

Parashat Mishpatim, Rabbi James Proops

The opening passage of this week's *Parasha* includes two curious statements regarding the consequences one will face if they mistreat their parents. First we are told “וּמַכֵּה אָבִיו וְאִמּוֹ מוֹת יוּמָת” - He who *strikes* his father or his mother shall be put to death” and subsequently “וּמַקְלֵל אָבִיו וְאִמּוֹ מוֹת יוּמָת” - He who *insults* his father or his mother shall be put to death”. While we are aware that honoring one's parents is included in the *Aseret HaDibrot*, it is surprising that the punishment for hitting or ‘merely’ insulting one's parents is so severe. In any other case where we cause physical harm to another person we are instructed to pay damages and ask for forgiveness, which leaves us to wonder what makes the mistreatment of parents so vastly different. The answer to the questions, stems from a misunderstanding of the Torah's approach to *Kibbud Av v'Eim*. For many, the assumption is that respecting one's parents is just another one of the *Mitzvot* between man and his fellow, no different from loving one's neighbor or doing chesed for the stranger. However, even a cursory analysis of the commentaries on the *Aseret HaDibrot* identify a major difference between the obligation to honor and respect parents, and all other *Mitzvot Bein Adam Le'Chaveiro*.

It is well known that the *Aseret HaDibrot*, read in last week's *Parasha*, are divided into groups of five; the first set dealing with *Mitzvot* between man and God and the second set between human beings. The fifth *Mitzvah*, to honor one's parents, seems to undermine this division as, despite being an interpersonal obligation, it is included in the first set of five. We can begin to understand the inclusion of *Kibbud Av v'Eim* in the first group of five from the explanation of the *Sefer HaChinuch* (*Mitzvah 33 & 212*). He stresses that the *Mitzvah* is built upon the gratitude that one owes to our parents. This includes gratitude for everything that they have done, from bringing us into the world to the everyday care and attention which they showered upon us from birth. Hashem obligated us in this *Mitzvah* so that it would instill within us the central trait of gratitude which is a fundamentally important *Middah*. We must feel and express gratitude for everything in life and therefore we must start at the very beginning, with those who brought us into the world. We can therefore see the natural connection between the *Mitzvah* of *Kibbud Av v'Eim* and the commandments between man and God. Through our gratitude for our parents, we will come to a greater appreciation of Hashem.

However, the *Meshech Chochma*, Rav Meir Simcha of Dvinsk (d. 1926), in his comments on *Parashat Kedoshim* which includes the statement “אִישׁ אָמֹן וְאָבִיו תִּירָאוּ” - You shall revere your mother and father”, emphasizes the fact that parents are responsible for their children’s religious education and upbringing. He explains that this goes *beyond* the obligation of parents to ensure that each child is given an appropriate school education, imbue children with *Emunah* and good *Middot* and accustom them to keep and observe *Mitzvot*. Rather, parents are not merely the teachers of their children but they serve as the link to *Matan Torah* and the great Revelation at *Har Sinai*. The foundation of our belief and faith is shaped and imparted largely by our parents. While this is yet another reason for our obligation to be grateful, it serves as an independent reason to go beyond gratitude and obligate us to honor them. This is why the Rambam compares honoring one’s parents to honoring one’s Rav, as to a certain extent they both connect us to the *Mesora*, which ties us to *Har Sinai*. We can therefore see the obligation to honor and respect one’s parents goes far beyond the basic concept of interpersonal relationships but it underlines the role parents play in attaching us to Hashem, the Torah and *Klal Yisrael*.

With this in mind we can now suggest an answer to our original question. Why is the punishment for mistreating and disrespecting one’s parents so much more severe than hurting someone else? Since the obligation to honor our parents is based on the fact that they provide our link to *Har Sinai*, striking one’s parents is not only demonstrating a lack of gratitude for all that they have provided us with (including life itself), but also it indicates that we do not value the *Mesorah* or the link to *Matan Torah* that they provide.

While this explanation helps us to understand the basis of the *Pasukim*, I think there is an underlying message that we must pay attention to. One who disrespects their parents or goes so far to strike them, certainly does not have the proper understanding or appreciation for what it means to be part of the unbroken chain of the Jewish People. From the laws obligating children in how to behave towards their parents, we learn most about the obligations parents have towards their children. Before we can expect our children to understand the great role their parents play, it is every parent’s responsibility to recognize their *own* value and the crucial role that they have in passing on the *Mesorah*. It is not enough to take care

of our children's basic needs and send them off to school for education. We have to use all aspects of our relationship and all our interactions with them to impart what a great privilege it is to be a part of *Am Yisrael*. We have to seek to instill not only a great sense of Jewish pride but an appreciation for Torah and *Mesorah*. If we, as parents, are able to achieve this great and lofty goal, then we stand a chance of setting our children up for success in fulfilling their obligations also.

Shabbat Shalom