

Sons Do Not Die for the Sins of Their Fathers

"Fathers shall not be punished for their sons, nor shall sons be punished for their fathers. Each person shall be punished for his own crimes." Deuteronomy 24.16.

On the face of it this quote from this week's reading, is a biblical response to Sumerian and Assyrian law. They did indeed put children to death for crimes their parents committed and vice versa. Or for example if a person's animal accidentally killed another person's child, then his child would be put to death in response. Or if a man raped a girl, his daughter would be raped in return. The Torah is distancing itself from such barbaric morality and penal systems.

But then what does the Torah mean when it says in the Ten Commandments that God takes into consideration the errors of fathers and applies them to their sons, for better or for worse?

Punishment is a legal way of protecting society and preventing people from harming or damaging each other. Like the law, it should be applied fairly and equally. And therefore, it must avoid literal equivalence such as an eye for an eye or a tooth for a tooth because sometimes a toothless fellow could get away with smashing his neighbor in the face destroying his teeth but since he has none he would get off scot free. That was why the Torah understood an eye for an eye to be fair financial compensation.

But when it comes to our actions, then, nothing to do with law, we do affect our children and our children affect us. If we spoil them they will become less good considerate children. If we are cruel to them they will more likely be cruel to their children and doubtless to us too. In other words, our actions do indeed affect our children and our children's misdeeds affect us. That is life. It is up to us to be good parents so that they will be good children.