

The Mitzvah of of Honoring parents Kibud Av v'Em, כבוד בא ואם

From Exodus 20:12

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

From Leviticus 19:3

You shall revere every man his mother, and his father, and keep my sabbaths; I am the Lord your God.

From Deuteronomy 5:16

Honor your father and your mother, as the Lord your God has commanded you; that your days may be prolonged, and that it may go well with you, in the land which the Lord your God gives you.

The week of November 23rd

The mitzvah of honoring parents seems to be an obvious requirement and a pretty simple mitzvah to observe. Yet on closer inspection this mitzvah is very complex.

Why should we honor and revere our parents? Do they have to do something to deserve the honor and reverence or are we required because they gave us life, however they treat us? Yet if the mitzvah is so obvious why did God command it in three distinct places in the Torah? Why does God offer a reward and justification for this mitzvah (that your days may

be long upon the land which the Lord your God gives you), the only one of the 10 Commandments to have such a reward?

To what lengths must one go to observe this mitzvah?

When are we required to observe this mitzvah and for whom? Biological parents? The parents who raise us? Grandparents? Surrogate parents?

After truly contemplating this mitzvah, it becomes clear why Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai taught that the most difficult to observe of all the mitzvot is “honor your father and mother”.

The medieval sage Bahya ben Asher found this mitzvah problematic. Why should the Torah state a reward for observing the mitzvah? One should honor one’s parents for their benefit not for the child’s.

The Maharal, Rabbi Judah Loew, saw the mitzvah as a particular kind of universal law. He explained that there are 4 types of mitzvot: 1) the non-rational, called *hukim*, such as the ashes of the red heifer that purify the impure and impurify the pure; 2) laws that would seem to be non-rational except that the Torah gives us the reason for them - like Shabbat, in which it is explained that we observe it as a reminder that God created the world in 7 days and freed us from slavery; these commandments are called *mekubbalot*, or ‘received, bequeathed’, because we observe them on being received from Moses; 3) rational mitzvot, like setting up law courts, or laws about timely payment of loans, that were they not commanded we would have figured them out on our own;

and 4) natural laws like honoring parents, laws that a person desires to fill out of their conscience or humanity. These are universal human traits.

Rabbi Benjamin Ze'ev ben Mattityahu agreed that this mitzvah was part of human nature and that is why no blessing is required when we observe it. Also no blessing is needed for commandments for which there is no quantifiable measurement.

Abraham Ibn Ezra understood the mitzvah of honoring parents as a rational observance. The parents' love and generosity towards the child should naturally evoke feelings of gratitude from the child to parent.

Or is it so natural? According to Rabbi Moses Hafetz, if honoring parents were natural no command would be needed. In fact it is not natural. It is not instinctive for a child to honor a person suffering from dementia or physically incompetent parent, and perhaps today we would add an abusive parent, therefore it must be commanded. "That it will go well for you" means that when one treats elderly parents with respect, that individual's children see how to treat parents properly and will treat their parents" the same.

The Talmud in Sotah 49a may be hinting at Rabbi Hafetz' lesson by noting a difference between parental and filial love: The love of parents goes to their children but the love of these children goes to their children."

[The material for these weeks has been adapted from the Mitzvah Initiative Curriculum, edited by Jane Shapiro for JTS and How to Be a Jew, Byron Sherwin and Seymour Cohen]