



Honoring One's Parents: How Far Should We Go?

Parshat Yitro, Exodus 18:1-20:23 | By Mark Greenspan

“Between Parents and Children” by Rabbi Daniel Nevins (pp.673-692) in *The Observant Life*

Introduction

Occasionally when meeting with a family prior to a funeral I am confronted by a legacy of ambivalent feelings. Often enough there is anger, recriminations, and disappointment on the part of children as they speak of their parents. Of course I'm only hearing the child's side of the story. The parents are not present to speak for themselves so I can only wonder what they might say. Still the feelings that these children express are very real and painful. After listening with much sympathy and understanding I often explain to the family that we are not commanded to love our parents. We're not even commanded to like them. The Torah is very specific: we are obligated to honor and respect our parents. The rabbis defined these terms in very concrete and practical ways. The truth is that honoring and showing respect for our parents is the most difficult of all the commandments and it doesn't get easier with age. It is comforting to know that the sages wrestled with the same issues with which we struggle today in our relationship with our parents. But difficulty does not absolve us of responsibility. There is something noble about treating others with sensitivity and respect even when they are not easy to love or to provide care. Below I have chosen just a few of the many passages in rabbinic tradition dealing with this issue. There is much for us to learn from engaging in this age old dialogue.

The Torah Connection

Honor your father and your mother; that your days may be long upon the land which the Lord your God gives you.

- Exodus 20:12

You shall each revere his mother and his father, and keep My Sabbaths; I am the Lord.

- Leviticus 19:3

You shall each revere: *Everyone one of you shall fear his father and his mother; this is the plain meaning. And it is further interpreted: I know only that this applies to a man; from where is it derived that it applies to a woman? When it states: "You shall each revere," (tira'u, the plural form) the verb applies to two, the man and the woman. If so why is it stated eesh, "man?" For a man has it in his power to do things but as to a woman, the authority of others is upon her.*

- Based on BT Kiddushin 30a

You shall fear, every man, his mother and his father: *Here it mentions the mother before the father because it is evident before God that a child fears his father more than his mother. But regarding honor (Exodus 20:12), it mentions the father first because it was evident to God that a child honors his mother more than his father because she wins his favor with kind words.*

- Rabbi Shlomo ben Yitzchak, Rashi, ad locum in his commentary

Our Rabbis taught: What is 'fear' and what is 'honor'? 'Fear' means that a child must neither stand in his the father's place nor sit in his place, nor contradict his words, nor tip the scales against him. 'Honor' means that he must give him food and drink, clothe and cover him and lead him in and out. The Scholars propounded: At whose expense? Rab Judah said: The son's. Rabbi Nahman ben Oshaia said: The father's. The Rabbis gave a ruling to Rabbi Jeremiah, and others state to R. Jeremiah's son in accordance with the view that it must be at the father's expense. An objection is raised: It is said: "Honor your father and your mother;" (Exodus 20:12) and it is also said: "Honor the

Lord with your substance;" (Proverbs. 3:9) just as the latter verse means at personal cost, so the former verse too. Also, if you say: At the father's expense, how does it affect him? It means through loss of time.

- BT Kiddushin 32a-b

A man may feed his father fattened chickens and inherit Hell and another may put his father to work treading a mill and inherit Paradise. How is it possible to feed his father fattened chickens and still inherit Hell? There was a man who used to feed his father fattened chickens. Once the father said to him: "My son, where did you get these?" He answered: Old man, shut up and eat, just as dogs shut up when they eat." Such a man feeds his father on fattened chickens but inherits Hell. How is it possible for a man to put his father to work in the mill and still inherit Paradise? There was a man who worked in a mill. The king ordered that the millers be brought to work for him. Said the man to his father: "Father, you stay here and work in the mill in my place, and I will go to work for the king. For if insults come to the workers, I prefer that they fall on me and not you. Should blows come, let them beat me and not you. Such a man inherits Paradise.

- YT Kiddushin 1:7

Rabbi Assi had an aged mother. Said she to him, 'I want ornaments.' So he made them for her. 'I want a husband.' 'I will look out for you.' 'I want a husband as handsome as you.' Thereupon he left her and went to Palestine. On hearing that she was following him he went to Rabbi Johanan and asked, 'May I leave Palestine for abroad?' 'It is forbidden,' he replied. 'But what if it is to meet my mother?' 'I do not know', said he. He waited a short time and went before him again. 'Assi', said he, 'you've determined to go; may God bring you back in peace.' Then he went before Rabbi Eleazar and said to him, 'Perhaps, God forbid, Rabbi Johanan was angry?' 'What did he say to you?' he enquired. 'May God bring you back in peace', was the answer. 'Had he been angry', he rejoined, 'he would not have blessed you'. In the meanwhile he learnt that her coffin was coming. 'Had I known.' Rabbi Assi exclaimed: 'I would not have gone out.'

- BT Kiddushin 31a

To what degree does the mitzvah of honoring one's father and mother extend? Even if one's parent takes his purse of gold and throws it into the sea in his presence, he should not embarrass them, shout, or vent anger at them. Instead, he should accept the Torah's decree and remain silent. To what degree does the mitzvah of fearing them extend? Even if one was wearing fine garments and sitting at the head of the community, if one's father and mother came, ripped the clothes, struck him on the head, and spit in his face, he should not embarrass them. Instead, he should remain silent and fear the King of kings who commanded him to conduct himself in this manner. Were a mortal king to decree something which would cause him even more suffering he would not be able to move a limb in protest. Certainly, this applies when the command emanates from He who spoke and caused the world to come into existence as He desired it.

Although these commands have been issued, a person is forbidden to lay a heavy yoke on his sons and be particular about their honoring him to the point that he presents an obstacle to them. Instead, he should forgo his honor and ignore any affronts. For if a father chooses to forgo his honor, he may.

A person who strikes a son who has attained majority should be placed under a ban of ostracism, for he transgresses the charge, Leviticus 19:14: "Do not place a stumbling block in front of the blind."

When a person's father or mother loses control of their mental faculties, their son should try to conduct his relationship with them according to their mental condition until God has mercy upon them. If it is impossible for him to remain with them because they have become very deranged, he should leave them, depart, and charge others with caring for them in an appropriate manner.

- Moses Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Hilkhoh Mamrim (The Laws of Rebellious Ones), Chapter 6

Reflections

What could be more basic to human decency than honoring one's parents? Daniel Nevins points out that the commandment to honor one's parents is not only one of the fundamental teachings of Judaism but it is also on a par with the reverence for God. The fifth commandment of the Decalogue is a kind of bridge

connecting the commandments that define our relationship with God with those instructions which define our relationships with our fellow human being. “Honor your father and your mother” connects heaven and earth.

And yet what could be more complex than the commandment to honor our parents and for parents to raise their children to be decent human beings? The Bible bears witness to the complexity of family ties. Genesis prefaces the Ten Commandments by bearing witness to the sometimes dysfunctional relations that connect us to our most ancient ancestors. Abraham nearly sacrifices one son and sends the other off to die in the wilderness. Isaac and Jacob each favored one child over the others leading to familial turmoil. Moses appears to have little or no relationship with his own sons other than naming them. It is no wonder the Bible has to remind us to honor our parents even when honor and reverence don't appear to be emotionally honest.

The Sages offer a rich tapestry of insights and discussions on the subject of parent-child relations. I encourage you to explore these discussions many of which can be found in Kiddushin 29a-32b. Several of the passages above are taken from the Talmud. For now I would like to share three insights that I have gained from exploring this material.

First I would have to say that the commandment to honor and revere one's parents was not composed for children. If we look at the discussions that appear in the Talmud and in the codes it is clear that the sages were concerned about the relationship between adult children and parents. Children by their very nature are going to love their parents when they are not angry at them. They are dependent on their parents not only for their physical needs but also for their emotional support. The Torah does not have to command us to honor or revere them. The sages in their interpretation of these verses were concerned with how adult children maintained a relationship with their parents.

Secondly as Rabbi Soloveitchik points out halakhah is more concerned with external behavioral expectations rather than internal emotional responses to parents. Nevins writes, “It rather establishes norms of conduct to ensure that parents attend to the needs of their children, and that children reciprocate when they reach the proper age. Ideally parents and children should love one another, but halakhah knows better than to legislate love.”

Finally there seems to be recognition in the sources above that even then halakhah cannot legislate all the possibilities when it comes to family relations. Providing food and shelter to one's elderly parents does not make one a saint nor does forcing one's parents to work make one a demon. Because there is an emotional element in these ties they are far more complex. So halakhah can go just so far - and then there are elements of honesty, authenticity, openness, and caring that define the relationship.

Finally *Hilkebot Mamrim* contains Maimonides' attempt to codify parent-child relationships. The first half of this book contains issues relating to the authority of Torah and the second half deals with our obligations to our parents. In the Torah a child who strikes or curses his parent can be put to death for his actions. It is because of this law that parent-child relations is included in the section of Maimonides' code dealing with those who rebel against the instructions of Torah. Our parents are in a sense our Torah. Their authority is similar to that of God's word. They are the source of our legacy just as the Torah is the source of our divine legacy.

Halakhah L'ma-aseh

1. *In this midrash and also in the classical codes of Halakhah, honoring parents is equated with honoring God...for Maimonides, a person who fails to honor his or her parents properly is to be compared to a heretic who renounces the obligation to honor God.*
- The Observant Life, p.674
2. *Reverence involves acknowledging the authority of our parents, while honor requires that they be made physically comfortable. It should be obvious that these obligations devolve upon adults with living parents, not solely on children still being reared at home.*
- The Observant Life, p.675
3. *Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik distinguishes between the external norms and the internal experience of filial piety. The Halakhah he observes does not attempt to regulate the emotional side of the parent-child relationship. It rather establishes norms of conduct to ensure that parents attend to the needs of their children, and that children reciprocate when they reach a proper age.*
- The Observant Life, p.675
4. *The sources teach us that parents are obligated to circumcise and redeem their sons, to teach their children Torah, to teach them a trade, and to see to their marriage. Some add that parents have an obligation to teach their children to swim as well. These are in addition to the basic obligations of feeding, housing, and clothing their young children.*
- The Observant Life, p.676
5. *While observant Jews may be tempted to disengage from their intermarried children, the better option will almost always be to build bridges rather than foster hostility or constantly to harp on the topic....Even when a child marries out of the faith; parents should continue to teach their sons and daughters the inestimable value of Jewish tradition.*
- The Observant Life, p.681
6. *David Golinkin describes a debate between Maimonides who allows a child to place a demented parent in the care of others and Rabbi Abraham ben David of Posquieres who protests that a child's obligations toward his or her parents cannot reasonably be made a function of that individual's health, mental or otherwise... Rabbi Golinkin advocates for middle ground, allowing appointment of professional healthcare providers but preferring to keep the parent in his or her own home environment whenever possible.*
- The Observant Life, p.690
7. *What if a parent asks a child to violate Jewish law by having his or her body cremated... if the parent insists on being cremated, the children should inform the parent that he or she will have to look after making the arrangements on his or her own. Afterwards, however, the child should mourn his or her parent in the traditional manner.*
- The Observant Life, p.691

Questions to Ponder

1. The sages offered specific definitions of the word 'honor' and 'reverence' or 'respect.' To what extent is their definition applicable today? How would you define those words for contemporary society?
2. The sages suggest that we are more likely to honor our mothers but respect our fathers. Do you think that is true?
3. Should honor/respect include an inner emotional element or is it sufficient to define these terms through behavioral norms?
4. What obligations should parents have to their children? At what age do parents no longer have obligations to provide for their children?
5. What limits, if any, should there be in the way adult children care for parents suffering from dementia or emotional illness?
6. How should a child handle a situation in which the parent asks the child to act in a way counter to his or her religious and ethical values?

Adapted from Torah Table Talk by Mark Greenspan