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Reel  
149

Box  
53

Folder  
251

What parents owe their children and what children owe their  
parents, 1926.

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"WHAT CHILDREN OWE THEIR PARENTS.  
and  
WHAT PARENTS OWE THEIR CHILDREN."

RABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER.

THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING

APRIL 11, 1926, CLEVELAND, O.

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JOSEPH T. KRAUS  
Shorthand  
Reporter  
CLEVELAND



There is naturally a great deal to be said on so broad a subject as we announced--"What Parents Owe Their Children and What Children Owe Their Parents," and I will not presume this morning to attempt to cover the entire field. I will limit myself to a few salient thoughts, to which you yourselves may add and from which you yourselves may derive others.

I think that foremost among the things which parents owe their children is the power of the force of example. That is so true that it seems almost axiomatic, but it is one of those tremendous simplicities that people so often overlook--the power of the force of stimulation, of example. Parents teach not by word of mouth as much as by example. During the early years of a person's life, the most dominant emotional interest in his life are his parents. Psychologists tell us that every lad up to his seventh or eighth year passes through what is technically known as the mother phase; that is to say, during those years the mother is the dominant emotional influence in his life; from that time on until he is twelve the lad passes through what is known as the father phase, when the father is the most significant and critical influence in his life; after that comes the school phase, still later on the mating phase. Up to the age of twelve, that is, in the first twelve plastic, all-important years of a person's life, the most



essential and vital, determining influence in his life are his own parents. In the case of a girl the years vary a bit but not materially.

Now in those formative years children are moulded not by the intellectual admonitions of their parents but by the subtlest kinds of influences which emanate from the very lives and actions and relationships of the parents, and from the kind of environment which parents surround their children with. If parents are unjust to one another and the child; if they are dishonest in their relationships and irreverent of the sanctities of home life; if they are of fiery temperament, sharp of speech, unkind of comment, why, those things will just enswathe the child's life as if it were an element; they will mould the child.

If a young man sees in his father a person who is unscrupulous in the pursuit of what he calls success, or if a young man sees in his mother one who is hectic in the pursuit of pleasures and luxuries, the child would have to be made of sterner stuff than the average child is made of to resist these influences. The wise Roman sage Juvenal, one of the satires which he dedicates to parenthood says this simple but eternal truth: "The example of vice. Vice need not be of that extreme type which everybody recognizes and deprecates, but everything which deviates from the wholesome and the normal and the social is to that extent a vice. The example of vice that we witness at home more surely and quickly corrupts us when they insinuate



themselves in our minds under the sanction of those we revere."

I would like to have you think of that sentence--"The example of vice that we witness at home more surely and quickly corrupts us when <sup>it</sup> they insinuate themselves in our minds under the sanction of those we revere. Perhaps one or two young men may spurn these practices, those whose hearts that Diana has formed with kindlier art and moulded out of better clay, but the average young man will not." Children are likely to out-parent the parents; to outdo their parents. In their effort to imitate them, which is a natural thing in a child, they will go a step further, and oftentimes to the point where the parent will turn upon his young and denounce them furiously for the very thing which he, unconsciously, perhaps, taught the child to do.

The phrase of the Rabbis comes back to <sup>me</sup> ~~him~~ when he thinks of it--"You yourself destroyed the lad, and now you denounce him."

On the other hand, when parents are just to one another and to the child, when they are honorable and reverent, when they surround their homes not with the garish and the loud and the vulgar, but with the refined and the charming and the beautiful; when the child or the young man sees his father pursuing his vocation honorably and devoting a great deal of his time and energy to other extra vocational social duties and obligation, and when he sees his mother



daily and hourly conduct herself in refinement and in dignity, with rare discrimination between that which is real and that which is sham, between that which is happiness and that which is only excitement and pleasure, that child will quite naturally, unconsciously, be moulded by those influences. Not always, of course. Life is not so simple. It does not always follow that perfect parents will have perfect children. There are other influences that ultimately come to play a very important role in the life of a child. There are inherited traits and instincts over which parents have no control, and there are those influences which come from the great world outside which parents cannot often control; but surely after they have done their full duty by the child and the child for one reason or another slides back, they have not <sup>on</sup> themselves the bitter blame; they can truthfully say, "Our hand did not spill his blood. We at least are not responsible for having made his life ugly and distorted and unhappy."

So that if I were asked, What is the first thing which parents owe their children? I would say themselves; the whole compound personality of their lives, their whole being. They owe it to their children to live in such a way and to perfect themselves daily in such a manner and to conduct themselves so that they will be a moral, social, refining, ennobling influence in their lives every day and every hour of the day. That is the greatest gift which parents can give their children. Not the gift of money



or the gift even of opportunity, but the gift of themselves; the power of example, of suggestion, of subtle influence. Many parents do not bear in mind this simple fact.

And if I were asked what is the second thing which parents owe their children, I would say it is a home; not a boarding house but a home; not a cubicle in some big hotel or vast hostlery, where doors are beds and tables are sleeping-porches, but a home. The child needs room, a romping place, and intimate corners, a place to meet his friends and play. These civilized cave dwellings may be very convenient for older people, but they are veritable prison-houses for children. Parents owe their children a home, and a home is not a place through which people come and go; a home is a place where people stay; a home is a place where father and mother and brother and sister meet and play the most marvelous games and read the most enthralling books and meet their friends and chat with them; a home is a place where there is love and light and laughter; a home is a place to which people naturally gravitate, because it is the most wonderful place in the world, because it is the happiest place in the world to be; and a home is a place where the growing boy and girl will want to be and into which he will wish to bring his friends, his boy friends and his girl friends, because they will be sure to find there a glad welcome, and a warmth and a kindness and a sweet orderliness and a touch of beauty, which quite makes one forget the seeming modesty of the furnishings of the



house.

A home is a spiritual atmosphere; it is built out of devotions and companionship and happy experiences, of parties and celebrations and festivals and customs and quaint ceremonies and old pictures and memories and association. These are the things which build a home, and parents owe their children just such a home. There are dwelling places throughout this great land of ours which people still insist upon calling homes, but which are really not homes. There are places to which a tired and grouchy father comes at the end of the day's business, and bolts his dinner behind the rampart of a newspaper, and lights a cigar and probably goes to sleep; or if he seeks some diversion he will take his wife and his children to a movie, away from the home; or perhaps he will join with a few of his kindred spirits in a little game--not every night but every other night and twice on Sunday ....

Mother is not able single-handed to build a home, or she, too, may not be willing. For she, too, may be busy with her social engagements and her luncheons and her dinners and the spending of money, the seeking of pleasures, and she, too, may be too busy. No effort is made on the part of either parent to grow up with their children, to think with them, to plan with them, to help them, to wrestle with them in their problems. So that the children after a while come to look for companionship and for entertainment elsewhere, away from home, away from their



parents, and that elsewhere is the great world over which parents have no control.

The second debt which parents owe their children is the debt of a home--not a sumptuous home, not a rich home, not a home superbly equipped with comforts and luxuries and servants, not at all, but a home that is built out of heart beats and sentiments and imagination and love and beauty--the things which do not cost money but which cost soul efforts and heart sacrifices. That kind of home parents owe their children, and those homes are becoming more and more rare in the world today.

And I think that the third thing which parents owe children is ~~his~~ freedom. The eternal conflict between parents and children is a conflict between authority on the one hand, parental authority, and the craving for absolute freedom, independence, on the other.--the fondest of parents who would like to fashion the child according to his likes and the child who would like to develop himself and express himself according to his likes. Parents oftentimes would like to mould their children according to their own image, forgetting, in the first place, that their image may not be a perfect one, and forgetting, in the second place, that while the child may inherit some of the qualities of one or the other of the parents, it undoubtedly also has distinctive qualities inherited from others, a unique personality. A child is an individuality all its own; a spiritual uniqueness all his own. It has been very



truly said by one of the eminent psychologists of England that a parent ought not to think of his child as of clay to be moulded, but rather of a bulb to be cared for, to be nurtured, to be guarded, but to be permitted to express its own self, to yield its own flower, and it is when parents forget the old Hebrew proverb, "Lead the child according to the child's own disposition and own temperament," that conflicts and unhappiness ensue.

There is very frequently the danger of mothers trying to mother their children too long, and of fathers trying to father their children too long. Nature has decreed that every human being, in order to reach full and normal manhood or womanhood, must pass through these stages which we call the mother phase or the father phase, or whatever names we call them,--the stages of dependence, of protection, and for himself discover his destiny. Wise parents will refrain, against the greatest of temptations, from attempting to make all the decisions for their children and from attempting to plan all their arrangements. They will rather encourage their children to make their own decisions and their own plans, to think through a problem for themselves, to assume responsibility. They will, of course, guard them and guide them so that they will not drive to excess or to anti-social acts, but they will at all times give them the opportunity to experience the sensation of independent thinking and independent decision. Parents of discretion will not try to impose upon their children their



own opinions, their own traditions, their own bias, their own prejudices. They will rather welcome, whenever their children express their individual opinions, even if those are opposed to their own, --they will welcome freedom of thought, expression and adventure in the life of their children. One of the real tragedies of life is to see grown people who have never grown up quite, whose wills and whose minds and whose decisions are still the wills and minds and decisions of their mothers and fathers.

And parents will also respect the freedom of their children in permitting them to choose their own careers. I have known many fathers who have built for themselves very successful business concerns, and take it for granted that their children will step in and take their place. The child may not at all have the qualifications for it; he may not at all have the desire for it; he may have other cravings. He may wish to be a professional man or an artist or social worker or inventor, or what not. And yet the parent, very subtly and very imperceptibly, will pilot the child into the particular vocation he desires the child to pursue, with the result that the child, when he grows up, will always be unhappy and will perhaps never know why he is unhappy. The greatest source of unhappiness in the world is mal-adjustment. It is the ancient story of the square peg in the round hole--misfits. Very often a man does not know why he is unhappy, but he knows that he is, and if he were to plumb to the very depths of his being and



analyzed himself he would know why he is unhappy. He has never connected; he has never realized the most urgent wish of his life; he has never fulfilled his destiny; the deepest cravings of his being were stunted, starved, denied. There is only one way of gaining happiness in the world, and that is to do the thing one wants to do and the thing one feels he ought to do and to do it well. That is one way that happiness comes to men and women; and when we do the things we do not wish to do, <sup>do not</sup> really wish to do, we are never, never quite happy in the world.

Parents ought not, in the love of their children, in their desire to protect them and shield them, to stand between their children and their God, between their children and their destiny, between their children and, if need be, their suffering and their sorrow and their experiences in life. Every human being has the inalienable right to find its own God in the wilderness, to seek for him, if necessary to suffer in the seeking. Freedom to choose one's career,--parents ought to safeguard that; and also freedom to choose one's friends. You realize how very often you force friends upon your children by circumscribing the limit of their acquaintanceship. Emerson said it is the good God who gives us our friends. People make friends spontaneously. They may meet a hundred people or a thousand people and they will not make friends, but suddenly someone will sweep across the horizon of their life and instantaneously there will be established some kind of a



spiritual contact between the two, an electric current, as it were; two souls have met and a friendship has been forged for all time. And that is one of the greatest of life's privileges--the privilege of having an understanding friend. How many fond parents take and determine beforehand with whom their boy or girl shall associate; and that determination is usually based upon the income of the parents of those children. The world of their children is by that degree confined and limited; they have been denied freedom in choosing their own. The only care which parents need take in the matter of choosing of friends is to see that the friends are not morally delinquent or likely to subvert the morals of their children. That provision they must take, but beyond that it is baneful and decidedly unsocial.

In other words, the third thing which parents owe their children is the opportunity of a free, spontaneous self-development, guided intelligently, wisely, by counsel, by suggestion. A child should not be left alone to grow up. A skilful gardener does not permit a plant to grow of itself without tending it, weeding it, without watering it, without protecting it; but a skilful gardener does not try to make a rose out of a hyacinth, or a pansy out of a lilac. A skilful gardener recognizes that each bulb has its own seed, its own identity, and he permits that identity, that inherent thing to express itself. And so should parents.



And lastly, among the things which parents owe their children is a religious training, a moral training. I have often heard it said, "Oh, I don't intend to give my child a religious training. He will grow up, and later on in life he will select whatever religion he wants to." . . . It is fallacious reasoning. A parent does not say, "I will <sup>not</sup> teach the child its mother tongue, and I will wait until the child is old enough to learn for itself, choose for itself whether it wants to speak French, German, English or Chinese." The parent gives the child its mother tongue, and then adds to it other speech later on. The parent does not say, "I will not teach my child a history of his people; I will wait until he is old enough to decide whether he wants to be a citizen of the United States or of Canada or of Mexico." When parents do not give their children religious instruction,--a God, a faith, a code, when the children are old enough to choose for themselves they no longer choose; their minds are already made up. But unconsciously the forces are working on them, and unconsciously God ideas and moral codes are fashioned for the child in the child's life every day of his life. When you think the child is about ready to think for himself and evolve for himself a faith and a moral code, you will find to your great chagrin and amazement the child has already made for himself a God idea and a code which will probably not be very acceptable to you. You have not helped him; you have not clarified his ideas; you have not stimulated his moral and spiritual



thinking and feeling. And that every parents owes to his child, especially the Jewish parents. For we have an additional problem. We are a minority, and like all protestant and distinguishable minorities . . we are subject to a certain amount of discrimination and unfavorable comment.

If the child is not early in life integrated in our group; if early in life we do not give him the glow and the glory of our faith, of our literature, of our history, of our experience; if we do not enlighten him as to what we are and why we are and why we persist, that child, when he grows to be a young man and gets out into the world amidst the unpleasantnesses, and subject to the attacks and the discriminations, he breaks under them; he becomes embittered and resentful. He was not prepared for them; he was not shielded against them; we sent him out into the world unguarded and unprepared.

And so parents owe their children a faith. It need not be in terms of creeds and dogmas, but it must be a real and vivid faith, and a living God and a kind Father and a protector of the weak, and the God of justice and of love. Parents owe that to their children.

Now a word about what children owe their parents. I suppose nowadays children do not feel as though they owe their parents anything. I believe that the first thing which children owe their parents is cooperation. The building of a home is a cooperative enterprise. Parents



alone do not make a home. Any social unit is made possible, any human organization--a city, a state, a club, an organization is made possible only when the individuals making up that unit are ready to sacrifice some individualistic privileges for the sake of the greater common privileges to be enjoyed by all. Man lives in society, man must live in society, man is a social being, and as long as man lives in communities and in groups man cannot be entirely free. And that is a thing which young people ought to remember. There is no such thing as absolute and complete freedom and independence in the world. Robinson Crusoe on a barren island may be a free man, but he is really not free at all, because he is the slave and the victim of the natural forces which relentlessly bear upon him. But as long as a man wants to live in the society of his fellowmen, he must consent to a program of give and take, of partaking and sharing, of exchange.

The saddest and the most discouraging fact in the world is to find children who are always ready to take, who take without particularly being grateful for the things which we see, and who are surly when they do not get because their parents cannot give what they want; children who are constantly draining, sapping, exploiting, giving nothing to this common experiment, this marvelous enterprise which we call a home. I have known young people who treated themselves to a college education, and all the things which their hearts craved, while their poor



parents were scraping and stinting themselves to the bone to make that education possible; with these same young people never for a moment trying to ease the burdens of their parents, and with these same young people, after they graduate, after they reach the goal, or what they feel is a goal in life, turning their backs upon their parents, for they are ashamed of them.

I have known young girls who paraded in all the finery imaginable, treated themselves to the silks and the satins, and I know that the blood of their parents has gone into that; and they make no effort to reciprocate. I have known men and women--I know men and women, prosperous, living in comfortable homes, driving about in fine machines, who found their aged parents a little old-fashioned, and shelved them in some home for the aged, upon the payment of some blood money. "Honor thy father and thy mother." That commandment is immediately followed with the other commandment, "Thou shalt not murder." And the Rabbis say that he who so desecrates parents and brings their old heads down in shame to the grave is a murderer of the deepest dye. They are all cheats. None of them plays the game squarely. They are all exploiters; they are all parasites. They use parents; they have to use them; they exploit them, but they give nothing in return--in love, in devotion, in cooperation, in helpfulness.

I have had young people come to me and say, "Rabbi, our homes are so unattractive; we can't live there;



there is no beauty there." And I have always said to them, "What have you done to bring beauty into your home, to make the home a little more attractive? And isn't the home your responsibility even as it is that of your parents?" Children, young and old, must learn that they owe the parents, first and foremost, cooperation. Children want to live their own lives; they must be ready to permit their parents to live their own lives. If they want independence for themselves, they must permit a certain amount of independence for their parents. And wise children will do well to remember that when all is said and done, their parents have lived longer, and that they have gone through the very things which blooming youth is going through in every age. They have lived longer; they have known life's defeats and life's sorrows and life's heartaches and life's joys, and they are perhaps a little wiser because of the lessons learned in the hard school of life. They will listen to them. Intelligent children will know that one does not have to experience all the hazards of life himself in order to discover the dangers; that one does not himself have to taste every poison in order to realize the other poisons; that in life we very often take the trusted opinion of fellowmen. And intelligent <sup>children</sup> will take the trusted opinion and counsel of those nearest and dearest to them, and will not needlessly seek to go through themselves all the hazards and all the dangers of life for the thrill of experience.

Young people will remember that youth very



often judges by surface standards, while age judges by basic standards; that youth very often cannot discriminate between the new and the novel, between the real and the false, between appetite and taste, between what nourishes a man and what merely excites and stimulates. They will not be as wilful and as rebellious in the presence of helpful counsel and suggestion.

Cooperation. Remember, I am not now speaking of the duty which children owe their parents in terms of obedience, or in terms of reverence, or in terms of love. These things cannot be commanded; these things come of themselves. If children will just learn and practice this essential code of cooperation, which is basic throughout life and in every human institution, without which nothing is possible, then all else will come of itself. Children cooperating with their parents will come to love them, come to be devoted, come to revere them, even as the parents who love the children are devoted and worshipful of them. Cooperation--give and take; that is what children owe their parents.

And lastly--and I am through--children owe their parents this: the pride of fulfillment. What do I mean by that? I mean this: the only reward which parents ask of their children is the reward of growing up into splendid men and women. That's all. They do not want of their children money or possessions or things. Parents thank God when they need not be dependent upon their



children. All that parents want of their children is that they should so live their life that they will give blessing to themselves, to the parents and to society. The only reward which an artist expects is the feeling of joy and pride and contentment when, after having completed his work, he looks upon it and sees that it is good. That is compensation, the only compensation. When the great master artist of the universe, God himself, fashioned his world, God saw that it was good, and that was divine satisfaction.

If you can bring, you son and daughter, a warm glow to your mother's heart, or a look of pride, dimmed perhaps with a tear, in the eyes of your father, by the quality of your life, by your achievements, by the respect that you have won among your fellowmen, by your work, by your courage, by your sacrifices,--if you can do that, why, you have paid your debt; not in full, for that debt is an eternal one, but your father and mother will feel repaid.

The pride of fulfillment. I remember the day I stood before an open grave where a young man was laid to rest, a young man of great promise, with a marvelous career awaiting him. Death had come upon him suddenly; like an arrow flying in the night, it had cut him down and laid him low. Beside the open grave stood an aged mother, bent, broken by grief. The funeral service was intoned. I was about to depart when I saw a man approach this aged mother, a man who proved to be one of the professors <sup>upon</sup> ~~which~~ this young man had had in his college, and the man placed his hand upon



the shoulder of this broken, grief-bent old mother, and said to her: "Your son was the noblest lad that I ever had the privilege of teaching." I caught his words. He did not say "brilliant" or "~~most~~ bright<sup>est</sup>." He said "The noblest lad that I ever had the privilege of teaching." And I thought I saw that stooped form straighten out a bit, and I thought I caught a new light come into the eye of the mother, and I heard her say, "Thank God, that will help; that will help." She had not lost everything, even in <sup>her</sup> bereavement.

There was the pride of fulfillment. Her son had realized her life, for he was noble among men. That is what I mean when I say that children owe their parents ~~for~~ all the wakeful nights, for all the sorrow and all the sacrifices. They owe their parents not material things-- I haven't spoken of them at all--they owe them the pride of fulfillment. For parents live in their children, and find their immortality in them.

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