

And Who cleanses – but does not cleanse completely, recalling the iniquity of parents upon children. (14:18)

Children are held to task for the iniquities of their parents. Is this fair? Let each generation pay for its own sins – not those of its predecessors. We have enough to deal with from our own mistakes, why should we be responsible to pay for those of our parents? *Chazal* explain that this unique form of reparation applies when *banim ochazin b'maaseh avosam*, “Children maintain their father's iniquities.” The son will be punished when he continues actively to expand and extol his father's egregious behavior. Still, is this a reason for the son to pay for his father's sins? The son should pay for his personal sins – not those of his father.

In his commentary to the Torah, *Va'Yomar Avraham*, **Horav Avraham HaLevi Patael, zl**, explains this with a well-known analogy. A hungry wolf sought his evening's dinner. He came upon a fox, who, although one of Creation's wiliest animals, was nothing more than a meal ticket for the wolf. The wolf was ravenous and prepared to partake of the fox's flesh, when the crafty fox asked the wolf, “Sir, why would you settle for such a meager meal? You know that I am not a large animal. You could probably consume me in just a few bites. You see that large, plump human being over there – well, that's who you should have for dinner. If you want a satisfying meal, you will sink your chops into his succulent flesh and enjoy. Why waste your time and energy on the slim pickings that you will have from eating me?”

It seemed like rational response, but the wolf was not quite as dumb as the fox would have believed. “It is forbidden for us (animals) to devour human flesh. We must stick to the animal species. Human beings are off limits.”

The fox was not one to be at a loss: “Do not fret. The punishment will not be meted out to you. If you sin, the punishment will be extracted from your children. You can rest easy; have your cake and eat it. Your children will be paying the bill – not you.”

The trusting wolf took one look at the plump human being and was immediately seduced by the fox's guile. He made an about-face and charged at the man. He was ravenous and was not about to rely on stealth in attacking. Little did he realize that his intended prey was quite adept, not only at protecting himself, but also, in preparing a covert trap to ensnare any animal that might disturb his peace. The wolf fell into a deep pit and broke many of his bones in the fall. He lay there in pain, all broken and bloodied. He began to wail and scream from pain. He understood that his end was near.

The fox sauntered by, peered into the pit, and, with a gleam in his eyes, greeted the wolf. “Can I do something to help you? You appear to be in pain,” he said in all innocence.

“Liar! You filthy liar! You said that only my son would be punished – not I. Look what happened to

me!” the wolf cried out.

The fox waited patiently before replying, “You are a fool. Do you not know that the punishment that you just received is because of your father! I told you that you had nothing to worry about your sins, but I never said anything about your father’s iniquity.”

The wolf began to scream, “How is it possible? Why should I suffer because of my father’s iniquitous actions? I did nothing; he should pay for his sins – not me!”

The fox laughed, “A few minutes ago, you were prepared to devour a human being, despite the fact that you were acutely aware that your son would be punished for your actions. If you are willing to sin and allow your descendants to make reparations – then you must be prepared to stand in for your father’s actions. You cannot have it both ways.”

We now understand why children are punished for the sins of their parents – if they perpetrate their parents’ sordid behavior. They know that, by their actions, they are setting their own children up for failure. When they sin, they are aware that the onus of guilt might possibly be placed on the shoulders of their children. Yet, this does not serve as a deterrent. They continue on with the lessons in iniquitous behavior which they learned from their parents. Thus, they actually receive exactly what they deserve.

For some people, their children are their only deterrent from sin. For others, regrettably, even their children do not prevent them from acting in a manner unbecoming a Torah Jew. Whether it involves dubious financial dealings or scurrilous moral behavior, it leaves children open to the stigma of guilt by association. Why should a child suffer because a parent has acted contemptibly? Life is difficult enough; growing up and developing into a proper *ben Torah* is filled with challenges. Why should we add to them?