

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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BH

BOUNDARY CROSSING AND ADDICTED CHILDREN

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Our last passage, about education debt, evoked a great deal of discussion on addiction. I see the two things as related: they both involve getting outside the realm of reality when it comes to understanding the true cost of a given behavior. We step into the loan without considering the possibility that we won't be able to pay it back. With addiction, denial is part of the problem. So, let's start talking about what Judaism says about addiction, starting with this Torah text:

If a man has a stubborn and rebellious son, who will not obey the voice of his father, or the voice of his mother, and who, when they have chastened him, will not listen to them. Then shall his father and his mother lay hold of him, and bring him out to the elders of his city, and to the gate of his place. And they shall say to the elders of his city: This, our son, is stubborn and rebellious, he will not obey our voice; he is a glutton, and a drunkard. And all the men of his city shall stone him with stones, that he die; so shall you put evil away from among you; and all Israel shall hear, and fear. (Deuteronomy 21:18-21)

As with so many other "social engineering" passages in Deuteronomy, this one has good intentions but it ends up being impossible to administer in reality. What is stubborn? What is rebellious? What if the parents disagree about the child? What if the elders don't want to stone the kid right away? How old does the child have to be to qualify for this category? Not surprisingly, the early midrash collection on Deuteronomy, Sifre and the Talmuds provide our answers. Let's start here:

Rabbi Yose said: Should he be stoned to death just because he has eaten three ounces of meat and drank a pint of wine? Rather, the Torah foresaw what he will eventually come to do and decreed that it is better for him to die while yet innocent than to die when guilty, for the death of the wicked is beneficial for them and beneficial for the world....Remove evildoers from the midst of Israel. (Sifre Deuteronomy, Piska 220)

Discussion Questions:

1. Sifre is pretty clear in its interpretation of what the stubborn and rebellious son is: he is an addict who's on a downward spiral. And it's better that he should die now rather than committing the sins they are absolutely certain he will commit in the future. How would we frame this today? Is this when we'd have an intervention? How quickly, then, should we do an intervention? How extreme should the intervention be? What are the behaviors that should trigger the intervention?
2. Is the death of the wicked good for the world? Why or why not? How could it be a benefit to the world?

I'm looking forward to your insights!

