the end of this *sugya* we learn of a more violent clash. This father also presents his own opinion of how to balance study and sexual activity:

R. Joseph the son of Raba [was] sent [by] his father to the house of study to study before R. Joseph, and they arranged for him [to stay there for] six years. Having been there three years and the eve of the Day of Atonement approaching, he said, "I would go and see my family." When his father heard [of his premature arrival] he took

up a weapon and went out to meet him. He said to him, “You have remembered your whore!”

Another version: He said to him, “You have remembered your dove!” They got involved in a quarrel and neither the one nor the other ate of the last meal before the fast.¹⁹

Things became so tense between this father and son that they began Yom Kipur without a last meal. The weapon in the father’s hand certainly represents a contest of power, but the narrative underscores the incomplete success of the father’s argument. Aside from his need to resort to violence, the father’s language itself seems to be uncomfortable for the talmudic compilers. An additional angle is offered: some accounts read “dove” instead of “whore.” Those hearing the story have even wondered whether both father and son miss the meal because they are dead, each killing the other in the culmination of the violence percolating throughout.²⁰ Ultimately, whatever the outcome there is no question here that the episode involves (a) an argument, (b) different perspectives, and (c) teaching from father to son. Regardless of what learning may occur, the father offers his son another perspective.

One more parental story appears in this *sugya*. In this narrative, the father finds his son’s behavior as fantastic as the previous father found his son’s opposition:

R. Hama b. Bisa went away [from home and] spent twelve years at the house of study. When he returned he said, “I will not act as did b. Hakina [surprising and thus scaring his wife to death].” He therefore entered the [local] house of study and sent word to his house. Meanwhile his son, R. Oshaia, entered, sat down before him and addressed to him a question on [one of the] subjects of study. [R. Hama,] seeing how well versed he was in his studies, became very depressed. “Had I been here,” he said, “I also could have had such a child.” When he entered his house his son came in, whereupon he rose before him, believing that [the other] wished to ask him some [further] legal questions. His wife chuckled. “What father stands up before a son?!”

[As an epilogue to this story, since from Bisa to Hama to Oshaia is the three generations,] Rami b. Hama applied to him [the following scriptural text:] And a threefold cord is not quickly broken is a reference to R. Oshaia, son of R. Hama, son of Bisa.²¹

Here, the father, like the son in our earlier text, balances marriage and study. He does wed first, but then he goes off to study before settling into his marital

home. Upon his return, he encounters a model young man: one well educated and respectful. We see him indulge in a private dream that this could be his son, which turns out to be true on one level. But isn't such a compliant son still a fantasy, especially when the father has been absent? He encounters his son twice, and they don't argue! We have the modern language of those who study adoption reminding us that he is only the biological father.

The wife of the absent father guffaws as he mistakenly rises before his son, for this father is turning the expected roles upside down. It would be appropriate to rise before a guest scholar but not before his own son.²² This erroneous posture becomes a joke, as the text both reveals and calls into question the appropriateness of behavior between this father and this son. The son has inadvertently assumed the father's role of the one who commands honor, thus transforming the relationship into a very different fantasy involving a weak father and a usurping son. The text does not tell us how this pair will move from the fantasy roles of father and son to a real relationship, but it does reveal a disconnect. The epilogue celebrates Oshaia as the third generation, the threefold cord that cannot be broken, but in doing so it may also be answering a concern that the father's absence has endangered this legacy.

The three texts above, situated in this single *sugya*, offer a range of visions: a relationship between father and son that is productive of learning, a relationship based only on biology that can serve as a fantasy for at least a moment or two, and, in the final vignette, a father greeting his son with violence. Despite the backdrop of students going off to study, the learning relationship between father and son still exists, however successful or unsuccessful. In fact, this variety suggests the tenacity of this relationship despite available alternatives. Because all the stories describe the encounters using the third person, however, we don't have the sons' perspective on this learning. That point of view resurfaces when we turn to the text examined briefly at the beginning and its twin:

Said Mar 'Ukba, "In this matter of [waiting between eating meat and milk] I am lax compared with my father's stringency [*chala bar chamra l'gabai abba*]. For if my father were to eat meat now he would not eat cheese until the very hour tomorrow, whereas I do not eat [cheese] in the same meal but I do eat it in my next meal."

Samuel said, "In this matter I am lax compared with my father's stringency [*chala bar chamra l'gabai abba*]. For my father used to inspect his property twice a day, but I do so only once a day." Samuel here follows his maxim, for Samuel declared,

“He who inspects his property daily will find a half-zuz coin [or the equivalent as profit].”²³

In these accounts we see two sons, each in the same position and each offering an account of his personal practice. Each declares that his father is “stricter” than he is about these matters of dining and accounting. Each son describes his father’s practice and his own, neither denying what he learned from his father nor following it exactly.

Ironically, despite the first-person presentation, ambiguity remains. What does it mean when a son says that his father is “stricter”? A couple of translations try to decide the issue: “I [the son] cannot hold a candle to my father” or “I am as vinegar is to wine compared with my father,” working to make it clear that the son envies the father and would, if he could, aspire to such a pinnacle.²⁴ But “stricter” does not always convey this nuance; it can also mean mulish and stubborn. For whatever reason, each son has arrived at a practice different from his father’s, even though he is aware of his father’s position. Does the son know more? Bourdieu would remind us that the social structure in which he operates differs from that of his father and will differ again through the son’s acting within and through these structuring structures. In this last case, the son’s actions diverge from his father’s actions because he, the son, lives in a world that is wholly other.

CONCLUSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR LEARNING

This study is an early exploration of these questions of fathers and sons. It has considered only a handful of examples and makes no claim that these are necessarily representative of other rabbinic presentations of parenting. Nevertheless, all of these encounters between fathers and sons prove both significant and ambiguous. The texts shows fathers who continue to teach their sons and who stand as models for their sons even after the sons have gone to study with other teachers. The texts also reveal sons who may or may not follow the guidance their fathers offer.

This picture complicates a son’s obligation to ransom his teacher first. In their array, these fathers together reveal that while the rabbis may have aspirations of replacing fathers with teachers, we must not assume that we know where one role leaves off and the other begins. This understanding urges us to revisit, from a refreshed perspective, texts that advocate an exploration of asceticism. Each young man who lives away from his wife and home also has

a natal family with whom to contend. We understand these young men differently when we focus on the parent-child relationship. While some of the fathers explored above certainly count as sages in their own right, they act here as fathers. Further, the above struggles reveal the possibility of generational change, since the son's point of view must be different than that of his father for such a contest to be required.

We would not have been able to observe either the involvement of the fathers or the ambivalent responses of their sons if research into anachronistic assumptions about the academies had not paved the way for conceiving more intimate environments for learning. Similarly, even the vivid distance separating the house of study from the family home in some of these narratives does not sever the household relationships. By following learning back to the family, we witness aspects of family relationships too long overlooked. Just as we can begin to glimpse sons framing their own lives in dialogue with their fathers, attention to ritual and lived religion may have the power to reveal other consequential aspects of household activities and relationships.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

With great pleasure and awe, I dedicate this exploration to my wonderful learned daughter, Madeline H. Black.

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NOTES

1. The present essay explores only the relationship of fathers and sons. For consideration of the teaching relationship of mother and son, see Susan Marks, "Bayit versus Beit Midrash: Jewish Mother as Teacher," in *A Most Reliable Witness: Essays in Honor of Ross Shepard Kraemer* (ed. S. Harvey et al.; Providence: Brown University Press, 2015).

2. *m. Baba Mezi'a* 2.11. See also *b. Baba Mezi'a* 33a. While the Mishnah aims to draw a firm distinction between the father who can prepare his son only for this life and the teacher who can prepare him for the next, the Gemara appears to complicate this clear distinction in exploring the necessity for multiple teachers. Gail Labovitz, in an unpublished paper, observes the insertion of the teacher in the case of mourning, where it interrupts the possible gender parity of how "father and mother" should be mourned.

3. Youval Rotman, "Captives and Redeeming Captives: The Law and the Community," in *Judaea-Palaestina, Babylon and Rome: Jews in Antiquity* (ed. B. Isaac and Y. Shahar; Leiden: Brill, 2013), 227–47.
4. Gerald J. Blidstein, "Master and Parent: Comparative Aspects of a Dual Loyalty," in *The Mishnah in Contemporary Perspective* (ed. A. J. Avery-Peck and J. Neusner; Leiden: Brill, 2002), 255–66.
5. David Goodblatt, "The History of the Babylonian Academies," in *The Cambridge History of Judaism*, Vol. 4, *The Late Roman-Rabbinic Period* (ed. S. T. Katz; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 821–39; Catherine Hezser, "Private and Public Education," in *The Oxford Handbook of Jewish Daily Life in Roman Palestine* (ed. C. Hezser; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 465–81; Jeffrey L. Rubenstein, *The Culture of the Babylonian Talmud* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).
6. *b. Hullin* 105a.
7. Goodblatt, "The History of the Babylonian Academies," 822.
8. *Ibid.*, 832.
9. *Ibid.*, 834.
10. Adam H. Becker, "The Comparative Study of 'Scholasticism' in Late Antique Mesopotamia: Rabbis and East Syrians," *Association for Jewish Studies Review* 34:1 (2010): 91–113. Concerning differences between the early and later rabbinic movement, see also Hezser, "Private and Public Education." Concerning differences between Palestinian and Babylonian communities, see Rubenstein, *The Culture of the Babylonian Talmud*.
11. Scholars have also just begun studying rabbinic curricula, and it will be interesting to see what these new approaches yield. See, for instance, Marjorie Lehman and Jane Kanarek, "Talmud: Making a Case for Talmud Pedagogy—the Talmud as an Educational Model," in *International Handbook of Jewish Education* (ed. H. Miller et al.; Dordrecht: Springer, 2011), 581–96.
12. Gil P. Klein, "Torah in Triclinia: The Rabbinic Banquet and the Significance of Architecture," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 102:3 (2012): 325–70.
13. *Ibid.*, 341–70. In the second part of his essay, Klein emphasizes the relationship of banquet hall and street and thus the traffic into and out of this space.
14. Clem Brooks and Catherine Bolzendahl, "The Transformation of US Gender Role Attitudes: Cohort Replacement, Social-Structural Change, and Ideological Learning," *Social Science Research* 33 (2004): 106–33. A popular treatment of the impact of different cohorts considers the differing contributions of the traditionalist, boomer, Gen X, and millennial generations. Lynne C. Lancaster and David Stillman, *When Generations Collide: Who They Are, Why They Clash, How to Solve the Generational Puzzle at Work* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002).
15. Pierre Bourdieu, "Social Space and Symbolic Power," in *In Other Words: Essays towards a Reflexive Sociology* (trans. M. Adamson; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 123–39, esp. 123–26.

16. Ibid., 134. Bourdieu notes that the properties of objects of the social world “are submitted to variations in time so that their meaning, in so far as they depend on the future, is itself held in suspense and relatively indeterminate” (133). Regarding education, Bourdieu recalls in a parenthetical discussion of his earlier work, “we showed how a social relation of understanding is constructed in and by misunderstanding . . . how teachers and students agree, by a sort of tacit transaction, tacitly guided by the need to minimize costs and risks, to accept a minimal definition of the situation of communication” (124). See also discussions of lived religion in David D. Hall, *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

17. Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Aryeh Cohen, *Rereading Talmud: Gender, Law and the Poetics of Sugyot* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998); Rubenstein, *The Culture of the Babylonian Talmud*.

18. *b. Berachot* 62b. Quotations of Exodus 15.17 and 25.8 are from the New Jewish Publication Society *Tanakh*.

19. *b. Berachot* 63a.

20. My students at New College of Florida wondered about this, as did the audience in Omaha. Ari Elon takes a slightly different approach, characterizing it as a tragedy that “ends in a nightmare frozen in nondeath till eternity.” Ari Elon, *From Jerusalem to the Edge of Heaven: Mediations on the Soul of Israel* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1996), 88.

21. *b. Berachot* 62b.

22. Elsewhere I discuss the mother’s teaching in this moment. See Marks, “Bayit versus Beit Midrash.”

23. *b. Hullin* 105a.

24. For these translations, see “Talmud Bavli Hullin 105a–b—Translation by Tzvee Zahavy,” A Talmudic View of the World, October 9, 2011, <http://tzvee.blogspot.com/2011/10/talmud-bavli-hullin-105a-b-translation.html>, and I. Epstein, ed., *The Babylonian Talmud: Seder Kodashim* (trans. E. Cashdan; London: Soncino, 1948), II:582.