

Honor your father and your mother

Where does it say that?

Three places in the Torah:

כִּבֵּד אֶת אָבִיךָ וְאֶת אִמֶּךָ

Kabed et avicha ve-et immecha.

Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land the Lord your God gives you. [Exodus 20:12]

Honor your father and your mother, as the Lord your God has commanded you, so that your days may be prolonged, and that it may go well with you, in the land the Lord your God gives you. [Deut. 5:16]

Ish immo v'aviv tira-u.

Every man shall revere his mother and his father. [Leviticus 19:3]

(Correct translation is “revere” or “be in awe of”, not “fear”.)

It's called *Kibbud Av Va-Em*. In honor, father mentioned first; but in reverence, mother mentioned first. Why? Mishna:

You might think... the honor due to the father exceeds the honor due to the mother, [but] the Torah stated, “Every man shall revere his mother and his father” to teach that both are equal. [K'ritot 6:9 - 28a; Genesis R. 1:15]

Talmud:

It was taught that Rabbi [Yehuda HaNasi] said: It is revealed and known to Him Whose decree brought the world into existence, that a son honors his mother more than his father, because she sways him with her words. Therefore, the Holy One, blessed be He, placed the honor of the father before that of the mother. It is revealed and known to Him Whose decree brought the world into existence, that a son reveres his father more than his mother, because he teaches him Torah. Therefore, the Holy One, blessed be He, mentioned the reverence of the mother before that of the father. [Kiddushin 30b-31a]

Torah also says that one must not hit [Ex. 21:15], curse [Ex. 21:17], or dishonor [Deut. 27:16] one's parents. Maimonides has these as three separate commandments. [Sefer Hamitzvot 2:218,219,195; Hilchot Mamrim 5ff]

Why honor parents?

Gratitude:

One should appreciate the fact that his parents are the source of his very existence in this world, and it is therefore appropriate for him to act as respectfully and beneficially as he can. Besides having brought him into the world, they also expended tremendous effort in raising him as a child. [Sefer HaChinuch 33, in 13th-century Spain]

Self-interest:

If you take care of your parents, your children will take care of you in your old age, and you will live longer! [Saadia Gaon, 10th-century Egypt]

Why is the commandment necessary? Torah does not command what we would do naturally. One view:

Honoring parents...goes against human nature. It requires us to acknowledge all they've done for us and show gratitude. It requires us to admit that we needed them, that we could not have done it ourselves. This is a difficult thing for the human ego. The ego would have us view ourselves as independent, self-sufficient and invincible. We can bring ourselves to thank strangers who do small things for us now and then, because this does not really affect our egotistical self-image. But when it comes to our parents, if we admit they did anything, we also have to admit they did everything for us. Our egos do not allow us to say, "I owe you everything." This, then, is the "most difficult of the difficult" mitzvot.

[Contemporary US Rabbi Yissachar Frand on Ki Tetze]

Also, many children (most?) grow up to rebel against their parents.

What if my parents have not been good to me?

One must honor parents even when they have not taken good care of their children, because Torah says:

Honor your father and your mother, as the Lord your God has commanded you. [Deut. 5:16]

implying this may be a *chok* (commandment whose rationale escapes us):

Even if your father and mother abandoned you and did not raise you, you should still honor them "as the Lord your God has commanded you." [Meir Simcha of Dvinsk, 19th-century Eastern Europe, Meshech Chochma on Deut. 5:16]

Why? Because:

- They transmitted the Tradition to us.
- Even if not, they transmitted the knowledge that we are Jewish, thereby giving us the impetus to discover the Tradition on our own, knowing that we belong.
- Even if not, they gave us life: That alone is sufficient reason.

Who must honor parents?

- Biological children of a Jewish mother must honor her, and their biological father if Jewish.
- Adopted children are exempt:
 - Rabbi Aha ben Yaakov raised his daughter's son, Rabbi Yaakov. When he grew up, [the grandfather] said to him: "Give me some water to drink". He replied: "I am not your son." [Sotah 49a]
- Converts are exempt: Prior family ties not recognized.
- Non-Jews are exempt: Not one of the seven Noahide laws.
- BUT** there is still a moral obligation:
 - He who brings up children is called the father, not he who gives birth. [Ex. R. 46:5]
 - If anyone brings up an orphan boy or girl in his house, Scripture accounts it as if he had begotten him. [Megillah 13a]
 - A convert must not curse his non-Jewish father or hit him, or disgrace him... but should treat his parents with... honor. [Rav Moshe Feinstein, Igrot Moshe YD 2:130]
 - Maharal: Non-Jews honor their parents more than most Jews.
 - Two non-Jews are Talmud's paragons of honoring parents. (See below.)
- Are adopted children obligated to search for their biological parents so they can honor them? (Unknown.)

How important is that commandment?

Talmud: The Torah compares the honor and reverence due to father and mother to the honor and reverence due to God Himself. [Peah Y 1:1, 6b]

Contemporary rabbi:

Even if one were to honor father and mother as he would a king and queen, he would still not fulfill his obligation, since the Torah compares their honor to the honor due to God Himself. Therefore, one should imagine how he would feel if God were to show up at his doorstep. With

what trepidation would he receive Him! One should honor parents with that same attitude. [Shmuel Houminer, 20th-century Jerusalem , Eved Hamelech]

The first five of the Ten Commandments address obligations to God, whereas the second five address duties towards individuals. Why is honoring parents among the first five? Because by honoring parents we also honor God.

One of only two commandments for which long life is promised.

What's my reward if I honor parents?

Torah promises long life: One of only two commandments for which this is promised. The other is to shoo away the mother bird before taking her eggs or young (*Shiluach HaKen*). [Deut. 22:6]

Mishna:

The following are the things for which a man enjoys the fruits in this world while the principal remains for him in the World to Come: Honoring father and mother, practicing charity, and making peace between a man and his friend; but Torah study is equal to them all. [Peah 1:1, Shabbat 127a]

What does it mean to 'honor' and 'revere' your parents?

It does not mean “Obey your parents”.

-Especially if they tell you to go against Torah.

Midrash:

It might be supposed that even if his father tells him: “Slaughter or cook for me on Shabbat”, he must obey. The Torah therefore explicitly states, [in the same verse:] Every man shall revere his mother and his father, and keep my sabbaths; I am the Lord your God. [Leviticus 19:3]. This implies [that...] if [any] mortal rages against you to make you transgress the commandments of the Torah, do not be cowed by his anger into following his counsel. [Numbers R. 14:6]

Talmud:

-One might have assumed that honoring father and mother supersedes Shabbat [but the rest of the verse shows that it is not so.] [Yevamot 5b]

-Torah study is greater than the mitzvah of honoring parents. [Megillah 16b]

Zohar:

Rabbi Yosei said: Reverence of mother and father is put next to keeping Shabbat [because] it is all one: He who reveres one keeps the other. [Zohar, Vayikra 3:81b]

Rambam:

A child must not listen to a parent asking him to transgress a commandment of the Torah or of the rabbis. [Rambam, Hilchot Mamrim 6:12]

Later rabbis: Even if request does not contradict Torah, you don't have to obey:

-If someone wants to pray in a synagogue where [the congregation] prays with more devotion, and his mother protests, he does not have to listen to his mother. [19th-century Russian rabbi Eisenstadt, Pitchei Teshuva, Yoreh Deah 240:22]

-If the father protests against the son marrying a specific woman that he wishes [to marry], the son does not have to listen to his father. [Rema on Shulchan Aruch Yoreh Deah 240:25]

-But if she is not Jewish, or not moral, or not religious, he must listen to his father. [Chaim Hezekiah Medini, 19th-century Jerusalem rabbi, Sdei Chemed, Ma'arechet Caf 147]

-Many rabbis say that the mitzvah to dwell in Israel overrides the obligation to honor parents. Some disagree. [Contemporary rabbi Moshe Lieber, The Fifth Commandment, p 131]

-If a parent asks a son to shave his beard, he need not listen. If a parent tells a child not to speak to a certain person, the child need not obey. [Shulchan Arukh, Yoreh De'ah 240:16]. [Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Braun, She'arim Metzuyyanim Bahalakhah 143]

Talmudic definitions:

-“Honor” means you must give them food, drink, clothing; and help them in and out. “Reverence” means you must neither stand nor sit in your parents' place, nor contradict them, nor tip the scales against them. [Kiddushin 31b]

Rashi explains:

If the father is in dispute with another scholar, the son must not side with his opponent... He must not even say: I agree with my father. This holds only in the father's presence, otherwise he may state his view freely. Even then, he should avoid mentioning his father's name when refuting his view, if possible.

No financial loss need be incurred. Talmud:

At whose expense [must the parents be helped]?

Rav Yehudah said: The son's.

Rabbi Nachman ben Oshaia said: The father's.

The Rabbis [ruled:] At the father's expense.

An objection is raised: It is said: “Honor your father and your mother”, and it is also said: “Honor the Lord with your substance.” [Proverbs 3:9] Just as the latter means at personal cost, so does the former. But if you say: At the father's [expense], how does it affect [the son]? [What personal loss is there?] Loss of time. [Kiddushin 32a]

The law:

The son provides food and drink from the resources of the father and mother (that is, he is not required to pay for serving his parents). However, he is obligated to honor his parents through his physical presence even if by doing so he will miss work...But if the son himself does not have [enough food for one day], he is not obligated to miss work and end up a beggar. [Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 240:5]

Joke:

A man calls his parents regularly, but is too busy to go see them in person. He asks his rabbi: Do I HAVE to fly out to see my parents? The rabbi replies: No, you can walk!

Gratify your parents:

The main way to honor parents is to gratify them, through words or deeds. [Rabbenu Yonah, 13th-century Catalonia, Iggeret Ha-Teshuvah 3:70]

Be sincere in honoring parents:

Honoring father and mother applies to feelings and emotions as well as actions. If one displays honor for parents only in superficial speech and deed, without heartfelt concern, he shows that in reality he considers them lowly and honors them only "because God says so." Rather, he must see them as truly great and honorable people. This is the main aspect of honoring parents. Once one has developed this attitude, it will be easy to honor them sincerely in both speech and action. [Sefer Charedim 1:35]

Look for your parents' qualities and achievements:

True fulfillment of honoring parents is only possible if you feel real respect and admiration toward them. You must therefore find areas or character traits in which they excel. If you do not cultivate a deep feeling of esteem for them, even if you go through all external motions of acting respectfully, you have not fulfilled the Torah's goal at all. [Rav Chaim Shmuelewitz, Sichot Mussar, p 158]

Do not call your parents by their first names. [Shulchan Aruch YD 240:2]

Remember that "*Kavod*" is dignity, not just honor:

-Just feeding and clothing parents is not honor, but only charity.

Remember your parents after they die:

-Say Kaddish, follow mourning rites, remember their teachings and merits, mention them often for the good.

To what extent must one honor parents?

Talmud: Honoring father and mother is the most difficult mitzvah:

Rabbi Ba bar Kahana said: The Torah put the most minor of minor commandments on the same level as the most major of major commandments. The easiest is sending away the mother bird, and the most difficult is honoring father and mother. And with regard to each, it is written [in the Torah]: “So that you may live long.” [Peah Y 1:1, 7a]

Mishna: This “bracketing” implies that all mitzvot get at least this reward:

A man may not take the mother bird along with the young...If in respect of so light a precept... the Torah said, “that it may be well with you”, and “that you may prolong your days”, how much more [must the reward be] for observing the more difficult precepts of the Torah! [Chullin 142a]

Rabbi Shim'on bar Yochai:

The most difficult of all mitzvot is “Honor your father and your mother”. [Tanhuma, Ekev 2]

Talmud: It is practically impossible to fully perform the mitzvah of honoring parents:

Rabbi Yochanan said: *Ashrei mi she-lo raah chama-an* -- Happy is he who has not seen [his parents]. Rabbi Yochanan's father died when his mother conceived him, and his mother died when he was born. And likewise for Abaye. [Kiddushin 31b]

Rashi explains:

Only one who never saw his parents can be considered not to have violated the commandment of honoring parents, [the most difficult one].

No blessing is said before honoring parents:

No blessing is recited for fulfilling this mitzvah, because you never know if you have fulfilled it properly. [And saying a blessing in vain is prohibited.] [Rabbi Chaim Hezekiah Medini, from 19th-century Jerusalem, Sdei Chemed, v6, Berachot 1:16]

You can never do enough for your parents:

Rabbi Tarfon's mother... took a walk [and her shoes tore].

He went and placed his two hands under her feet, and she walked on them until she reached her bed.

One time, [Rabbi Tarfon] became ill, and the Sages came to visit him. His mother said to them, “Pray for my son, for he treats me with exceptional honor.” They said to her, “What does he do for you?”, and she relayed this incident to them.

They said to her, “Even if he were to do that thousands upon thousands [of times], he still would not have achieved half of the honor the Torah requires.” [Peah Y 3b]

You must honor your parents personally:

Rabbi Avahu said, "My son Avimi is an example of one who has fulfilled the mitzvah of honoring [one's parents]." Avimi had five children who were ordained [as rabbis] while his father was still alive. Yet, when Rabbi Avahu came [to visit] and called out at the door, Avimi himself hurried and went to open it for him saying, "Yes, yes!" [I am coming to open the door] until he reached there. One day [Rabbi Avahu] said, "Bring me a drink of water." He [Avimi] brought him [water and found him] sleeping. He stood over him [and waited] until he awoke. [Kiddushin 31b]

You must honor your parents willingly and cheerfully:

One can feed his father birds of delicacy and be punished; one can make his father grind with a millstone and be rewarded.

-How can one feed his father birds of delicacy and be punished?

Once there was a son who always fed his father birds of delicacy. The father asked his son how he could afford to do so. The son answered him, "Old man! What do you care? Chew and eat! Even dogs eat quietly."

-How can one make his father grind with a millstone and be rewarded?

A man who worked at a mill had an elderly father. One day the king drafted the father for forced labor. The man told his father: "Father, you work here on the millstone and I will go in your place, so that if I incur ridicule and lashes, better me than you." [Peah Y 1:1]

Parents may not demand the honor due them:

It is forbidden to burden your children by being particular about them honoring you. [This is so that] you will not pose a stumbling block before them, rather you should forego [your honor] and close your eyes to their actions... [Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 240:19]

Parents should just teach children the importance of the commandment.

Parents may be rebuked, but very gently:

Rabbi Eliezer was asked: "How far does the honor of parents [extend]"? If your father is transgressing a precept of the Torah, you must not say to him, "Father, you are transgressing a precept of the Torah", but... "Father, such and such a verse is written in the Torah." [Kiddushin 32a]

Another commandment may or may not take precedence:

Eleazar ben Mathia said: If my father orders me, "Give me a drink of water", while I have a commandment to perform, I disregard my father's honor and perform the commandment... [But] Issi ben Yehudah maintained: If the commandment can be performed by others, it should be performed by others, while he should bestir himself for his father's honor.

Said Rabbi Mattena: The law agrees with Issi ben Yehudah. [Kiddushin 32a]

Who are good examples of honoring parents?

A idolatrous Gentile and a “bad guy”!

Damah ben Netinah:

Rabbi Abbahu said: Rabbi Eliezer the Great was asked by his disciples: “Can you give a [good] example of honoring parents?” He replied: “Go and see what [the idolatrous Gentile] Damah ben Netinah of Askelon did. His mother was mentally ill and used to slap him in front of his colleagues, and all he would say was, “Mother, it is enough!””

Once the Sages came to him... to buy... a precious stone for... the vestments of the [High] Priest, and they agreed... on a price of 1,000 golden pieces. He entered the house and found his father asleep with his leg stretched out on the chest containing the stone. He would not trouble him and came out empty-handed... The Sages thought he wanted a higher price, and raised their offer to 10,000 golden pieces. When his father awoke, Dama entered and brought out the stone. The Sages wished to give him 10,000 golden pieces, but he exclaimed: “Heaven forbid! I will not make a profit out of honoring my parents. I will only take the price we agreed, 1,000 golden pieces.”

And what reward did the Holy One, blessed be He, give him? Our Rabbis report that in the very same year his cow gave birth to a red heifer, which he sold for more than 10,000 golden pieces. See how great is the merit of honoring father and mother! [Deuteronomy Rabbah 1:15; also Peah Y 5b-6a]

Esau:

-Rabbi Shim'on ben Gamliel said: No son has ever honored his parents as I have done, and yet I find that Esau honored his father even more than I. How? [He] said: I usually waited on my father dressed in soiled clothes, but when I went out into the street I discarded these clothes and put on instead handsome clothes. Not so Esau. The clothes in which he was dressed when attending on his father were his best... Hence you learn that Esau was most scrupulous in honoring his parents. [Deuteronomy Rabbah 1:15]

-There was not a man in the world who showed as much honor to his father as Esau did, and this is what gave him dominion in this world. [The Romans are Esau's descendants.] [Zohar, Bereshit 1:146b]

Shabbat shalom.