

He who spares the rod hates his son

*He who spares the rod hates his son (Mishlei 13:24)*¹

Devarim Rabbah 1:4

These are the words that Moshe addressed to all Israel – R. Aha son of R. Hanina said: The words of rebuke should have been said by Bilaam, and the blessings by Moshe. Still, had it been Bilaam who rebuked them, the Israelites would have said: Someone who hates us is rebuking us! And had Moshe blessed them, the nations of the world would have said: Someone who loves them is blessing them. The Holy One blessed be He said: Let Moshe who loves them rebuke them and let Bilaam who hates them bless them so that the blessings and the rebuke should be clarified in the hands of the nation of Israel.²

Midrash Tanna'im on Devarim 25:3

Your brother be degraded before your eyes – Once he is flogged, he is your brother...the flogging is beloved for it atones for the sins...the flogging is beloved for it brings the individual to be loved by his Father in heaven...as it says: *Discipline your son and he will give you peace* (Mishlei 29:17), *Discipline your son while there is still hope* (Mishlei 19:18), *Train a lad in the way he ought to go* (Mishlei 22:6), *He who spares the rod hates his son* (Mishlei 13:24), *Do not withhold discipline from a child; If you beat him with a rod he will not die* (Mishlei 23:13), *Beat him with a rod and you will save him from the grave* (Mishlei 23:14).³

Midrash Tanhuma on Parashat Shemot 1 – Shemot Rabbah 1:1 - He who spares the rod hates his son⁴

¹ The second half of the verse - *But he who loves him disciplines him early* - which we did not include in the title, is clear. True rebuke can come from a place of love and good intentions, and many verses and midrashim attest to this fact. See, for example, the verse in Mishlei (3:12) *For whom the LORD loves, He rebukes, As a father the son whom he favors*, as well as Mishlei (9:8) *Do not rebuke a scoffer, for he will hate you; Reprove a wise man, and he will love you*, and Mishlei (27:5), *Open reproof is better than concealed love*. In the midrash we find “Love unaccompanied by rebuke is not love” (Bereishit Rabbah 54:3), among others. The difficult teaching is what is found in the beginning of the verse. Why should it be true that *He who spares the rod hates his son*?

² See what we wrote regarding “the rebuke of love” in Parashat Devarim, where we discussed this midrash and its connection with Moshe’s rebuke at some length, and Parashat Balak-Bilaam, as well. Still, the focus of that midrash is the second half of the verse, and our question remains: What about the first half of the verse?

³ Given that we have opened with Sefer Devarim where we find the second half of the verse *But he who loves him disciplines him early* discussed, let us turn our attention to the latter part of Sefer Devarim (Parashat Ki Tetze) where the punishment of flogging appears. There we find the first half of the verse discussed - *He who spares the rod hates his son*. But that is only after-the-fact, when the individual has already sinned. Flogging is a punishment for an evil act; perhaps it comes instead of a more severe punishment. But we are still missing a teaching about a father who educates his son by means of the rod. Yet our current focus is Sefer Shemot, at the beginning of the Egyptian exile, not Sefer Devarim and the laws of flogging.

⁴ The two sources that deal with the motif of *He who spares the rod hates his son* in detail are Shemot Rabbah and the Tanhuma, at the beginning of the Egyptian exile described in Sefer Shemot. Both of these midrashim apparently drew from the same source. According to scholars, it appears that Shemot Rabbah was compiled after the Tanhuma and borrowed from it. A close examination shows that the content of the teaching as it appears in these two sources – and even the language that is used – is similar and almost identical (aside from one section that we will note). There are, however, interesting differences in the way the material is edited and presented. In the first part that presents negative examples relating to *He who spares the rod hates his son*, the parallels between the midrashim are clear, so we present them together. In the second half, in which positive examples relating to *But he who loves him disciplines him early* are presented, there is a clear difference that we will point out, leaving

Now these are the names (Shemot 1:1). This is the meaning of what is written: *He who spares the rod hates his son, But he who loves him disciplines him early* (Mishlei 13:24). Normally, if a man informs his friend that someone has beaten his son, the father would harass him in every aspect of his life. Why, then, does Scripture state: *He who spares the rod hates his son?*⁵ This teaches you that whenever a man fails to chastise his son, that son will ultimately act wickedly, and he will come to despise him. We find this to be so in the case of Yishmael, who behaved fondly toward his father, who failed to chastise him, and he thus went astray. As a result, Avraham began to despise him, and drove him emptyhanded from his home.⁶ What had Yishmael done? When he was fifteen years old, he brought idols into his home, to play with and to worship as he had seen others do. *Sarah saw the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Avraham making sport* (Bereishit 21:9). The word *sport* refers here to practicing idolatry, as it is said: *And the people sat down to eat and to drink, and rose up to make sport* (Shemot 32:6).⁷ She said to him: *She said to Avraham: Cast out that slave-woman and her son* (Bereishit 21:10), lest my son learn from his behavior.

Immediately: *The matter distressed Avraham greatly, for it concerned a son of his.*⁸ *But God said to Avraham, “Do not be distressed ... whatever Sarah tells you, do as she says...”*

Immediately:⁹ *Early next morning Avraham took some bread and a skin of water... teaching you that he came to despise Yishmael for having strayed to a bad path, so he sent him away*

the reader to judge whether or not it is significant. In any case, we will see how the midrash presents how the family of Yaakov/Yisrael enters into such a difficult exile, one that is challenging both physically and spiritually. This may also shed light on the other exiles that the nation of Israel suffered over the course of its history.

⁵ Were someone to learn that another person had beaten his son, he would “harass him in every aspect of his life,” meaning that he would harass him until he hits him back. See the Talmud Bavli, Kidushin 28a: “One who calls another a slave shall be ostracized. One who calls another a *mamzer* incurs the punishment of forty lashes. If one calls another a wicked person then the insulted person may harass him in all aspects of his life!” Yet here we find that the father, himself, is beating his son!

⁶ The midrash here “reveals” something that we did not know about the relationship between Avraham and Yishmael, creating – as we will see – a parallel between the relationship between Avraham and Sarah and their children and that of Yitzhak and Rivkah and their children. Regarding the latter, the Torah spells out that the father loved the older child and the wife loved the younger one. The midrash informs us that this was true in the former case, as well, and that Avraham loved his first-born son. Clearly, these are no direct parallels, but the idea that Avraham favored his eldest child is a novel idea. Perhaps it is related to his relationship with Hagar – see our article on Keturah in Parashat Hayye Sarah.

⁷ This verse is found in the story of the Golden Calf, which was built by the nation of Israel, who were descendants of Avraham and Yitzhak. The root *tzadi-het-kuf* in the Torah (which often means “laughter” but which we have translated here as “sport”) appears many times, and it deserves its own study. Examples include: Avraham’s laughter upon receiving the promise of Yitzhak’s birth, Yitzhak’s own name, which was bestowed on him by God, Sarah’s laughter for which she was rebuked, the laughter of Lot’s sons-in-law in Sedom, this case of Yishmael making sport with Yitzhak, the sport that Potiphar’s wife falsely accused Yosef of, the sport at the scene of the Golden Calf.

⁸ Perhaps this is the indication that Avraham loves Yishmael. In any case, the play on words making use of the root *tzadi-het-kuf* is one of the most prominent in Sefer Bereishit, if not in the entire Torah and all of Tanakh. Avraham laughs and then Sarah laughs and then the child is called Yitzhak. Yishmael engages in sport and then Yitzhak fondles his wife Rivkah – all with the root *tzadi-het-kuf*.

⁹ I do not understand the repeated use of “immediately” in this midrash, and would welcome any explanation.

together with his wife, Hagar, emptyhanded, banishing them from his home... Teaching you that once he strayed to a bad path he no longer cared for him...for he had gone astray...¹⁰

Another example of this: *Yitzhak favored Esav* (Bereishit 25:28). Apparently, Esav went astray because his father failed to chastise him. As we have learned, the wicked Esav committed five transgressions in one day: he slept with a betrothed maiden, killed a man, denied the concept of resurrection, rejected the essential principle of religion, and despised the birthright¹¹...

Furthermore, he longed for his father's death, so that he might slay his brother, as it is said: *Let but the mourning period of my father come, and I will kill my brother Yaakov* (Bereishit 27:41). He compelled Yaakov to flee from his father's house, while he went to Yishmael's home to learn evil ways from him, and to add to the number of his wives, as it is said: *So Esav went to Yishmael and took to wife, in addition to the wives he had, Mahalat the daughter of Yishmael son of Avraham, sister of Nevayot* (Bereishit 28:9).¹²

Similarly, Avshalom went astray because David failed to chastise and punish him. He tried to kill his father, he slept with his father's ten concubines, he forced his father to wander about barefoot and weeping, he brought about the slaughter of thousands of Israelites, and caused him innumerable trials, as it is written: *A psalm of David, when he fled from his son Avshalom* (Tehillim 3:1), and this is followed by: *O LORD, my foes are so many! Many are those who attack me*. For a wayward child in a person's home is more difficult than the war of God and Magog, for we find regarding the war of Gog and Magog it is written: *Why do nations assemble, and peoples plot vain things?* (Tehillim 2:1), yet it does not say *O LORD, my foes are so many!*¹³

David behaved similarly toward Adoniyah. Because he did not reproach him or punish him, he went astray, as it is written: *His father had never scolded him: "Why did you do that?" He was*

¹⁰ This is the first example of someone who spared the rod – and, indeed, any form of rebuke – from his son, and in the end came to hate him. But it is important to note how the verse is understood. The person who spares the rod will, in the end, hate his son. The hatred is the outcome; it is not the reason for, or a description of, the situation. The reason this happened was overindulgence – too much love. In Avraham's case, this must have been particularly painful, since he fled from a house of idol worship, only to discover that his spoiled son brought those very idols into his house.

¹¹ See the Talmud Bavli, Bava Batra 16b: "Rabbi Yohanan says: That wicked Esav committed five transgressions on that day that Abraham died: He engaged in sexual intercourse with a betrothed maiden, he killed a person, he denied the principle of God's existence, he denied resurrection of the dead, and he despised the birthright." It is interesting that when a later midrash quotes the Talmud it introduces it with the expression "as we have learned."

¹² Rabbinic literature is always stringent with Esav, even in comparison with Yishmael (even though the Torah refers to Esav as "your brother," an expression that is never used regarding Yishmael). The latter two sins – the desire to hasten his father's death in order to kill Yaakov (Neither of which were fulfilled. The Torah attests to the fact that the two brothers together bury their father with great honor, see Bereishit 35:29) – are the outcome of Yaakov's provocation, in which Yitzhak also played a role. In any case, all of his failings also came about because of overindulgence on the part of his father. Yitzhak, who saw how overindulgence led his brother to be banished from his father's house, failed in the same manner.

¹³ This matter is also discussed in Talmud Bavli, Berakhot 7b, where the Gemara asks: "A Psalm of David, when fleeing his son, Avshalom. A Psalm of David? It should have said: A lament of David!" The Gemara's explanation is that David was comforted that his son was the rebel, and it was not a slave or some other degenerate. Note that David also refused to be consoled when Avshalom was killed, weakening the hearts of his soldiers, until Yoav severely rebuked him (2 Shmuel, Chapter 19). Until the last moment, David loved Avshalom and did not fulfill the teaching of *He who spares the rod hates his son*.

*the one born after Avshalom*¹⁴ (1 Melakhim 1:6). Was not Avshalom actually the son of Michah, and Adoniyah the son of Haggit? Why, then, does it say: *He was the one born after Avshalom*? To teach us that just as Avshalom went astray because his father failed to chastise him, so did Adoniyah, concerning whom it is written: *His father had never scolded him: "Why did you do that?"* Thus, he went astray for the same reason. This is the meaning of: *But he who loves him disciplines him early.*¹⁵

Shemot Rabbah 1:1 - But he who loves him disciplines him early¹⁶

But he who loves him disciplines him early. This refers to the Holy One blessed be He, because He loves the nation of Israel, as is written: *I have shown you love, said the LORD* (Malakhi 1:2), he increases their afflictions. For you find that the Holy One blessed be He bestowed three generous gifts to the people of Israel, and all of them were given by means of affliction: the Torah, the Land of Israel and the life of the World-to-Come. The Torah, as is written: *Happy is the man whom You discipline, O LORD, the man You instruct in Your teaching* (Tehillim 94:12). The Land of Israel as is written: *Bear in mind that the LORD your God disciplines you just as a man disciplines his son* (Devarim 8:5), and what is written immediately afterwards? *For the LORD your God is bringing you into a good land.* The World-to-Come, as is written: *For the commandment is a lamp, The teaching is a light, And the way to life is the rebuke that disciplines* (Mishlei 6:23). And whoever disciplines his son, his son will love his father and respect him, as is stated: *Discipline your son and he will give you peace; He will gratify you with dainties* (Mishlei 29:17), and it further states: *Discipline your son while there is still hope* (Mishlei 19:18), and his love will increase, as is stated: *But he who loves him disciplines him early* – it is because he disciplines him early that he loves him.¹⁷

You find that Avraham disciplined his son Yitzhak, teaching him Torah and instructing him in his ways, as is written by Avraham: *Inasmuch as Avraham obeyed Me and kept My charge...* (Bereishit 26:5), and it is written: *This is the story of Yitzhak, son of Avraham*, to teach you that

¹⁴ Although Avshalom and Adoniyah were born one after the other, they had different mothers. This is why the midrash wonders about the meaning of *He was the one born after Avshalom*. The explanation is that there is a different relationship between them – that they were both overindulged children, born one after the other.

¹⁵ David is worse than Avraham and Yitzhak not only because he did not change his attitude toward them even at the very end, but also because he had two sons who misbehaved, and he should have learned from his experience with Avshalom (although it seems likely that by the time Avshalom rebelled it was probably too late to educate Adoniyah). Up to this point, the four examples of the father who spares the rod and ends up hating his son or being hated by him, are found in both Midrash Tanhuma and Shemot Rabbah with only minor differences in style and wording. From now on, however, there are differences, which we will try to point out.

¹⁶ In this instance, we will first bring the midrash in Shemot Rabbah, even though it is the later source.

¹⁷ Shemot Rabbah chooses to open with the second half of the verse – the positive perspective – *But he who loves him disciplines him early*, presented as referring to the entire community of Israel, rather than to an individual, suggesting that the nation's entire experience is one of "early discipline." The "land flowing with milk and honey" that was promised to them so many times over, will be theirs only by means of affliction. True reward is a promise for some future World-to-Come. Even the Torah, which is the guarantee of a true reward, is attained by means of affliction. Based on this, the exile to Egypt should come as no surprise to us. Even the end of this section of the midrash: "And whoever disciplines his son, his son will love his father and respect him" where it appears that the midrash is returning to focus on the individual, it is possible that the midrash is still relating to the nation as a whole. The son – that is, the nation of Israel – loves and respects the Father – that is, the Holy One, blessed be He. The author of the midrash is intentionally offering a double meaning.

he was similar to his father in every way, developed in wisdom, wealth and good deeds. The proof of this is that he was 37 years old when his father took him to be bound up...yet he did not object. This is why: *Avraham willed all that he owned to Yitzhak* (Bereishit 25:5). This is the meaning of: *But he who loves him disciplines him early.*¹⁸

Similarly, Yitzhak disciplined Yaakov at an early age, teaching him Torah and disciplining him where he studied, as is stated: *But Yaakov was a mild man* (Bereishit 25:27). At first he studied what his father taught him, and then he left his father and installed himself in the house of Ever to study Torah. This is why he merited inheriting the land, as is stated: *Now Yaakov was settled in the land where his father had sojourned, the land of Canaan* (Bereishit 37:1). Yaakov also disciplined his children, pressuring them to learn his ways, and there was no one unworthy among them, as is written: *These are the names of the sons of Yisrael who came to Egypt with Yaakov...Reuven, Shimon, etc.* All his children are compared to Yaakov, as they were all righteous, just as he was. This is the meaning of: *But he who loves him disciplines him early.*¹⁹

Midrash Tanhuma Parashat Shemot 1 - But he who loves him disciplines him early²⁰

But he who loves him disciplines him early (Mishlei 13:24). This refers to Avraham who disciplined his son Yitzhak, teaching him Torah and instructing him in his ways... This is the meaning of *But he who loves him disciplines him early*. Similarly, *But he who loves him disciplines him early*, this refers to Yaakov, who was taught Torah by his father, Yitzhak, who disciplined him where he studied... This is why he merited inheriting the land... Yaakov also disciplined his children, urging them to learn his ways, and there was no one unworthy among them... All his children are compared to Yaakov, as they were all righteous, just as he was. This is the meaning of: *But he who loves him disciplines him early.*²¹

¹⁸ After opening with a general approach, presenting the destiny of the people of Israel as one of affliction, Shemot Rabbah presents the case of Avraham whose approach to Yitzhak was one of “early discipline.” The Binding of Yitzhak was certainly traumatic for Yitzhak, but Yitzhak merited to inherit his father in both matter and spirit. There is reward that follows discipline, and it is possible to receive that reward even without waiting for the World-to-Come. It is possible to receive the beauty, wealth, riches and, perhaps, even the love, of the father who was commanded to bind up his son.

¹⁹ Shemot Rabbah closes its teaching with the case of Yaakov and his children going to Egypt. But it does not answer the question: If Yaakov raised his children with “early discipline,” why couldn’t their story conclude on a positive note, with brotherly love? This, after all, was the lesson of Yitzhak and Avraham’s relationship, as well as the relationship between Yaakov and Yitzhak. Might this be the reason that the midrash chose to begin with the fate of the nation of Israel as a whole? Is the midrash deliberately avoiding discussion of the quarrel between siblings that brought them into the Egyptian exile – a quarrel that does not fit with the approach suggested by the midrash?

²⁰ We will now turn our attention to the Midrash Tanhuma, which may be the source of the midrash that we have been studying, and we will see how this midrash develops the positive perspective of *But he who loves him disciplines him early*.

²¹ We did not bring the full text in the descriptions of Avraham and Yitzhak, Yitzhak and Yaakov, and Yaakov and his children, because they are virtually identical with the descriptions that appear in Shemot Rabbah, above. It is important, however, to pay attention to the order of the descriptions. Midrash Tanhuma opens with the stories of the patriarchs and continues until it changes its focus to the individual. If we present the stories of Yishmael and Esav as the negative proof texts supporting *He who spares the rod hates his son*, isn’t it only natural that we should turn to Yitzhak and Yaakov as models for the positive *But he who loves him disciplines him early*? And what of the counter-example of David?

Likewise, *But he who loves him disciplines him early* refers to the righteous Bat-Sheva, who rebuked her son, Shlomo, as is written: *The words of Lemuel, king of Massa, with which his mother admonished him* (Mishlei 31:1). R. Yosé the son of Hanina posed the question: What is meant by *Massa, with which his mother admonished him*? It means that Bat-Sheva turned him over a whipping post and punished him by beating him with a rod. What did she say to him as she did this? *No, my son! No, O son of my womb! No, O son of my vows!* (Mishlei 31:2). With these words she was saying to him: “Everyone knows that your father is a God-fearing man, and if you should go astray, they will say that you are my son, and I am responsible for what you are.” *No, O son of my womb?* “When the other women of your father’s house became pregnant, they saw the king’s face no more, but I went to him so that I might have a well-formed and powerful son.” *And what, O son of my vows?* “All the other women of your father’s house vowed: I shall have a son fit for kingship, but I vowed: I will have a son wise in the knowledge of the law and worthy of prophecy.” Therefore she beat him and chastised him and said to him: *Wine is not for kings, O Lemuel; Not for kings to drink, Nor any strong drink for princes.* (Mishlei 31:4). That is to say, she was telling him: “What have you to do with kings who drink wine, become drunk, and say, *O Lemuel*, what is God to us? It is not for princes to say: *Where is strong drink?* Shall he, to whom all secrets of the world are revealed, drink wine and become drunk?” Therefore she chastised him, and *He was the wisest of all men* (1 Melakhim 5:11).²²

It is taught that R. Shimon bar Yohai taught: You find that the Holy One, blessed be He, bestowed three precious gifts upon Israel, but He gave them only through affliction: the Torah, the Land of Israel, and the World-to-Come... And whoever disciplines his son, his son will love his father and respect him, as is stated: *Discipline your son and he will give you peace; He will gratify you with dainties* (Mishlei 29:17). This is the meaning of: *But he who loves him disciplines him early.*²³

Shabbat Shalom

Afterthoughts

²² Both Avshalom and Adoniya are the negative examples, while Shlomo is proof positive of the success of the teaching *But he who loves him disciplines him early*. The midrash goes to great lengths to defend the honor of the House of David and to find a positive character with which to balance the overindulged royal children. But see an alternative version of this midrash in Vayikra Rabbah (Parashat Shemini 12:5), which presents this as a severe rebuke to Shlomo. In Vayikra Rabbah the midrash has Shlomo in bed on the morning of the dedication of the Temple, having gotten drunk the night before and reveling the night with Pharaoh’s daughter. Shlomo was deep in slumber with the keys of the Temple under his pillow while the people waited for him, until his mother came and struck him on the head and said these things as a severe rebuke to him. See the midrash there in order to understand how our Midrash Tanhuma labors to turn the story on its head. This section about Shlomo does not appear at all in Shemot Rabbah!

²³ This is also a shortened version, because again, the text of the Tanhuma is very similar to that of Shemot Rabbah. The main differences are the order of the presentation and the surprising addition of the story about Shlomo. In any case, the Tanhuma chooses to conclude with what is natural for the midrash – current events. Throughout the teaching, the Tanhuma deals with individual personalities, and only at the end does it turn its focus to the nation of Israel - its challenges and sufferings - which is the core of Sefer Shemot that we are now beginning.

Afterthought 1:

This is a double question. First – are the textual changes between Shemot Rabbah and Midrash Tanhuma significant? If so, what do you think may be the impetus behind the change?

Creative comments would be appreciated, including those that offer “early discipline” and do not “withhold the rod.”

Afterthought 2:

You may be interested in seeing a poetic approach to the idea that we have presented here of a strict approach to children’s education, as it appears in the Book of Ben Sira (Chapter 30):

He that loveth his son causeth him oft to feel the rod, that he may have joy of him in the end.

He that chastiseth his son shall have joy in him, and shall rejoice of him among his acquaintance.

A horse not broken becometh headstrong: and a child left to himself will be willful.

Bow down his neck while he is young, and beat him on the sides while he is a child, lest he wax stubborn, and be disobedient unto thee, and so bring sorrow to thine heart.

Chastise thy son, and hold him to labor, lest his lewd behavior be an offence unto thee.