

‘The Person Who Sins; He Shall Die’: Ezekiel and Intergenerational Punishment

Introduction

THERE ARE FOUR discussions of the principles of divine justice in the Book of Ezekiel. Verses 3:16-21 discuss justice for the individual; 14:12-23 discuss justice for any nation; chapters 18 and 33 return to justice for the individual. Although they sound like abstract philosophical statements, they are prophecies that respond to the particular circumstances of Ezekiel’s time. Ezekiel teaches that God judges people by their most recent actions, and never by the merits or demerits of their ancestors or contemporaries.¹

In chapter 18, the longest and most comprehensive of these discussions, Ezekiel tells his generation that they are responsible for their own actions and therefore deserve destruction. God rejects their claim that they were being punished because of the sins of their ancestors:

The word of the Lord came to me: What do you mean by quoting this proverb upon the soil of Israel, ‘Parents eat sour grapes and their children’s teeth are blunted’? As I live—declares the Lord God—this proverb shall no longer be current among you in Israel. Consider, all

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lives are Mine; the life of the parent and the life of the child are both Mine. The person who sins, only he shall die.²

This prophecy justifies God's meting out destruction to this generation. On the positive side of the equation, the people can avert their plight through repentance, since God judges people by their most recent actions. They are not paralyzed by their own sins or those of their ancestors.³

Despite the consistency and clarity of this message in these four passages, it appears to contradict the Torah and other prophetic works which teach that there is intergenerational merit and demerit. The proverb that people knew in Ezekiel's time was consistent with the Torah's teachings. In this essay we will consider the conflicts and explore Ezekiel's prophetic purposes in light of his ostensible rejection of this principle of divine justice.

Intergenerational Reward and Punishment in the Torah

In the Ten Commandments, God states that He punishes later generations for the sins of their ancestors and rewards later generations for the merits of their ancestors:

For I the Lord your God am an impassioned God, visiting the guilt of the parents upon the children, upon the third and upon the fourth generations of those who reject Me. but showing kindness to the thousandth generation of those who love Me and keep My commandments.⁴

In *Berakhot* 7a, Rabbi Yohanan uses this principle to answer the classical problems of theodicy. Good things happen to bad people when their ancestors were righteous, and bad things happen to good people when their ancestors were wicked. In that Talmudic passage, Rabbi Meir disagrees, insisting that even Moses did not know the answer to the problem of theodicy, which is beyond human comprehension.

The passage in *Berakhot* 7a then poses an apparent contradiction between the Ten Commandments, which state that God punishes the sons for the sins of the parents, and a verse in Deuteronomy (cf. *Sanhedrin* 27b):

Parents shall not be put to death for children, nor children be put to death for parents: a person shall be put to death only for his own crime.⁵

The Talmud concludes that only when children are wicked are they punished for the sins of their ancestors. However, when the children are righteous, then the verse in Deuteronomy applies and they are not punished. Rashi, Rashbam, and Ibn Ezra (on Exodus 20:4-5) and Radak (on Ezekiel 18:6) accept this resolution as the proper meaning of the Ten Commandments.⁶

Ramban (on Exodus 20:4) modifies this view. If the children are bad, but not as bad as their parents, then they also can be punished for the sins of their parents. Only if they completely repent would they be exempt from intergenerational punishment. This view reflects a concept of collective judgment against a family if they sin beyond a certain threshold.

The *Mekhilta* has another resolution to this contradiction, and understands that the verse in Deuteronomy is mandating that human courts must not punish an individual for the crimes of another family member. There is in fact no contradiction between this verse and the Ten Commandments which speak of God's meting out punishment over generations. Following this reading, Ibn Ezra and Ramban grant that there is no contradiction within the Torah itself. However, the passages in Ezekiel explicitly state that God does not reward or punish intergenerationally. These commentators reinterpret the verses in the Torah in order to present a harmonized picture across the Torah and the Prophets.

To summarize: the simple reading of the Torah indicates that righteous people can suffer for the sins of their wicked ancestors, and wicked people can benefit from the merits of their ancestors. Deuteronomy 24:16 (as understood by the *Mekhilta*) rules that human courts may not apply intergenerational punishment. The texts in the Torah appear to contradict the explicit verses in the Book of Ezekiel which state that intergenerational punishment does not apply. This has led many commentators to adopt a less smooth reading of the verses in the Torah—that God applies intergenerational punishment only when the descendants are wicked.

Additionally, the Talmud and these later commentators likely are motivated by a human sense of fairness. Few are likely to protest intergenerational merit, and we invoke it in the first blessing of the *Amidah* at least three times daily. However, intergenerational punishment seems unjust. Why should an innocent child suffer for the sins of his ancestors?

Harmonization of Genesis-Jeremiah with Ezekiel

Several examples in the Book of Kings support Ramban's modified reading. Rehoboam (I Kings, chapters 11-12), Jehoram (II Kings 8:16-19), and Hoshea (II Kings, chapter 17, especially 17:2) are depicted as more righteous than their ancestors but still wicked, and they inherit the brunt of the sins of their ancestors. In several other examples in Kings, sons are depicted as just as wicked as their ancestors and suffer for their ancestors' sins as well as their own.⁷ However, fully righteous descendants do not get punished. Most prominently, Josiah was spared of being punished for the sins of his grandfa-

ther Manasseh even though the decree against Jerusalem was not annulled and was carried out three and four generations later.

Although most evidence in Kings supports Ramban's reading, it remains a difficult interpretation of the words of the Torah itself. Moreover, several other biblical narratives and prophecies challenge Ramban's reading. For example, Ham sins, but Noah curses Ham's son Canaan:

[Noah] said, 'Cursed be Canaan; the lowest of slaves shall he be to his brothers.'⁸

Radak explains that this was a prophetic curse upheld later in the Torah, and is therefore a reflection of God's will.

The children of Datan and Aviram were killed along with their rebellious fathers, and the children of Akhan were killed along with their sinful father:

Now Datan and Aviram had come out and they stood at the entrance of their tents, with their wives, their children, and their little ones...and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up with their households, all Korah's people and all their possessions.⁹

Then Joshua, and all Israel with him, took Akhan son of Zerah—and the silver, the mantle, and the wedge of gold—his sons and daughters, and his ox, his ass, and his flock, and his tent, and all his belongings, and brought them up to the Valley of Akhor. And Joshua said, 'What calamity you have brought upon us! The Lord will bring calamity upon you this day.' And all Israel pelted him with stones. They put them to the fire and stoned them.¹⁰

These are both cases in which God meted out punishment onto the ostensibly innocent children of the sinners.

The responses found among many traditional commentators to retain personal accountability and a sense of fairness include the suggestion that the children must have sinned as well, or at least remained silent as willful accomplices to their parents.¹¹ An alternative is that the children were not really punished.¹²

However, some commentators grant the possibility that the children suffered or were killed and solely because of the sins of their parents. See, for example, Rashi and Ibn Ezra regarding Datan and Aviram; Ralbag and Abarbanel regarding Akhan; and Yehudah Kiel regarding Canaan.¹³ This appears to be the smoother reading each time.¹⁴

Although intergenerational punishment seems unjust, it is consistent with the divine perspective of God and the Torah. The halakhic understanding of the stigma of a *mamzer* serves as a deterrent to the parents against adul-

tery and incest. Likewise, those who interpret *karet* as the untimely death of one's children allow for the possibility of intergenerational punishment on a broader scale.

Rabbi David Tsevi Hoffmann (on Deuteronomy 5:9) explains God's threat of intergenerational punishment as a form of deterrence. Living to see four generations generally is the maximum life expectancy of an individual (see Genesis 50:23). God's punishing up to four generations, then, is intended as a deterrent and punishment to the sinner rather than a transfer of punishment onto an innocent descendant. One who knows that his progeny may suffer if he sins will be more likely to refrain from sinning. Therefore, the principle of intergenerational punishment is consistent with other areas of divine judgment in the Torah.

Jeremiah has a slightly different view to Ezekiel. He quotes the same proverb that Ezekiel had cited, but indicates that in the future, this proverb will no longer be true:

In those days, they shall no longer say, 'Parents have eaten sour grapes and children's teeth are blunted.' But everyone shall die for his own sins: whosoever eats sour grapes, his teeth shall be blunted.¹⁵

For now, it appears that the proverb is correct, that the Israelites are being punished for the sins of their ancestors. This reading is corroborated elsewhere in the Book of Jeremiah:

I will make them a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth, on account of King Manasseh son of Hezekiah of Judah, and of what he did in Jerusalem.¹⁶

You show kindness to the thousandth generation, but visit the guilt of the fathers upon their children after them. O great and mighty God whose name is Lord of Hosts. . . .¹⁷

These verses are consistent with the simplest reading of the verses in the Torah that state that God rewards and punishes intergenerationally. They are also consistent with Kings, written around the same time as Jeremiah and traditionally written by Jeremiah.¹⁸

To summarize, the evidence from Genesis through Jeremiah is consistent. Intergenerational punishment and reward are premises of the Torah.¹⁹ Those who engage in widespread reinterpretation would respond that they have no choice. While prophecy can express many facets of a complex reality, it would not flatly contradict the Torah or other prophets. Since Ezekiel unambiguously denies intergenerational reward and punishment, most commentators reinterpret the many verses that point in a different direction.

Ezekiel Contradicts the Torah

In one Talmudic passage, Rabbi Yose b. Hanina reaches the remarkable conclusion that Ezekiel in fact contradicts the Torah:

Said R. Yose b. Hanina: Our master Moses pronounced four [adverse] sentences on Israel, but four prophets came and revoked them Moses had said, 'The Lord is . . . visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and upon the children's children, unto the third and unto the fourth generation'; Ezekiel came and declared, 'The soul that sins, it shall die.'²⁰

This reading gains a major advantage over the prevalent opinion we considered above. It preserves the smoothest meaning of the biblical texts. However, this means that there is a fundamental difference between the teachings of the books that preceded Ezekiel, and Ezekiel's own teaching. Could God's idea of justice have changed?

Rabbi Eliezer of Beaugency explains that circumstances had changed in Ezekiel's time. God had been patient with the community in their land; Ezekiel describes their new state as they go into exile:

Until now I have been patient on behalf of My Name and the city I have chosen. But from now on, I will not be patient . . . but rather you are like individuals.²¹

Communal and corporate responsibility declined once the people were uprooted from their land. In this reading, justice did not change. Circumstances did. One rule applies in one circumstance, the other in a different one.

A more radical approach is suggested by Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook. Ezekiel prophetically decreed that the concept of justice itself needed to change as a result of the new historical reality of the exile. God therefore acceded to his demand:

When the nation declined, Ezekiel saw that spiritual separateness was good for her so that the past sins would not factor into their judgment . . . this is what the situation required. When a righteous person decrees a decree, Heaven upholds it . . . and the new path is paved . . . to judge each individual separately.²²

Thus far, we have considered two options found in our traditional commentaries. Most reinterpret a number of biblical passages to harmonize all the evidence. The minority view that follows *Makkot* adopts the smoothest read-

ings of all the passages and explain how there was a shift in Ezekiel's time, creating a discontinuity between the books that preceded Ezekiel and those that followed him.

To test this discontinuity, we must consider the Book of Chronicles. If the operation of justice changed in Ezekiel's time, then Chronicles' retelling of history should reflect this change, since it was written after Ezekiel's time.

Conspicuously, Solomon's sins are not mentioned in Chronicles; the blame for the division of the monarchy is attributed entirely to Rehoboam's political blunder and to Jeroboam's sins. Similarly, Manasseh repented in Chronicles and cleared many of his idols out of the Temple. Instead, Chronicles blames Zedekiah's generation for the destruction of the Temple. At first blush, then, the major disasters that Kings attributes to intergenerational punishment are blamed instead on the generations that were punished in Chronicles. Perhaps the theology of intergenerational punishment really ceased in Ezekiel's time.

Despite all the evidence in favor of the discontinuity hypothesis, there is not a complete shift. Chronicles alludes to the prophecies of doom from Kings. Ahijah mentions the decree against Solomon (II Chronicles 10:15), and Huldah mentions the decree from Manasseh's time (II Chronicles 34:23-28). If Chronicles had wanted to assert that the operation of justice had changed, it would have expunged these and other references to intergenerational reward and punishment.²³ Therefore, the discontinuity hypothesis does not account for all the evidence.

Educational Agendas of Each Prophet

There is a third possibility, that Chronicles is not disputing Kings, and Ezekiel is not disputing all the books from Genesis until Jeremiah. Rather, Chronicles and Ezekiel are radically shifting their educational emphasis to the axis of personal responsibility.²⁴ The historical context of each prophetic work matters, as they are not abstract systematic philosophical discussions.

The Torah presents intergenerational reward and punishment as part of God's system of justice. It also teaches personal responsibility:

Know, therefore, that only the Lord your God is God, the steadfast God who keeps His covenant faithfully to the thousandth generation of those who love Him and keep His commandments, but who instantly requites with destruction those who reject Him—never slow with those who reject Him, but requiting them instantly.²⁵

With a complex Torah message, each prophet chooses aspects of divine justice that suits his educational purposes in his generation and circumstance.

Jeremiah needed to justify the destruction of the Temple (in Kings and his book). He wanted the people to avoid the conclusion that God is unfair so that the people would not feel permanently rejected by God. Though the people of Zedekiah's generation were wicked, they knew that they were not as bad as Manasseh's generation. Jeremiah responds that God metes out punishment intergenerationally, and always has done so, as evidenced in Kings. In the future people no longer will complain of this phenomenon (Jeremiah 31:29), but for now this was the reality.

Ezekiel and Chronicles, by contrast, already were the beginning of Jeremiah's envisioned future. The people wondered if they ever would be able to undo the sins of previous generations. Ezekiel and Chronicles therefore chose a different emphasis: personal responsibility is paramount and the people can break away from the clouds of the past with repentance.

In this view and as most Rishonim hold, the fundamentals of justice never changed. Like the minority opinion, there is no need to reinterpret all earlier narratives and prophecies that have intergenerational judgment. Each book stresses aspects of a bigger truth that spoke to its generation's needs. Taken together, they comprise the eternal message that God's relates to people both as integrally connected to their families and their nation; and as unique individuals who bear full responsibility for their actions.

NOTES

1. This essay is based on a shiur given at the Tanakh Yemei Iyyun of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah in 2008.
2. Ezekiel 18:1-4.
3. Radak, R. Eliezer of Beaugency.
4. Exodus 20:4-5; cf. Exodus 34:6-7; Numbers 14:18.
5. Deuteronomy 24:16.
6. Some try to bring this Talmudic view in line with the verses in the Ten Commandments by arguing that *'le-son'e'ai*' (those who despise Me) refers to the children. However, the parallel verses in Exodus 34:6-7 and Numbers 14:18 do not have *le-son'e'ai*. Additionally, in order to be consistent one would need to say that intergenerational reward for *le'ohavai* (those who love Me) refers only to instances when the children are righteous like their parents. Radak (on Ezekiel 18:6) supports this reading by asserting that most Jews in his day were not idolaters and were observant. However, most understand intergenerational merit as working unconditionally, and not only when the children are righteous.
7. For example, Jeroboam is not punished for his sins; his son Nadab is (I Kings 15:29-

- 30). Elah inherits punishment from his father Baasha (I Kings 16:13). Jehoram inherits from Ahab (I Kings 16; II Kings 3, 9). Zechariah inherits from Jehu four generations later (II Kings 10:28-30; 15:8-12).
8. Genesis 9:25.
 9. Numbers 16:27, 32.
 10. Joshua 7:24-25.
 11. See, for example, *Genesis Rabbah* 36:7 and Hizkuni on Genesis 9:24; *Midrash HaGadol* quoted in *Torah Shelema* Numbers 16:180; *Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer* 37.
 12. See, for example, R. Saadyah Gaon (Rasag) on Genesis 9:25 (who reads the verse 'cursed be the father of Canaan', namely Ham); Rasag on Numbers 16:27 (the children of Dan and Aviram came out to watch their fathers get swallowed); *Sanhedrin* 44a (the children of Akhan came out to watch their father being stoned).
 13. Yehudah Kiel, *Da'at Mikra: Genesis* vol. 1 (Hebrew) (Jerusalem, 1997), 230.
 14. Strikingly, Rabbenu Bahya on Numbers 16 argues that there is no reasonable explanation of why the children of Dan and Aviram were killed in *peshat*. Being a kabbalist, he surmises that these children must have been reincarnations of the people who built the Tower of Babel and the people of Sodom.
 15. Jeremiah 31:28-29.
 16. Jeremiah 15:4.
 17. Jeremiah 32:18.
 18. *Bava Batra* 15a.
 19. The message of intergenerational punishment is so consistent that one sage utilized the argument of the proverb-makers as a proof text: 'If a man comes in unto his wife during the period of her separation, he produces children with *tsara'at*'. R. Abin applied to this the verse, 'The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge' (Jeremiah 31:29); and these [i.e. the children] apply to their parents the following verse, 'Our fathers have sinned, and are not; and we have borne their sins' (Lamentations 5:7)" (*Vayikra Rabbah* 15:5).
 20. *Makkot* 24a. See also *Tanhuma Shofetim* 19, *Bamidbar Rabbah* 19:33.
 21. R. Eliezer of Beaugency on Ezekiel 18:4.
 22. Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, letter #283. See further discussion in Mordechai Tropper, "The Ethical Principles of Ezekiel the Prophet" (Hebrew), *Shematin* 114 (1994), 33-38.
 23. Other examples of intergenerational reward and punishment in Chronicles include: (1) II Chronicles 21:5-7 parallels II Kings 8:16-19, that Jehoram is not destroyed despite his wickedness because of the Davidic covenant. This is the only clear reference to intergenerational merit in Chronicles. (2) Elijah the prophet proclaims the death of Jehoram and his family (II Chronicles 21:14). (3) The exile lasted seventy years because of 490 years of deferred judgment (II Chronicles 36:21). (4) See also II Chronicles 29:9, which takes intergenerational punishment for granted.
 24. This approach is also espoused by Gershon Brin, *Studies in the Book of Ezekiel* (Hebrew), (Tel-Aviv 1975), 80-105; Sara Japhet, *The Ideology of the Book of Chronicles and its Place in Biblical Thought* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem, 1977), 138-154; and Yehudah Kiel, *Da'at Mikra: I Kings* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem, 1989), introduction, 124-127.
 25. Deuteronomy 7:9-10.