

Parenting from a religious perspective

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1. Name giving

Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house; your children will be like olive shoots around your table. Yes, this will be the blessing for the man who fears the LORD. (Psalms 128:3-4)

Wealth and children are the adornment of this worldly life. (Surah 18:46)

(Jesus)... said to them: Whoever welcomes this little child in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me... (Luke 9:48)

To bear children or to multiply is God's mission for the marriage partners. To raise and educate children is God's mission for the parents. Therefore parenting constitutes a collaboration with God's plan.

Prayer must always take first place, even before the intention to procreate. The Holy Scriptures contain several examples where infertile parents were gifted with a child, like, for instance, Abraham and Sarah or Zachariah and Elizabeth. However, these examples also illustrate the importance of the name as it contains a certain meaning. Quite frequently the child's name is determined by God even before his birth because it expresses something about the child's character and his task. One should therefore not give a

child a name fraught with a blemish.

Of importance is not only the physical thriving in the mother's womb, but also the spiritual wellbeing. The child senses when the parents pray, praise God or talk to the unborn - his upbringing essentially already begins at this point.

The Arabic word for parenting is *tarbyia* which is primarily understood as disciplining the soul. It is of the utmost importance to Muslims to whisper the Islamic creed into the infant's right ear directly after the birth. In Islam every child called Muhammad enjoys a special position.

Jewish children are named at their circumcision, which is performed as a symbol of the eternal covenant with God.

Some Christians have their offspring christened shortly after the birth, speak their creed of faith and the child also receives a baptismal name. All this is given to the children as a precious jewel to accompany them on life's journey and one can only hope that it will not lose any of its lustre.

2. Phases of child development

These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. (Deuteronomy 6:6-7)

Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. (Mark 10:14)

Be aware that your possessions and your children are only a test, and that there is a tremendous reward with God. (Surah 8:28)

The third year is a particular milestone in a child's life. He can already speak quite well and constantly asks questions. At this age it is appropriate to gradually introduce the child to the Holy Scriptures.

The Hebrew word for parenting is *chinuch*. To this day, in strictly traditional orientations of Judaism the religious education of the

young begins in a kind of primary school or privately at the age of three.

At that age a celebration takes place where the boy's first hairs are shaved off and only the hairs at the sides are left as a religious symbol. He receives his first kippah and is allowed to wear the tzitzit. The girls, however, learn how to light the Shabbat candles and the fundamental rules of how to dress modestly.

In Christian and Muslim household, too, the children are instructed in their first prayers and benedictions before and after meals. At religious celebrations and feast days, the child is introduced increasingly deeply to the essence of the celebration. This also includes the non-consumption of sweets. Thus the family conveys its religion's basic rules to the child.

As Islam assumes that little children are "innocent", they enjoy much freedom, nearly up to the time of their school enrolment. This does, however, mostly apply to male offspring. Daughters have to help in the household from an early age and mind their younger siblings in order to become capable housewives and mothers at a later stage.

Imam Ali said: Then leave him at that until he reaches the age of 5 years; then see if he can distinguish between the right and the left hand. When he knows the difference, then make him face qiblah and tell him to do sajdah.

This is to continue till he is 6 years of age. Then he should be told to pray and taught ruku` and sajdah.

When he completes 7 years, then he should be asked to wash his face and hands, and then told to pray. This will continue till he reaches the age of 9 years, when he should be taught proper ritual ablution for prayer and proper salāt.

The Holy Prophet Muhammad ibn Abdillah said to teach the children how to pray when they have reached the age of seven and to strictly urge them to perform their prayers and to separate their beds when they are ten years of age (Kanz-ul-Ummal, Vol. 16, No. 45330).

In some Christian denominations the practising parents usually decide to have their children baptised between the ages of seven and ten; the

age of the First Holy Communion in the Catholic faith. When a Jewish child has reached the age of nine, the parents start introducing him to the fast at Yom Kippur, depending on his strength. Such acts of faith are extremely important for the child's further development. Within the three religions adolescent between the ages of twelve and fourteen attain religious maturity. In the Jewish faith this is celebrated by the Bar Mitzvah and the Bat Mitzvah, in the Christian Faith by the Confirmation and in the Muslim faith by circumcision. The general rule here is that a boy should be circumcised before the onset of puberty.

The children's sexual education goes hand in hand with their religious instruction. This emphasises sexual abstinence prior to marriage and matrimony as the correct relationship between man and woman as this is the only natural way to beget a child, that abortion is a major sin etc.

3. Setting Boundaries

If his sons forsake my law and do not follow my statutes, if they violate my decrees and fail to keep my commands, I will punish their sin with the rod, their iniquity with flogging. (Psalms 89:30-32)

Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children. For what children are not disciplined by their father? – No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it. (Hebrews 12:7, 11)

And as for the boy, his parents were believers, and we feared that he would overburden them by transgression and disbelief. (Surah 18:80)

The raising of children is the parents' most important and sacred task. Some pedagogical and parenting approaches nowadays are not always in the child's best interest. Pious parent should search for suitable

methods particularly in the Holy Scriptures which provide numerous examples of how God disciplines and educates his children. At times he has no choice but to be hard on them: the Israelites had to roam the desert for forty years, Saul was punished for his disobedience (1. Samuel 15), King David for the sins he committed with Bathsheba and the census (1. Chronicles 21:1-17) etc. Were all these instances simply punishments or were they inspired by God's wisdom and foresight?

One of the most important aspects of parenting is the setting of boundaries. Mankind could still be living in the Garden of Eden had it obeyed God's only command and not eaten the forbidden fruit from the Tree of Knowledge.

God subsequently issued the Ten Commandments, which are valid to this day and essentially constitute the recipe for paradise on earth.

We have already explored the most important commandment: to honour God. Now let us dedicate an extra chapter to honouring one's parents. All these are commandments to basically set the boundaries everyone needs to be truly happy and to bring joy to others. Thus it is also extremely important for children to know that they cannot do everything they want. A child quickly understands if something is forbidden in a stern voice like, for instance, not to play with knives or fire. He may not take toys from other children in the sandpit, destroy what they have built or throw sand at anyone. Properly raising children starts with the small things. It is, however, vital that parents act consistently when they say or demand something! Otherwise, the child interprets their actions as a game and continues to do what has been forbidden to him, which can subsequently lead to major arguments.

In the case of many children, however, a simple verbal admonition goes unheeded. Here, too, the Holy Scriptures can supply some wisdom:

A wise son heeds his father's instruction, but a mocker does not respond to rebukes. (Proverbs 13:1)

A rod and a reprimand impart wisdom, but a child left undisciplined

disgraces its mother. (Proverbs 29:15)

Corporal punishment of children in their early years spares society from later crimes of the then adolescents, correctional institutions and even prison. This does not mean physically abusing the children, but a proper slap on the behind can achieve a lot and prevent much future heartache. The punishment does, however, have to be appropriate to the child's age and the severity of the offence: there is a difference between lying and stealing. Parents who love their children will never harm them by punishment.

In some countries, especially in North America and Western Europe, it is legally prohibited to physically punish children and the results of this liberal approach are disastrous: children turn into monsters, do not respect anyone, despise their own parents and do not recognise any authorities, including governmental ones. Many adolescents or adults who have served prison sentences say that their parents barely admonished and punished them.

The proverbs in the Tanakh provide us with a more in-depth insight into the subject:

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction. Listen, my son, to your father's instruction and do not forsake your mother's teaching. They are a garland to grace your head and a chain to adorn your neck. (Proverbs 1:7-9)

Loving parents in particular, who follow God's instructions, should consistently admonish and also punish their children when they do wrong. They should, however, be guided by love instead of anger!

And do not be afraid, those who love their children and raise them according to the Holy Scriptures, will never punish them too severely or in a destructive manner. But no pedagogical doctrines will help those who do not love their children and who do not recognise any divine authority to lovingly raise their children.

4. Honour your parents!

Honour your father and mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you! (Exodus 20:12)

Honour your father and mother - which is the first commandment with a promise – so that it may go well with and that you may enjoy long life on the earth. (Ephesians 6:2-3)

We enjoined a man to be dutiful to his parents... Give thanks to Me and to your parents. To me is your ultimate return. (Surah 31:14)

Honouring one's parents is the main commandment amongst believers as well as unbelievers or agnostics. It characterises every advanced society. Well brought up children can be recognised from their behaviour towards their parents, particularly once their parents have aged. Adult children have a duty to look after their parents.

The commandment to honour your parents ranks fifth among the Jews and Orthodox Jews, among the Catholics it is the fourth of God's Ten Commandments, immediately after the commandments referring to God himself. The Hebrew word for to honour is כָּבַד. It derives from another term which means "to be heavy" but also "to be substantial". The same word is used in the Psalms when God is being praised or extolled. This shows what an important position is afforded to parents. It is certainly not always easy to take care of one's parents, but if one considers that this task even entails the forgiveness of one's sins, one should gladly accept any burden! The spiritual teacher Jesus Sirach commented as follows:

If you respect your father, you can make up for your sins, and if you honour your mother, you are earning great wealth. If you respect your father, one day your own children will make you happy; the Lord will hear your prayers. If you obey the Lord by honouring your father and making your mother happy, you will live a long life... The Lord will not forget the kindness you show to your father; it will help you make up for your sins. (Sirach 3:3-6, 14)

We can see how many promises are tied to the commandment to honour one's parents! But should one still not follow this

commandment, the Holy Scriptures even threaten death:

Anyone who attacks their father or mother is to be put to death. Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death. (Exodus 21:15, 17)

The Koran says something similar:

Your Lord has commanded that you worship none but Him, and that you be good to your parents. If either of them or both of them reach old age with you, do not say to them a word of disrespect, nor scold them, but say to them kind words. And lower to them the wing of humility, out of mercy, and say, "My Lord, have mercy on them, as they raised me when I was a child." (Surah 17:23-24)

This illustrates the correct appreciation of one's parents and the true solidarity between generations.

One should not really expect a reward for the proper treatment of one's parents as it is the children's duty to care for their parents because their parents also took care of them. And one should do this with humility and prayer. The Prophet Muhammad even ranked the respect for one's parents in second place, directly after prayer. 'Abdullâh Ibn Mas'ûd said that when he questioned the Prophet what he loved most, the Prophet replied that this was prayer at the correct times, followed by kindness towards and respect for one's parents.

The Islamic scriptures dictate the children's lifelong obedience towards their parents because the Prophet termed disobedience towards them as one of the gravest sins. The only exception is the temptation into sin or the renunciation of one's belief in Allah.

The mother holds an even more venerable position in Muslim communities. When the Prophet was asked whom to respect the most, he answered three times "your mother" and only then "your father".

5. The children's own path

Hear me, You heavens! Listen, earth! For the Lord has spoken:

"I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me." (Isaiah 1:2)

They are the ones upon whose hearts and hearing and eyes Allah has set a seal. They are utterly steeped in heedlessness. Assuredly, it is they, in the Hereafter, who will be the losers. (Surah 16:108-109)

Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life...

(John 14:6)

Children are allowed to and should make their own way. God Himself granted Adam free will and Adam abused it.

Some children's behaviours, however, can also partly be due to their parents' passiveness or weakness. Thus the Tanakh mentions the priest Eli and his wicked sons who even stole the sacrificial offerings. Eli was too weak and only tried to stop them verbally. Following their theft of the Ark of the Covenant, God had them slain in battle.

(1 Samuel, Ch. 2 and 4). The Prophet Samuel also failed as a father which compelled Israel's Elders to demand a king. (1 Samuel, Ch. 8)

Children are not their parents' property. Everyone is responsible for their own deeds. Let this be of comfort to those parents whose children err from the correct path despite a good upbringing. The Holy Scriptures illustrate this: *The child will not share the guilt of the parent, nor will the parent share the guilt of the child. (Ezekiel 18:20)* *Whoever goes aright, for his own soul does he go aright; and whoever goes astray, to his detriment only does he go astray: nor can the bearer of a burden bear the burden of another...* (Surah 17:15)

From the Gospel according to Luke we are familiar with the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32) where two brothers, who have been raised the same, behave very differently. The father lets the younger son go his own way, but never gives up hope that he will find his way back to him. And his hope is fulfilled. Therefore one should never cease to hope! Then again, there are cases where bad parents have good children. It is God who directs every creature. So, when children choose the wrong path, one does not necessarily have to attribute this to one's own failure, but rather pray for them. If, on the other hand, one has well turned out his children, one should view this as a blessing and commend them to the grace of God.