



Source Sheet

What do we owe or not owe our parents? How does one negotiate the inevitable tension of caring for our parents? How do we make choices when there are no good choices?

Kiddushin 31

Rav Asi had an elderly mother. She said to him: “I want jewelry,” and he made jewelry for her. She said to him: “I want a man whom I can marry,” and he said to her: “I will seek one for you.” She said to him: “I want a husband who is as handsome as you.” At this point, he realized that she was senile, and that he would be unable to fulfill all her requests. Therefore, he left her and went to Eretz Yisrael.

Rav Asi heard that she was following him to Eretz Yisrael. He came before Rabbi Yoḥanan and said to him: “What is the halakha with regard to leaving Eretz Yisrael to go outside of Eretz Yisrael?” Rabbi Yoḥanan said to him: “It is prohibited.” Rav Asi further asked: “If one is going to greet his mother, what is the halakha?” Rabbi Yoḥanan said to him: “I do not know.” Rav Asi waited a little while, and then came back to him. Rabbi Yoḥanan said to him: “Asi, you are evidently determined to leave. May the Omnipresent return you in peace,” and he said no more.

רב אסי הוה ליה ההיא אמא
זקינה אמרה לי' בעינא תכשיטין
עבד לה בעינא גברא נייעין לך
בעינא גברא דשפיר כותך שבקה
ואזל לארעא דישראל

שמע דקא אזלה אבתריה אתא
לקמיה דרבי יוחנן אמר לי' מהו
לצאת מארץ לחוצה לארץ א"ל
אסור לקראת אמא מהו א"ל איני
יודע [אתרח] פורתא הדר אתא
אמר ליה אסי נתרצית לצאת
המקום יחזירך לשלום

Rav Asi came before Rabbi Elazar, because he did not know how to interpret Rabbi Yoḥanan's statement. He said to Rabbi Elazar: "God forbid, perhaps he is angry with me that I wished to leave?" Rabbi Elazar said to him: "What exactly did he say to you?" Rav Asi said to him: "May the Omnipresent return you in peace." Rabbi Elazar said to him: "If it is so that he was angry, he would not have blessed you. Rabbi Yoḥanan certainly gave you permission to leave." In the meantime, while he was traveling to meet her, Rav Asi heard that her coffin was coming (i.e., his mother had died and her coffin was being brought to Eretz Yisrael). He said: "Had I known I would not have left," as after his mother's death he was not obligated to leave Eretz Yisrael to honor her.

אתא לקמיה דרבי אלעזר א"ל חס
ושלום דלמא מירתח רתח א"ל
מאי אמר לך אמר ליה המקום
יחזירך לשלום אמר ליה ואם
איתא דרתח לא הוה מברך לך
אדהכי והכי שמע לארונא דקאתי
אמר אי ידעי לא נפקי

Discussion Questions:

- First, in your own words, how do you understand what's going on here?
- Can you explain the tension and guilt that Rav Asi feels. What is he torn between?
- What does Eretz Yisrael symbolize to Rav Asi. Is his ambivalence to not leave about the holiness of the place, or does Eretz Yisrael represent something to him developmentally or professionally?
- What is the tension that Rav Asi's mentors face in counseling him?
- Could there have been a better outcome to this story, and if so - how could it have been achieved?
- If Rav Asi was sitting in a chair in our circle, what words of comfort or understanding would you offer him?
- Have you ever seen a moment like this in your own life?