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The Tale of Two Sons
21: 15-21

The tale of two sons DIG: What were the rights of the firstborn son? What was to be the father's attitude? How does this reflect God's justice and love? Why the severe penalty of rebellious children? What mitzvah lies behind this regulation (see 5:16)? How does this mitzvah help us to understand the parable of the prodigal son and his jealous brother?

REFLECT: What specific passion for God's justice do you get from this passage? Do you know of anyone suffering from injustice? How could you help him or her this week? Have you ever felt "disinherited" by family, friends, or employers? How can the Lord help you? Why doesn't ADONAI accept our first birth? How does this mitzvah point to Golgotha?

These two mitzvot balance each other. The first protects a son from an unfair father; the second protects parents from an unruly son. Together, they illustrate the balance of rights and responsibilities that exist in a family, and even more so, in the wider society.

Deuteronomy 19:1 to **26:15** (**to see link click DI – The Social and Family Mitzvot**) deals with individual mitzvot, and to today's readers they might appear irrelevant at first, but the very principles behind these commandments were the ones that have brought dignity to mankind. We need to examine these mitzvot in depth to discover the spirit in which they were given, so that we can still live in obedience to **God's Word** today. For example, in **Numbers 18, the Israelites** were to bring **their tithes** to the Tabernacle because **the priests** and **Levites** had **no inheritance**. But today we have no Temple and no priesthood; however, we bring our tithes to our place of worship. That is the spirit of the mitzvah.

The firstborn son (21:15-17): Suppose a man has two wives. Polygamy, although contrary to **ADONAI's** original design of one woman for one man (see the commentary on **Genesis Ax – Then the LORD God Made a Woman from the Rib He had Taken Out of the Man**), was certainly practiced in the biblical period. But it was never a positive experience. The Bible never describes a happy polygamous marriage. Abraham took Hagar in addition to Sarah and Jacob married two sisters (How did that turn out? Oy Vey). However, this passage in **Deuteronomy** is one of several texts that seem to support polygamy **(Exodus 21:7-11; Leviticus 18:18; Second Samuel 12:7-8)**. Here we find a mitzvah that protects the inheritance rights of **the firstborn son** of an **unloved wife**. **The man** in question has taken a second **wife**, whom he **loves**, and has had **a son** by **her**. Could **he** rightfully deny **his firstborn** the inheritance rights in favor of **his son** through **his loved wife**?[461]

A more careful study of the text indicates that **Moshe** is legislating for **a man** who has two **wives** in succession, the second after the first one had died. The Septuagint, Latin Vulgate, Samaritan Version, and **Jewish Targum** all follow this opinion. It is informative to note that to insist that both **wives** were living, would be asking the imperfect verb form to bear a load it was not meant to carry. This mitzvah envisions a situation in which **a man** has **a son** by **his first wife**. After **her** death, **he** remarried and had another **son**. Since **he loves his** second **wife** more, **he** wants to give **her son** the inheritance rights. **Ha'Shem**, however, prohibits this. The mitzvah protects the inheritance rights of **the firstborn**.[462]

Suppose a man has two wives – the one loved and the other unloved – and both the loved and the unloved bear him sons. But it happens that the firstborn son belongs to the unloved wife. Now on the day he lets his sons inherit what he has, he must not treat the loved one's son as firstborn, in place of the unloved one's son, who is the firstborn (21:15-16). This is

exactly what **Jacob** did. **He** gave a double inheritance to **Joseph, Rachael's firstborn**, whom **he loved** more, instead of to **Issachar** the **unloved Leah's firstborn son** (of course **the Torah** had not been written yet). This teaches us that we should not show any **partiality** to our children, or anyone else in the family of **God**.

As **Peter** says: **I truly understand that God is not one to show favoritism (Acts 10:34).** And there are other verses in the B'rit Chadashah that reflect the same sentiment. **Let love be without hypocrisy – detesting what is evil, holding fast to the good (Romans 12:9),** and **I solemnly charge you – before God and Messiah Yeshua and the chosen angels – to observe these things** (the choosing of **elders**) **without taking sides, doing nothing out of favoritism (First Timothy 5:21).**[463]

Rather, he must acknowledge the firstborn, the son of the hated one, by giving him a double portion of all that he has. For he is the first of his vigor – the right of the firstborn is his (21:17). The strong preference for **the firstborn** was an ancient custom in **Isra'el**. However, in salvation history, it should be noted that **YHVH** occasionally bypassed **the firstborn son** and chose the second **son**. **Abraham's firstborn son** was **Ishmael**, but **God chose Isaac**, and **Esau** was **Isaac's firstborn son**, but **God chose Jacob (Romans 9:6-13)**. **Jacob** gave **his** special blessing to **Ephraim, Joseph's** second **son**, and not to **Manasseh, the firstborn (Genesis 48:20-22). ADONAI** doesn't accept our first birth, which is of the flesh, but offers us a second birth, a spiritual birth, that makes us **His firstborn children (John 3:1-18; Hebrews 12:23).**

The rebellious son (21:18-21): If **a son** should not suffer because of **his father's** whims, then neither should **parents** (indeed the whole family) suffer because of one **son's** incorrigible behavior. First, an example of the situation is

given: **Suppose a man has a stubborn and rebellious son who does not listen to the voice of his father or mother. They discipline him, but he does not listen to them. Then,** the responsibility would fall upon **the parents**. **His father and mother are to grab hold of him and bring him out to the** impartial **elders of his city – to the gate of his place (21:18-19).** The judicial and economic decisions customarily took place in the area of **the city gate**. This case of **a rebellious son** represented more than a family matter because the family unit was, and is, an essential part of the fabric of the covenantal nation. Therefore, the rejection of parental authority is the same as violating the covenant in **Isra'el**.[464]

The parents would then state their case before **the elders of his city, "This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious – he does not listen to our voice. He is a glutton and a drunkard" (21:20). The son,** however, was not judged for being **a glutton and a drunkard**, but for being **rebellious**. **His** self-indulgent living and **drunkenness** were simply examples of **his rebellion** against parental authority.[465] Here, the responsibility of the community is made clear. **The parents** had the responsibility to give the facts to **the elders**, but could not take the law into their own hands. If **the rebellious son** refused to change **his** ways, then the only verdict was **death** by **stoning**. **Then all the men of his city are to stone him with stones to death (21:21a).** This is another mitzvah that at first seems barbaric. In our modern society, which frowns upon even the simplest forms of corporal punishment, the idea of executing **a son** for disobedience seems to be horrific. Once again, however, a closer look uncovers important features that put the mitzvah in its proper context and indicates contemporary relevance.

This mitzvah is not talking about naughty young children, but about seriously delinquent young adults. If this mitzvah intentionally balances the preceding one above, then it may picture **a firstborn son** who is proving totally unworthy of **his** inheritance. More than that, his conduct could affect the family's economic capability for generations to come. If this is how he behaves now, what would he do with the family's wealth when he inherits it?

In addition, this mitzvah recognizes a valid role for civil authorities, representing the interests of the whole community, when domestic issues become a threat to the well-being of a family and thereby the welfare of the whole community. In other words, the family is not loaded down with the total burden of delinquent behavior on its own since the offense also involves the blatant and persistent violation of **the Ten Words** (see **Bp – Honor Your Parents**). **So, you will purge the evil from**

your midst. There is a phrase that we hear many times in the study of **the Torah**. One that is repeated seven times from **Chapters 13** to **24, "You will purge the evil from your midst" (13:6, 17:7, 19:19, 21:21, 22:21, 22:24, 24:7).**

Again, mention is made of the deterrent effects of capital punishment: **And all Isra'el will hear and be afraid (21:21b).** No record in the Bible or extra biblical literature has come to light which indicates that this punishment was ever carried out. It was obviously a very last resort. The **fear** of death apparently deterred Jewish **sons** from being **rebellious**.[466] And the matter of the **rebellion** in young adults is just as relevant today as it was then. No one is suggesting that **the rebels** of today should be **stoned**; however, it is important to note that **the fear of ADONAI is the beginning of wisdom and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding (Proverbs 9:10).**

The "mitzvah of the prodigal" helps us to understand one aspect of our **Lord's** parable (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ Hu – The Parable of the Lost Son and His Jealous Brother**), and the fact that **the father ran** to meet **his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him (Luke 15:20 NIV)**. In the Near East, it isn't customary for older men to run. Of course, **the father's** love for **his son** compelled **him** to rush to meet **him**, but there was something else involved. News of the **rebellious** young **man's** wicked life in the far away country had certainly drifted back to **his** hometown, and **the elders at the gate** knew that **he** had disgraced **their city**. Seeing **him** approach, **they** might have been tempted to refuse to let **him** in, or, in **their** anger, picked up **stones** to **stone him to death**. But with **the father** holding **his son** in **his arms**, **kissing him**, and welcoming **him**, **the elders** could do nothing. Had anyone thrown **stones**, **they** would have hit **the father**. This speaks of **Golgotha** (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ Ls – Then They Brought Jesus to Golgotha, the Place of the Skull**), where **God** took our punishment for us that **He** might be able to welcome us home.[467]

*Dear Heavenly **Father**, Praise **You** for **Your** great love, patience and wisdom. Praise **You** for accepting our repentance. **The Lord is not slow in keeping His promise, as some consider slowness. Rather, He is being patient toward you – not wanting anyone to perish, but for all to come to repentance (Second Peter 3:9).** Thank **You** for teaching through stories that true repentance is not merely a flippant "yes," but it is a change of heart to love and believe in the Messiah that works itself out in loving obedience.*

“Now what do you think? A man had two sons, and he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go work in the vineyard today.’ The son answered, ‘I won’t,’ but afterward he had a change of heart and went. The man went to the second son and said the same thing. But he answered, ‘I will, sir,’ and didn’t go. Which of the two did the will of the father?” “The first,” they said. Yeshua said to them, “Amen, I tell you, the tax collectors and prostitutes are going ahead of you into the kingdom of God. For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him. But the tax collectors and prostitutes did believe him; and even after you saw this, you had no change of heart to believe him” (Matthew 21:28-32). You *are worthy of all our love, even in hard times.* ***For I consider the sufferings of this present time not worthy to be compared with the coming glory to be revealed to us (Romans 8:18).*** *In the holy name of* ***Yeshua*** *and* ***His*** *power of resurrection. Amen*