

The Mitzvah of Honoring parents

Kibud Av v'Em, כבוד בא ואם

Week of December 1, 2009

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.

Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai taught that the most difficult to observe of all the mitzvot is “honor your father and mother”. What makes it so difficult is knowing the parameters – how do I properly observe this mitzvah?

The Sages attempted to answer this question with suggested behaviors that sound somewhat unusual to our ears:

Kiddushin 31b

Our Rabbis taught: What is ‘reverence’ and what is ‘honor’? ‘Reverence’ means that he [the son] 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, lead him in and out.

It is uncommon for children today to express reverence for their parents by not sitting in the “parent’s chair” (unless you are Archie Bunker) and fortunately it is rare that a parent in our society has to depend on the child for food and

clothing. Nevertheless we can translate the Sages admonitions into terms to assist us. Reverence from their definition is about respect and the attitude with we treat our parents. Honor is about actions, doing for our parents.

But how we determine exactly what that means is difficult and puts a direct challenge to children in considering how to best fulfill the mitzvah of “honoring and revering parents.”

Lest one think it easy to fulfill the challenge the Talmud tells of lessons learned from a Gentile whose commitment to his parents put the rabbis themselves to shame:

Rab Judah said in Samuel's name: R. Eliezer was asked: How far does the honor of parents[extend]? Said he, “Go forth and see what a certain heathen, Dama son of Nethinah by name, did in Ashkelon. The Sages sought jewels for the ephod, at a profit of six-hundred-thousand [gold denarii], R. Kahana taught: at a profit of eight hundred-thousand but as the key was lying under his father's pillow, he did not trouble him. The following year the Holy One, blessed be He, gave him his reward. A red heifer was born to him in his herd. When the Sages of Israel went to him [to buy it], he said to them: “I know you, that [even] if I asked you for all the money in the world you would pay me, but I ask of you only the money which I lost through my father's honor.”

When R. Dimi came, he said: He [Dama son of Nethinah] was once wearing a gold embroidered silken cloak and sitting among Roman nobles, when his mother came, tore it off from

him, struck him on the head, and spat in his face, yet he did not shame her.

What if one's parents are gone? Does the mitzvah still hold? It seems to me that it most certainly does given the fact that our bond as children is not cut despite the reality that our parents are no longer physically in this world. Our relationship does not end and neither does the responsibility to them.

This is why reciting Kaddish on their yahrtzeit and at the times we recite Yizkor are important links to our parents and a way for us to continue to show honor and reverence.

Living up to their values and the lessons they taught us, making sure commitments they made while they were alive are still kept - for example a tzedakah pledge that they made but were not able to complete before they died - is yet another way we continue to show honor and reverence.

The question of how to honor and revere also leads to a basic question of why are we not commanded to love our parents, the way we are commanded to "love God" and even

to “love the stranger”? There are three basic responses to this question.

a) Loving our parents is normative, so therefore there is no need to command it.

b) Love is a component of reverence. The act of honoring and revering our parents are manifestations of love.

c) Love is a complicated emotion. One cannot really command an emotion. Showing respect, even minimal respect in the case of an abusive because they gave you life, can be commanded but love cannot be expected. Eliezer Azikiri wrote that love comes out of a reciprocal respect between parent and child. When the parent parents well love is simply a natural reaction by the child so there is no need for commanding it. Obviously if the parent is abusive, love should not be expected and there is no point in trying to command it.