



Rethinking Our Relationship to the Past

Elana Stein Hain & Tamara Mann Tweel

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What do we owe the generations that came before us, and what do we want future generations to inherit from us? When do we preserve the past, and when do we break from it? In this episode of TEXTing IRL, **Elana Stein Hain** and Hartman research fellow **Tamara Mann Tweel** dig into Parashat Yitro, uncovering how the commandment to honor parents is about more than caretaking; it's about learning to see the past with weight, reverence, and generosity.

*This source sheet is part of the **February 2, 2026** episode of the podcast **TEXTing IRL - Ideas for Real Life**. Host **Elana Stein Hain** sits down with guests who are accomplished practitioners in their fields to explore how classic and modern Jewish texts can help us wrestle with and act with integrity in the face of the big dilemmas of our time.*

Elana Stein Hain is the Rosh Beit Midrash and a senior research fellow at the Shalom Hartman Institute of North America, where she serves as lead faculty and consults on the content of lay and professional programs.

A widely well-regarded thinker and teacher, Elana is passionate about bringing rabbinic thought into conversation with contemporary life. To this end, she hosts [TEXTing IRL](#), a bi-weekly podcast that considers issues relevant to Jewish life through the lens of classical and modern Torah texts; she also teaches [Talmud from the Balcony](#), an occasional learning seminar exposing the big ideas, questions, and issues motivating rabbinic discussions. Elana is the author of [Circumventing the Law: Rabbinic Perspectives on Legal Loopholes and Integrity](#) (Penn Press, 2024) which uses loopholes as a lens for understanding rabbinic views on law and ethics.

She earned her doctorate in Religion at Columbia University and is an alumna of the Yeshiva University Graduate Program in Advanced Talmudic Studies (GPATS) as well as the Consortium in Jewish Studies and Legal Theory Graduate Fellowship at Cardozo School of Law. She also served for eight years as a clergy member on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, at both Lincoln Square Synagogue and the Jewish Center, has taught at the Wagner School at NYU, and sits on the board of Sefaria: A Living Library of Jewish Texts.

Elana is currently living in Jerusalem with her family.

Tamara Mann Tweel is a Fellow of the Kogod Research Center at Shalom Hartman Institute of North America. She has spent her career educating students, faith leaders, and professionals on the history and value of American civil society and civic leadership.

Tamara received her Ph.D. in history from Columbia University and a master's degree in theological studies from the Harvard Divinity School.

She currently serves as the Senior Program Director for Civic Initiatives at the Teagle Foundation. In a previous role she was the co-founder and Executive Director of Civic Spirit, a civic education organization serving Jewish and Catholic independent schools across America. She serves on the Advisory Council of The Princeton University Office of Religious Life.

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Shalom Hartman Institute of North America
475 Riverside Drive, Suite 1800
New York, NY 10115
212-268-0300
info@shalomhartman.org | www.shalomhartman.org

1. Babylonian Talmud Kiddushin 30b

תנו רבנן : נאמר : "כבוד את אביך ואת אמך", ונאמר : "כבוד את ה' מהונך", השוה הכבוד
כבוד אב ואם לכבוד המקום. נאמר : "איש אמו ואביו תיראו", ונאמר : "את ה' אלהיך
תירא ואתו תעבד", השוה הכבוד מוראת אב ואם למוראת המקום . . .

The rabbis taught, it is said: "Honor your father and your mother" (Exodus 20:11), and it is said: "Honor the Lord from your wealth" (Proverbs 3:9). Scripture compares the honor shown to parents to the honor shown to God. It is said: "A person shall fear their mother and their father" (Leviticus 19:3), and it is said: "You shall fear the Lord your God and you shall worship the Lord" (Deuteronomy 6:13). Scripture compares the awe that we show our parents to the awe that we show to God . . .

2. Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead*

"Every human being is worthy of honor, but the conscious discipline of honor is learned from this setting apart of the mother and father, who usually labor and are heavy-laden, and may be cranky or stingy or ignorant or overbearing. Believe me, I know this can be a hard Commandment to keep. But I believe also that the rewards of obedience are great, because at the root of real honor is always the sense of the sacredness of the person who is its object. . . ."

"... you see her as God sees her, and that is an instruction in the nature of God and humankind and of Being itself."

3. Babylonian Talmud Kiddushin 30b

... וכן בדין, ששלישתן שותפין בו. תנו רבנן : שלשה שותפין הן בראש : הקדוש ברוך הוא, ואביו, ואמו. בזמן שאדם מכבד את אביו ואת אמו אומר הקדוש ברוך הוא : מעלה אני עליהם כאילו דרתי ביניהם, וכבודני.

... And so it should be, God and the parents are all partners in the creation of a child. As the Rabbis taught: There are three partners in the creation of a human being: The Lord God, the father and the mother. When a person honors their father and their mother, God says: I consider it as though I live among them, and they've given Me honor.

4. Bereshit (Genesis) Rabbati, Parashat Vayishlach

לְלַמֶּדְךָ שֶׁגְדוֹל כַּח כְּבוֹד אָב וְאִם כְּתִלְמוּד תּוֹרָה, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר כִּי הוּא חַיִּידָּךְ וְאַרְךָ יָמֶיךָ (דְּבָרִים ל' כ), וּבְכְבוֹד אָב וְאִם נֶאֱמַר לְמַעַן יִאָּרִיכוֹן יָמֶיךָ (שְׁמוֹת כ' י"ב) . . .

This comes to teach you that the power of the honor of father and mother is as great as the power of Torah study, as it is said, "For it is your life and the length of your days" (Deuteronomy 3:20), and concerning the honor of father and mother it is said, "in order that your days be lengthened" (Exodus 20:12) . . .

5. Jerusalem Talmud 1:7

אִי זָהוּ מוֹרָא. לֹא יוֹשֵׁב בְּמַקְוֹמוֹ. וְלֹא מְדַבֵּר בְּמַקְוֹמוֹ. וְלֹא סוֹתֵר אֶת דְּבָרָיו. אִי זָהוּ הַכִּיבוֹד. מְאָכִיל וּמְשָׁקֶה מְלַבֵּישׁ וּמַנְעִיל וּמַכְנִיס וּמוֹצִיא.

What is fear? He may not sit in his place and may not speak in his stead nor contradict his words. What is honor? He feeds and gives him to drink, clothes him and puts on his shoes, leads him out and in.

. . . דִּתְנִי רַבִּי שְׁמַעוֹן בֶּן יוֹחִי. גְּדוֹל הוּא כִיבוֹד אָב וְאִם שֶׁהֶעֱדִיפוּ הַקְדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא יוֹתֵר מְכַבְּדוֹ. נֶאֱמַר כָּאן כְּבֹד אֶת אָבִיךָ וְאֶת אִמְךָ. וְנֶאֱמַר לְהֵלֵן כְּבֹד אֶת יְיָ מְהוֹנֶה. בְּמָה אֶת מְכַבְּדוֹ מְהוֹנֶה. מִפְּרִישׁ לֶקֶט שְׂכָחָה וּפִיָּאָה. מִפְּרִישׁ תְּרוּמָה וּמַעֲשֵׂר רֵאשׁוֹן וּמַעֲשֵׂר שֵׁנִי וּמַעֲשֵׂר עֲנִי וְחֻלָּה. וְעוֹשֶׂה סוּכָה וְלוֹלֵב שׁוֹפָר וְתַפִּילִין וְצִיצִית. מְאָכִיל אֶת הָרַעֲיָבִים וּמְשָׁקֶה אֶת הַצְּמִיאִים. אִם יֵשׁ לָךְ אֶת חֲזִיב בְּכָל אֵילָנוֹ. וְאִם אֵין לָךְ אֵין אֶת חֲזִיב בְּאַחַת מֵהֶן. אֲבָל כְּשֶׁהוּא בָּא אֶצֶל כִּיבוֹד אָב וְאִם בֵּין שְׁנֵי לָךְ בֵּין שְׁאֵין לָךְ כְּבֹד אֶת אָבִיךָ וְאֶת אִמְךָ. אֲפִילוֹ אֶת מִסֵּבָב עַל הַפֶּתַחִים.

. . . The words of Rabbi Ḥiyya bar Abba disagree, for Rabbi Ḥiyya bar Abba said that Rabbi Yudan, son of Rabbi Simeon bar Yoḥai's daughter, stated that Rabbi Simeon bar Yoḥai stated: Honoring father and mother is great because the Holy One, praise to Him, preferred it over His own honor. It is said (Ex. 20:12): "Honor your father and your mother," and it is said (Prov. 3:9): "Honor the Eternal with your property." How do you honor Him? From your property! One gives gleanings, forgotten sheaves, and *peah*, one gives *terumah*, the First and Second Tithes and the tithe for the poor, *ḥallah*, one makes a *sukkah*, and *lulav*, *shofar*, and *tefillin*, and *tzitzit*, one feeds the hungry and gives to drink to the thirsty. If you have the wherewithal, you are obliged for all of these; if you have nothing, you are not obliged even for one of them. But when it comes to honoring father and mother, whether you own property or you do not, you must honor father and mother, even if you are a beggar at people's doors.

6. Philo, "On the Decalogue," sec. 106-107, 120

This commandment [of filial piety] God placed on the border-line between the two groups of five . . . parents by their nature stand on the border-line between the mortal and immortal sides of existence, the mortal because of their kinship with people and other animals through the perishableness of the body; the immortal because the act of generation assimilates them to God, the generator of the All . . .

7. Leo Strauss, "Progress or Return? The Contemporary Crisis in Western Civilization"

Let us try to clarify this issue somewhat more fully by contrasting the life characterized by the idea of return with the life characterized by the idea of progress. When the prophets call their people to account, they do not limit themselves to accusing them of this or that particular crime or sin. They recognize the root of all particular crimes in the fact that the people have forsaken their God. They accuse their people of rebellion. Originally, in the past, they were faithful or loyal; now they are in a state of rebellion. In the future they will return, and God will restore them to their original place. The primary, original, initial, is loyalty; unfaithfulness, infidelity, is secondary. The very notion of unfaithfulness or infidelity presupposes that fidelity or loyalty is primary. The perfect character of the origin is a condition of sin, of the thought of sin. The man who understands himself in this way longs for the perfection of the origin or of the classic past. He suffers from the present, he hopes for the future.

Progressive man, on the other hand, looks back to a most imperfect beginning. The beginning is barbarism, stupidity, rudeness, extreme scarcity. He does not feel that he has lost something of great, not to say infinite, importance; he has lost only his chains. He does not suffer from the recollection of the past. Looking back to the past, he is proud of his achievement; he is certain of the superiority of the present to the past. He is not satisfied with the present; he looks to future progress. But he does not merely hope or pray for a better future; he thinks that he can bring it about by his own efforts. Seeking perfection in a future which is in no sense the beginning or the restoration of the beginning, he lives unqualifiedly toward the future. The life which understands itself as a life of loyalty or faithfulness appears to him as backward, as being under the spell of old prejudices. What the others call rebellion, he calls revolution or liberation. To the polarity faithfulness-rebellion, he opposes the polarity prejudice-freedom.