

Whom Should You Honor?

Although relationships between parents and children are complex, our honor for our parents should remain unwavering.

BY RABBI LAWRENCE W. RAPHAEL

Five [commandments are written] on one tablet and five on the other.... On [the last line of] one tablet it is written: Honor your father and mother. And opposite it on the [last line of] the other tablet is written: You must not covet your neighbor's wife. Our coveting can lead to illicit affairs and complex relationships or families, in which the children end up unable to give both of their parents proper respect or may be unsure to whom that honor is due. (Rachel Mikvah, *Broken Tablets*, Jewish Lights Publishing, Woodstock, VT, 1999, p. xix)

In [Exodus \[20:12\]](#) the command is to honor (*kabeid*) our parents.... In [Deuteronomy \[5:16\]](#) we are told also that things will go well with us for fulfilling this obligation.... More compelling, however, is the interpretation found in Gersonides' medieval Torah commentary. He argues that it is not a reward but rather a natural result. Respect for parents will ensure that succeeding generations will accept the teachings of their elders. The pattern repeats generation after generation, and we [will] live a long life in the values that are perpetuated. (Rachel Mikvah, *Broken Tablets*, Jewish Lights Publishing, Woodstock, VT, 1999, p. 63)

Honoring one's parents is directed to the concern for the physical needs. The Talmud teaches, "Honoring one's parents is observed by helping them to eat and drink, clothing and covering them, and helping them to go in and out" ([Kiddushin 31b](#)). Feeling respectful or feeling honor is not central to the Talmud. Rather, acting in a way that makes the parent feel that she or he is a significant and special person to the child is what Jewish law demands. (Michael Chernick, "Who Pays? The Talmudic Approach to Filial Responsibility" in *The Journal of Aging and Judaism*, Spring/Summer 1987, pp. 109–117)

All fathers fail, of course. All of us see in our children's disdain the judgment of heaven. But we do not wholly fail. We mediate the divine love in which we all live and move and have our being. Biology (or its equivalent in the case of adoption) will win out. Nature and nurture always prevail. Our children replicate as they supersede our selves. Most important in my view is the task of commanded honor. Our inevitable ambivalence can only be resolved in action. We are commanded, whatever our mixture of love and hate, of regret and gratitude, to do honor. Doing changes everything. (Arnold Jacob Wolf, "Ten More Words" in *Broken Tablets* by Rachel Mikva, Jewish Lights Publishing, Woodstock, VT, 1999, p. 134)

The fifth commandment forms a transition from the first to the second group of declarations because it incorporates both the religious and the social dimensions. Honoring parents is a way of honoring God, the ultimate source of all life and care. (*Etz Hayim*, The Jewish Publication Society, p. 446)

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Commentary

Honoring our parents is first among our duties toward other human beings, just as it is one of the first laws of holiness in [Leviticus 19:3](#). However, in that passage the order of parents is reversed — with “mother” coming before “father” — and a different verb is used to describe the commanded action — “revere” or “respect” rather than “honor.”

Talmud, [Kiddushin31b-32a](#) attempts to explain what constitutes respect for one’s parents and what constitutes honor. The discussion takes as its point of departure the fact that the verb used in both Exodus and Deuteronomy as part of the Ten Commandments is “honor,” whereas in Leviticus it is “respect.”

The Talmudic discussion notes that respect is observed by not standing in the parent’s usual place, not sitting where the parent normally sits, not contradicting the parent’s words, and not interfering in a parent’s dispute with others. Rashi comments upon this text by noting that a child should not side against his or her parent. We can understand this to imply that the word “respect” means to be aware of and sensitive to one’s parents’ psyches and emotional wellbeing.

An example from our tradition of what Rabbi Wolf means by “doing changes everything” can be found in the following story from Talmud, [Kiddushin31a](#):

It once happened that there was a young man who fed his father fattened chickens, but when his father asked from where they came, the son replied, “Old man, old man, shut up and eat, even as dogs shut up when they eat.” Thus, even though the young man provided plenty of fine food for his father, he did not inherit a portion in paradise.

There was another young man whose work was grinding wheat. When the king sent word that millers must be brought to work for him, the young man said to his father, “Father, you go to the mill to grind in my stead, and I will go do the king’s work. Should there be humiliation in it, I would rather be humiliated and not you; should there be flogging, let me receive the blows and not you.” Thus, although he made his father grind in the mill, the son inherited the Garden of Eden.

Our argument recognizes that no one, not even God, can command the emotions of another. We feel what we feel. But appropriate and proper behavior — that is another matter. We honor our parents because it is they who gave us life. If they are lovable, we also love them. But whether or not they are lovable, we must honor them.

This is not just a matter for young children but a concern for children of every age. The relationship between parents and adult children is a complicated subject. Since honor and respect for parents are not particularly natural responses on the part of children, this may be the very reason why they had to be commanded. On the other hand, the rational use of parental prerogatives is not always guaranteed. In fact, the Talmud (*Mo-ed Katan* 17a) says that those who strike their adult children are placed under a ban.

The reality that we are not perfect and may have ambivalent feelings about our parents is part of our human condition. While it is possible to think that our love for them may wane, we cannot

allow honor to follow that same path. “Do I not, for example, accept the notion of unconditional love with regard to my children? And what is ‘unconditional love’ if not a love that proceeds from ascription rather than deserts? If I can try and provide unconditional love for my children, then why not unconditional honor for my parents?” (Leonard Fein quoted in *Broken Tablets* by Rachel Mikva, Jewish Lights Publishing, Woodstock, VT, 1999, p. 66)

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