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The Rights of Parents and the Rights of Children, 1938.

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THE RIGHTS OF PARENTS AND THE RIGHTS OF CHILDREN

With special reference to Sinclair Lewis' new book "The Prodigal Parents".

By
Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver

At
The Temple

On
Sunday, February 13, 1938

The author of "Prodigal Parents", Sinclair Lewis, thinks that a new revolt is about to take place. First there was the Revolt of Women, then the Revolt of Youth and now, the third, the The Revolt of Parents, is scheduled. The Revolt of Women was for votes, jobs, equality and is gone. The Revolt of Youth was against the tyranny and tradition of the elders. And now the Revolt of Parents is, in a sense, a revolt against the revolt of youth, the reign of tyranny of children.

This is an age when revolts are the order of the day. A day without its revolt is a dead loss. To think of carrying on anything in the old accustomed way is in itself a revolutionary idea. Things have got to be changed. That is the slogan of our generation. And the more and more things change, the more they remain the same. In morals and in customs just as in the circum-navigation of the globe, if you go far enough in one direction, you will come back to your starting point.

The Revolt of Women, for example, gave them equality with men. But this really isn't saying much. It hardly improved their real status. It gave them equality to look for jobs, to join the ranks of the unemployed. Woman suffrage undoubtedly increased the number of voters but hardly raised the intelligence of the electorate.

The Revolt of Youth, twenty years ago, that well-known and exceedingly well-publicized Revolt of Youth of twenty years ago was a revolt against the fearful mess which the older generation had made in the world, a revolt which was to usher in the new day has spent itself. Twenty years later, in a world which young people have had a hand in the making, a world of blood and thunder dictatorships, a world of collapse, war and preparations for war, millions of youth throughout the world tramping the sidewalks looking for jobs.

And now there is another revolt - the Revolt of Parents. It is, of course, difficult to estimate how great is the enslavement of parents and how really great is the urgency for revolt. Perhaps in the United States, children are pampered too long and are allowed to exploit their parents too much. But that the youth of America is largely a youth of cheap exploiters who badger their living off their parents and that a revolt of parents is now indicated, is, I believe, overstating the case grossly. Of course, there are such young people and largely where parents permit young people to grow up in such a way. But you and I have known of young men and women - the knowledge of whom has been superbly inspiring - who have sometimes carried loads far greater than they should carry, who, in many instances, are the sole support of their parents.

Certainly the hero of Mr. Sinclair Lewis' book, Mr. Fred Cornplow needed a revolt. His revolt was long over-due. He was being driven by his offsprings, a cockey, omniscient, confused college-loafer of a son and a badgering, shrewish, patronizing and calculating sort of a daughter. They were spongers, both of them. They both belonged to the ancient order of the "Gimme Gimme".

The father existed just for them as a Mint and a Treadmill. He was to be on hand and at all times as the adequate provider, the dependable pack-horse to whom one turned only in times when there were bills to be paid. Father existed, in other words, as a convenience for his children. No one thought it worth the trouble to turn to father to ~~ask~~ consult him, to ask his opinion in vital matters, to ask for his judgment on any event that was taking place in the world, nationally or internationally. Father was definitely outmoded. He belonged to the horse and buggy days. He certainly had no imagination. How could

he know what was going on in a world full of Fascism, Communism and Socialism. He was bourgeois. He was definitely outmoded.

Both children in this particular instance, had their ideas painted pink. The daughter, particularly flirted with radicalism of all sorts. She played at being free. She had worked out for herself a peculiar blending of communism plus high society - you know the type. She liked and enjoyed all the comforts in the world in which she lived and which was made possible by the profits of her unimaginative bourgeois father. She even aspired to the social set immediately above her. But she also gave herself that intelligent spree of vicarious radicalism.

She was not at all averse to taking money from father in order to finance a radical sheet which lambasted father and what he stood for. She was persuaded that father ought to be grateful for the privilege. There are such people.

The son, Howard, was a lovable, impractical sort of a fellow. He wanted to go to work so as not to have to go to College. He wanted to go into business so as not to have to go to work. He always wanted to do something else and, of course, have dad finance it. He had more fantastic schemes and ideas per minute than the Patent Office in Washington per year. His education - that fragmentized education picked up between football playing periods at college - his education was phoney. He could misspell, as the author says, in three languages. He couldn't keep a job. He couldn't earn a dollar. But he wanted to start off in life just where father left off, not where he began. That was Howard.

Now the father was a good-natured tolerant willing sort of a "Babbit", a shrewed, keen American business man who was not unaware of what was going on. He was content in his business success, in the security of his wife's affection and love. He was content to put up with the constant demands, the constant

nagging of his children. He did that not uncomplainingly and not indefinitely. He had become, as so many business men do become, a creature of routine of the rudimentary comforts of physical life, a man of a fixed pattern. He was reconciled to the padded servitude of his office, to his small, well-regulated world and his little circle of friends and even to his ever-narrowing intellectual horizon. But there was in him, as in so many "Babbits" the possibility of madness. There were fugitive dreams in his life, dreams which flared up from time to time, a vision which beckoned - "the golden road to Samarkand" - which beckoned, freedom, adventure, away from routine, away from the dark comforts of his own world, away from the harassment of exacting and demanding children.

And after long last, these two facts - the nagging children and the yearning for things beyond - these two facts fed the smouldering fires of rebellion in his soul and he decides, much to the discomfort and agitation and fear of his family - he decides to retire. He has had enough of it. He wants to travel. He wants to see the world, perhaps pick up the threads of his earlier life. He wants to taste and sample again some new experiences in life. This idea tantalizes him so much that he is actually frightened by it. But after a while, he decides not to retire, but only to take a vacation. He does run away for a few days with his wife to renew again the sacred comradeship of intimacy and privacy.

But his beloved children don't permit him to dwell long in this paradise. They ferret out his privacy and persuade him to return home to assume an additional set of demands.

His daughter who has obtained a position as an interior-decorator decides to experiment first and foremost on father. She converts their home of many years - she introduces the new motif and at once his home becomes converted in somebody's else's house.

Then Howard gets married. And after a time suggests to his father that Howard Junior might soon arrive and that he ought to make provisions for Howard Junior. That is a little too much for father. Father figures out that he had three generations to help support. As a young man he had to help out his father and sister. He had to look after himself and his children and now there is the prospect of a fourth generation. There was no way of taking a vacation from that. The only thing left was to run away, to Europe, to put the seas between himself and these generations of young people.

That is not so easy. They try to make him feel that this restlessness is an indication of a nervous breakdown. Finally, in one last desperate effort, he emancipates himself. He strikes out for himself and shows that he is a man. He runs away.

After five months of it in Europe, wonderful months, months which remind him of his early youth, his honey moon days, he is free. He can choose the people he wants to be with, the places he wants to go to, the time when he wants to be alone, the time when he wants to think. Five months of it.

And then he becomes restless, he begins to be a little out of things generally. He begins to feel too much like a tourist going from hotel to hotel. He begins to feel that perhaps that just as much as children need parents, to parents need children. He wants to belong again, to be in a world where he is know, where he is recognized, where he can express himself. There is no particular point in expressing yourself in France. Who would pay attention to the opinion of anyone but a Frenchman in France. In your own town, you can express yourself.

So he is secretly glad when trouble calls him back home. He was afraid that he was no longer needed. Howard goes to pieces. Father is goad there is something for him to do. He had better come back home and

set his house in order. And he is glad of an opportunity to return. He realizes that it was good that he had gone away, that he had demonstrated his independence by running off with his wife. He returns home and takes Howard in hand. He straightens him out, sets him up in business again - not over-confidently - but feels that he has a job and a job well worthwhile. Father soon finds himself nurturing the hope that some day soon he will be able to get away again. That is the story of the revolt of parents - not a serious one - which Sinclair Lewis describes in his new novel - not a very important novel, by the way.

The theme which runs through the book is the rights of parents and the rights of children. And that, in my judgment, is a rather unrewarding way to approach the problem. The minute you start to discuss rights, you create for yourself an atmosphere of competitiveness. It is far more helpful to see the subject not as a matter of debate but as a matter of conference, cooperation. If you ask each person to contribute his best judgment on how to solve a problem you have cooperation. If you approach a problem from the point of view of rights, you are setting up obstacles for yourself.

The problem of the home is a problem in cooperation as is that of any organized unit of human beings. There are no absolute rights in the home for ~~any~~ anyone just as there are no absolute rights for anyone in any social organization. There is no absolute freedom for any human being in any organization. There is freedom plus responsibility.

Now there were in the world eras, abuses and places in human history where one dominated to the exclusion of the other, periods of moral anarchy, moral enslavement. Human progress has moved in the direction of twin goals, the goals of maximum human freedom compatible with maximum human responsibility.

That is what makes society possible. That is what makes the home endurable. In other words, we approach the idea of home and family from the point of view of discipline.

The trouble with Howard and Sarah, the children was that they had not been trained early enough in life. Sooner or later the parents come to realize the cooperative nature of this thing called home. So Hazel, the mother, in a moment of reflection says to her husband: "First you encouraged them to walk ~~ver~~ you, and then you fly right to the other extreme and want to run off to Abyssinia and get away from them." The father, himself, begins to understand that he is not without guilt for wh t has happened to Howard:

"Howard had been reared to demand, not that he be permitted to train his eyes and memory and chest muscles, but that he have, without passionate struggle, all the material richness of a medieval emperor; a palace small but luxuriously heated, a chariot which could gallop at eighty miles an hour, a magic device whereby he could talk to fellow potentates five thousand miles away."

Children in this kind of a home are reared to expect things as things rightfully theirs, things for which they do not have to struggle, sacrifice for, which they need to make no contribution in terms of service and sacrifice.

The simple fact of the whole matter is that parents owe nothing to children, if by owing them something we mean many comforts or even opportunities. We are fortunate if we are able to give these things to children but they are not morally obligated to give them these concepts. What they do owe their children is first of all a home. By that I mean, not a rich home, not a home where all these thousand and one comforts are provided to lessen discipline, to slacken muscles, to soften the hardihood of character. I

mean that parents owe children an inspired environment, a home, not a house, a home built out of honor and integrity, a home which is filled with solicitude, sympathy, tenderness, sweetness, a home where every corner is redolent of beautiful memories, a home to which we can look back years and years later as to a place which glowed in our memories which speaks to us as through the magic of dreams. That is what parents do owe their children. That kind of a home can be given to children. For it is not built out of money at all. Very often money destroys that kind of a home.

Parents do owe their children the example of courageous honorable living, of faithfulness, refinement and social mindedness. They owe them the example of mutual respect between father, mother and children, where speech is kindly and judgments charitable and faith strong. Children have a right to expect that. Parents owe their children that freedom which is required to express themselves provided they have something to express. They should be free to choose friends provided they choose friends of good character. They should be free to choose their careers but they should be helped, guided and counselled by the parents. In other words, parents have the right to tend, weed and water the garden but wise parents should not try to make a rose out of a hyacinth or a lily out of a good sound cabbage.

In the self-same way, children owe parents almost the self-same things. They owe their parents a home for children help to make a home or to break a home. Children owe it to their parents to help the home a place of beauty where they can bring their friends, confidences, not a place where they change clothes to go to the next appointment. Children owe it to their parents and to themselves, to this cooperative enterprise called a home to bear their share of the responsibility and load, to contribute if not in money, then in service and devotion, in kindness and love, in reverence to the totality of the happy family. They owe it to their parents to

solicit their judgment and their counsel. Children should not assume as these fond and foolish children, Howard and Sarah did, that their parents were outmoded and knew nothing of what was going on around them.

Wise children under that parents have lived longer than they have, have experienced much more than they have and have perhaps learned a few lessons from life's knocks - sorrows, disappointments, happiness and can give the most disinterested sort of counsel.

"Woe to thee, O Land when thy King is a child" said a wise philosopher of the Bible. "Here my son, the instruction of thy father. Do not forsake the law of thy mother." That was written 2500 hundred years ago. I submit that it is still valid, absolutely valid today.

Finally, children owe it to their parents to respect their freedom. Parents are human beings. They have other functions to perform in the world besides that of parenthood. They are human beings. They have their own inviolable dreams. They too wish to walk the "golden road to Samarkand" before the shadows of night fall. They want to enjoy a spiritual comradeship in privacy free from the everlasting harassment of exacting children. And they are entitled to it.

Rather than speak then of the rights of parents and the rights of children, it is wiser to speak of common help in making out of a home the most glamorous, the most magic, the most beautiful place that men and women young and old can live in. When that is done, when each one contributes and shares, you will have the sort of a home of which the Psalmist sang so long ago, and which still exists, thank God, among the myriads all over the world:

Except the Lord build the house,
They labour in vain that build it;
Except the Lord keep the City,
The watchman waketh but in vain
It is vain for you that ye rise early and sit up late,
Ye that eat the bread of toil;
So He giveth unto His beloved in sleep.

Lo, children are a heritage of the Lord,
The fruit of the womb is a reward.
As arrows in the hand of a mighty man,
So are the children of one's youth.
Happy is the man that hath his quiver full of them;
They shall not be put to shame,
When they speak with their enemies in the gate.

Such homes are within the reach of mortal men and women if they think not of revolt of youth, the revolt of parents, if they think/of rights and privileges, if they think of love, great love, surpassing love and of how to make each other as happy as is possible in the kind of a world in which we live in today.



(4) Howard marries - 9 grandchildren - 4 generations.

(5) Emily - ~~like~~ wants to be human being - not
money parent - (Sick) - (Lurane)
Psychiatrist.

(6) Flight

8) 5 months, it

"Out & it" - Tourist - needed his children

Amabel - Howard goes to pieces

Glad - some thing to do - returns

"old folks showed they cared run off together"

Sara is better for it.

Takes Howard in hand

"It isn't going where you want to, that is
freedom - but knowing that you can go".

9/ Rights!

Debate vs. Conference.

Cooperation - a society - No absolute rights.

all enjoy freedom + responsibility.

Displaced desires on part of all.

"Prophetic parents" started too late. Had yielded too long.

"First you encouraged them to walk over you, and then you
fly right to the other extreme & want to run off to Libya
& get away from them"

see p. 294

He wants to go into bus. ^{to} ~~to~~ and to have to go to work.

He always wants to do something else - and has had
financial it.

He has more fantasies & chance than the patient office in work.

His education is Phony - He can misspell in 3 languages.

He would ^{like} to start life - when his father leaves off.
He can't ~~make~~ ^{keep it} a deliberate - and always - stand-out!

6/ The father - is a gout-natured, Tolerant, shrewd and collaring
sort of a Babbit. A shrewd, keen bus. man - who
is not unhappy, what is going on - but content in
his bus. success, secure in his wife's love - he puts
up with demands & nagging, children - but not
unsuccessfully - & more.

He ~~is~~ has human & creative, routine comfort, of a
first pattern revolved. He is married to the graded
servitude, his office - to his small, well-regulated world -
this little circle, framed - to his ever-warring hazards,
altho in youth he was a college man himself.

But there are in him the fantasies, madness.
There are psychic dreams - "The Golden Road to
Samaritand". To break away from routine, daily.
Live their own lives -

Does (99)

7/ There ^{Feel up} 2 fully freed the receding press, rebellions.

① Retire - house-hell - Travel - Long - music
frivolous himself -

② Vacation - run away - together - free - devoted,
refuge - perpetual out - Money -

③ Continue their nagging - Remodels his home!

pastor, & calculator, not a daughter - progress both -
members, the ^{ancient order} "German" ^{of a century} - to destruction.

He existed for them as a Ment & a Trust will.

He was to be on hand, at all times, to put on the head,
father act - the adequate provider - the defendable
fact-house - the turn to him when bills are to be
paid. He existed as a conscience for his children.

was on that it ^{even} worth the trouble to consult him on
matters of ^{things} finance, or judgment - He was, self-dated -
old-fashioned - out-moded - ^{hardly} had no imagination!
Certainly did not understand great social changes in
Society - World Trends - Socialism - Communism -
He was benighted!

Both children had their stern parental penalty in College.

The daughter, part - pleated with redemption, playing at being
free. She had worked out for herself a peculiar blend of
first Communism plus high Society - She loved Reynolds
the comfort, the world in which she lived, made possible by
her father's benighted profits. She aspired to the social rev.
the set also her. But she also possessed the instinct spice
of vicarious redemption.

She was not averse to use her of her father's money to
finance a comm. paper which launched anything & everything
her father stood for. She was persuaded that her father ought
to be grateful for the privilege.

5/. Howard was a lovable, impractical, blundering rest, a fellow.
He wanted to go to work - was sent to him to finish College.

1. Author thinks (1) Revolt of Women - Votes - Jobs - Equality.
(2) " " Youth - Franny + traditions of elders
(3) " " the ~~the~~ Parents - against the Revolt
of Youth.

2. This is an age when revolts are the order of the day.

A day without its revolt is just a dead loss.

To think of anything carry on in its accustomed way -
turning lefty - turny - is truly a rather hard. That to enter-
tain these days.

"Things have got to be changed" - this is shibboleth.

And, I concur, the more they change, the more they remain the same. In moral customs, as in transmigration, the
ghosts - if you go far enough in one direction you will
come back to your starting point.

3. The Revolt of Women gave them equality with men - Antisocially im-
proved their status. ~~a new status~~ There are more people
voting now - but hardly more intelligent voting.

The R. Youth - which was to remake the world, ~~the~~ 20 yrs
ago - the world which the old paper had so weeded off
with war & profiting's injustice - has spent itself
^{id. now} ~~in~~ 20 yrs later - in unemployment for millions, youth -
war - & preparation for war.

And 20 years there is to be another Revolt - Parents!

4. It is difficult to estimate how great Enslavement -
- and how urgent is such a Revolt. - Perhaps more in Am.

Certainly S. Lewis' - Fred. Wm Cornplan - needed a Revolt.

He was being driven by his offspring - a cobby, an awkward,
confused, college-brother, a son, and a lady, shrewish,

Howard had been reared to demand, not that he be permitted to train his eyes and memory and chest muscles, but that he have, without passionate struggle, all the material richness of a medieval emperor; a palace small but luxuriously heated, a chariot which could gallop at eighty miles an hour, a magic device whereby he could talk to fellow potentates five thousand miles away.

A Song of Ascents; of Solomon.

Except the Lord build the house,
They labour in vain that build it;
Except the Lord keep the city,
The watchman waketh but in vain
It is vain for you that ye rise early and sit up late,
Ye that eat the bread of toil;
So He giveth unto His beloved in sleep.

Lo, children are a heritage of the Lord;
The fruit of the womb is a reward.
As arrows in the hand of a mighty man,
So are the children of one's youth.
Happy is the man that hath his quiver full of them;
They shall not be put to shame,
When they speak with their enemies in the gate.

THE RIGHTS OF PARENTS AND THE RIGHTS OF CHILDREN

Sinclair Lewis suggests that the time has now come for a revolt of parents against the recent well-publicized revolt of youth. This is an age when revolts are the order of the day. A day without its revolt is just a dead loss. To think of anything carrying on in its old accustomed way is itself a revolutionary thought. And of course the more things change, the more they remain the same. In morals and customs, just as in space, if you can go far enough in one direction, you will come back to your starting point.

The revolt of women gave them equality with men but hardly improved their real status. They are now free to join the ranks of the unemployed equally with men. There are more people voting today as a result of women suffrage but hardly more intelligent voting.

The revolt of youth which was to remake the world which had been so frightfully messed up by the older generation, has now, twenty years later, as a result of the new leadership of youth, given us a world of blood and thunder dictatorships, war and preparations for war and millions of youth tramping the sidewalks looking for jobs.

And now there is to be another revolt - that of parents! It is difficult to estimate how great is the enslavement of parents and how urgent is such a revolt. Perhaps in the United States, children are pampered too long and are allowed to exploit their parents too much. The American father, by and large, is a good natured and tolerant beast-of-burden, and a shrewd, selfish and badgering young son or daughter can use him pretty much as "mint and treadmill".

It is doubtful, however, whether youth generally are such cheap and thoughtless exploiters. Rather I find all around me superb and inspiring instances of young people bravely sharing their responsibilities in the home, uncomplainingly braving burdens often too heavy for their young shoulders, and

in many instances, at point of great sacrifice, entirely supporting their parents.

It is pointless to approach the problem of the home from the point of view of "rights". It is far more helpful to see the subject not as a matter of debate but as a matter of conference, not as a competition, but as a cooperation. There are no absolute rights in the home any more than in the larger society outside the home. There is no absolute freedom for anyone within any organized unit of human beings. There is freedom plus responsibility.

Parents do not owe their children either money or opportunity. They owe them a home which is more than a house, & not rich, but built out of honor and integrity, where speech is kindly, faith strong and judgments charitable. They owe them the example of clean, courageous living, refinement, faithfulness and social mindedness. They owe them the freedom to grow, to express themselves, to choose their friends, just so long as these friends have character, and the freedom to choose their careers. Parents may tend, weed and water the garden but they should not try to make a rose out of a hyacinth or a lily out of a good sound cabbage.

Children, owe their parents an eagerness to help make the home a place of beauty and good cheer, a place to which they bring their joys, plans, confidences and friends - not merely a place from which they go for their pleasures and to which they return when there is no other place to go to. They owe the home that measure of reciprocity which alone makes the contented family possible.

Finally, children must respect the freedom of parents even as they expect parents to ~~xxx~~ respect their freedom. Parents have other functions in life besides that of parenthood. They are human beings. They have their own inviolable dreams. They too wish to walk the "golden road to Samarkand" before the shadows lengthen and the night falls. They want to enjoy a spiritual comradeship in privacy, free from the everlasting harassment of exacting children. They are entitled to it.