The Odyssey and Kibbud Av va-Em

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By Martin Lockshin

The Jewish content of Daniel Mendelsohn's acclaimed 2006 memoir, *The Lost: A Search for Six of the Six Million*, was obvious. But his latest memoir, *An Odyssey: A Father, A Son, An Epic*, appears to have no direct relevance to Judaism. Still, the issues he raises about relationships between parents and children are relevant for Jews who take seriously the *mitzvah* of honoring parents.

Mendelsohn is a professor of classics at Bard College. His book describes the year or so beginning when his 81?year?old father, Jay Mendelsohn, a retiree who had had a successful career in Mathematics and Computer Science, sat in on Daniel Mendelsohn's seminar on Homer's *Odyssey*.

Jay had promised to just listen as an auditor, but instead, he participated actively in the classroom discussion, often advocating interpretations that conflicted with his son's. After the course, father and son went together on a Mediterranean cruise that visited the locations described in Homer's *Odyssey*. Shortly after the cruise, Jay had a stroke and soon thereafter died.

Mendelsohn is a great writer, and I had trouble putting the book down. As someone who taught Homer's *Odyssey* in a "great literature of the Western world" course at York University, I felt a personal connection. Also, when I turned sixty, my son, Noam Lockshin, took me on a trip to the areas of France and Germany where the Bible commentators whose works I study, Rashi and Rashbam, lived and were educated.

Mendelsohn explores the tension between the worldview of the humanist and that of the mathematician. Jay is constantly saying things like: “A crime is a crime. If you’ve done wrong, you’ve done wrong. There’s no gradations in breaking the law. It’s either not broken or it’s broken. That’s what justice is.” Or “You can’t argue with numbers.” Or “Only **science** is science.” He considers Daniel’s work, the interpretations of texts, to be “subjective, impressionistic, a matter of opinion.” Daniel, on the other hand, who had always excelled in the Humanities, did poorly in Mathematics and never understood, or even bothered to try to understand, his father’s work.

Mendelsohn shares the insights that he, his father, and his students had into Homer’s *Odyssey*. He walks us through all 24 “books” (as the chapters of the *Odyssey* are called) excerpting the classroom give?and?take. Like many excellent teachers, Mendelsohn is self-critical, always trying to improve his teaching. He reflects on how little we understand about how teaching works. “One of the strangest things about teaching,” he writes, “is that you can never know what your effect will be on others; can never know, if you have something to teach, who your real students will be, the ones who will take what you have to give and make it their own . . . can never really know which of the young people clustered around the seminar table is someone whom the teacher or the text has touched so deeply, for whatever reason, that the lesson will live beyond the classroom, beyond you.”

Homer’s *Odyssey’s* plot line is so simple that, as Mendelsohn points out, Aristotle summed it up in three sentences:

A man [the Greek hero, Odysseus] has been away from home for many years; Poseidon [the god of the Sea who dislikes Odysseus] is always on the watch for him; he is all alone. As for the situation at home, his goods are being laid waste by the Suitors [who wish to marry his wife whom they incorrectly presume to be a widow], who plot against his son. After a storm-tossed journey, he returns home, where he reveals himself, destroys his enemies and is saved. (Aristotle’s *Poetics*)

Just like Mendelsohn’s *An Odyssey*, much of the complexity of Homer’s *Odyssey* arises out of the relationships between fathers and sons. (Readers who are interested in the relationship between the son in Homer’s *Odyssey* and his mother, on the other hand, might enjoy reading Margaret Atwood’s *The Penelopiad*.)

In Book 2 of Homer’s *Odyssey*, the goddess Athena says that “Few sons are equals of their fathers; most fall short, all too few surpass them.” A central issue is whether Odysseus’s son, Telemachus, will be worthy of his noble lineage. In fact, everyone wonders about this, including Telemachus himself and, of course, generations of readers. While most readers see Odysseus as the main focus

of the epic that is named for him, some have read it as a *Bildungsroman*, a coming?of?age story focusing on the moral growth and development of Telemachus. His father had left home and gone to battle when he was still a baby. When we meet him, he is a powerless twenty-year-old, unable to deal with the disarray caused by the rowdy suitors in his parents' home. He has grown up without a father and is about to meet him for the first time.

Homer's *Odyssey* includes another father-son relationship, too. When Odysseus went off to the war in Troy, his father, Laertes, stayed behind. As the action picks up in the *Odyssey*, Laertes is, as Mendelsohn describes him, "a decrepit old man, alone in his orchard, tired of life." Homer says that Laertes "no longer comes down into town but toils alone in the countryside, far from men; an old servant-woman is there to serve him food and drink when his arms and legs are gripped by weariness."

Mendelsohn's book is not a *Bildungsroman* focused on the parent's relationship with a maturing child. It is the story of what happens when the child is at the peak of a career while the parent has retreated from public life. While their relationship is complicated, Jay and Daniel still show tenderness to each other from time to time. Homer has little to say about this type of relationship, perhaps because so few people lived into their eighties, or even into their sixties, in his world. The one passage in his *Odyssey* that relates directly to this theme is disturbing. When Telemachus meets his father after being away for twenty years, he disguises his identity and provokes his father before revealing himself. Surprisingly, for a book that focuses on exactly this relationship, Mendelsohn calls this a curious decision and has nothing more to say about it.

In our world, we will more and more have to face this new parent-child pattern, either as parents or as children (and some of us as both). What happens when the roles of the child's youth are reversed, when the child is the one who lives the public life and the aged parent "no longer comes down into town"? What happens when the child is at the peak of physical, intellectual and professional accomplishment and the parent is starting to slip, physically and/or mentally? What happens when parents are no longer making decisions for the best interests of the children but become children trying to safeguard the best interests of their parents?

While Mendelsohn does not address these questions, Jewish readers naturally ask: what happens to the *mitzvah* of honoring a parent when, in a sense, the child slowly evolves into the parent's decision-maker? Imposing our will on a parent seems inappropriate, especially fooling a parent into doing what we think is best for him or her, as we may have tried to do with our small children. But when sons and daughters sense that they are now the responsible adults, what is the compassionate thing for them to

do? Does *kibbud av va-em* mean always deferring to the decision of a deteriorating parent, even when we sense that their stated decision is not in their best interest? And the all-too-common ultimate question that comes up in the closing pages of Mendelsohn's book: do children have the right (or perhaps even the duty?) to pull the plug on a failing parent?

An Odyssey offers no simple answers, and, to the best of my knowledge, our traditional texts lack an unambiguous message about this topic, too. But Mendelsohn's book is a fascinating read and a useful way to focus on these crucial questions.