

**Torah Table Talk – *The Observant Life***  
**Reverence, Honor,**  
**And the Challenge of Filial Relations**  
**Between Parents and Children,** by Rabbi Daniel S. Nevins  
***Parshat Va'etchanan*, Deuteronomy 3:23 – 7:11**

This week's Torah Table Talk is sponsored by Anne and Jeffrey Resnick  
In honor of their grandchildren and the anniversary of Jeff's Bar Mitzvah

**I. Introduction**

The commandment to “honor your father and your mother” is not kid’s stuff. So significant is this *mitzvah* that it is included among the Ten Commandments. According to *Midrash Tanhuma (Ekev 3)*, honoring one’s parents is also the most difficult *mitzvah* to fulfill. The *Midrash* is speaking about our responsibility as adults to our parents and not young children and their parents. Rabbi Nevins writes that only as parents do we “begin to comprehend the sacrifices made by our own parents and we gain a greater perspective on the gift of creation.” Pre-adolescent children, by nature, naturally want to honor and respect their parents – after all, their parents are bigger than them and they are dependent on their parents for their basic needs! Besides, even when we are rebellious we want our parents to love us. The real challenge in fulfilling this commandment takes place first, as we gain our own independence and separate from our parents, and later, when our parents grow older and we become responsible for them. In their discussions of this commandment, the sages assume that the commandment “to honor our parents” applies mainly to adult children when people must negotiate the tensions between becoming our parents’ care givers and respecting our parents’ autonomy. Rabbi Nevins writes: “If honoring one’s parents and raising one’s children were easy tasks, then the Torah might well have skipped over the stories of the conflicted families in Genesis. And indeed thousands of years later, contemporary Jewish families still contend with the same challenges described in the Bible...” As Jews, then, we continue to wrestle with the ideal of filial responsibility and love and the complexities of living in the world. Both as parents and children we face challenges in understanding the nature of our relationship to one another.

**Deuteronomy 5:16** – Honor your father and mother, as the Lord your God has commanded you, that you may long endure, and that you may fare well, in the land that the Lord your God is assigning to you.

**Leviticus 19:3** – Everyone of (*eesh*) you shall each **revere** (*tira'u*) his mother and his father, and keep my Sabbaths; I the Lord, am your God.

**II. Sources, Resources**

1) **Every one of you shall revere his mother and his father** (Lev. 19:3): This is the literal translation of the verse. The Halachic explanation of the verse, however, is as follows: since scripture says, *eesh*, “each man,” I have here only the law that a man must revere his father and his mother. Whence do I know that this also applies to a woman? Because scripture states *tira'u*, “They shall show reverence.” It is evident, therefore that the verse speaks here of the two (man and woman). But if that is so, why does the verse use the term *eesh*, man? Because it is the man who has the means to do it, while a woman is under the jurisdiction of others.

**Every one of you shall revere his mother and his father:** Here Scripture mentions the mother before the father because it is manifest to God that the child fears his father more than the mother (By mentioning the mother first the Torah stresses the duty of fearing her.) In the case of honoring one’s parents, however, scripture mentions the father before the mother because it is manifest to God that the child honors the mother more than the father because she endeavors to win him over with kind words. By mentioning the father first, scripture emphasizes the obligation to honor also him. (*Rabbi Shlomo ben Yitzchak, Rashi’s Commentary on Lev. 19:3*)

- a) *In writing a comment on a passage, Rashi is usually trying to answer a question. What question does he want to answer in the first and second paragraphs above? What is bothering Rashi?*
- b) *Rashi appears to base his explanation on a stereotype in parent-child relations: We are more likely to honor our mothers and revere our fathers. Do you agree with him? Why or why not?*

2) Our Rabbis taught: What is 'reverence' and what is 'honor'? 'Reverence' means that one must neither stand in his the father's place nor sit in his place, nor contradict his words, nor tip the scales against him (Should his father be in dispute with another scholar, his son must not side with his opponent – Rashi). 'Honor' means that he must give him food and drink, clothe and cover him, lead him in and out. The Scholars asked: At whose expense (should he support his parents?) Rab Judah said: The son's. Rabbi Nahman ben Oshaia said: The father's. The Rabbis gave a ruling to R. Jeremiah - others state, to Rabbi Jeremiah's son - in accordance with the view that it must be at the father's expense. An objection is raised: It is said: 'Honor your father and mother;' (Exodus 20:12) and it is also said: 'Honor the Lord with your substance;' (Proverbs 3:9) just as the latter means at personal cost, so the former too. But if you say: At the father's expense, how does it affect him? (He honors his parents) through loss of time. (BT Kiddushin 31b-32a)

a) *Note that the sages do not understand reverence and honor as emotions but as behavioral expectations. Quoting Rabbi Joseph Soleveitchik, Rabbi Nevins writes: "The halachah does not attempt to regulate the emotional side of the parent-child relationship. It rather establishes norms of conduct to ensure that parents attend to the needs of their children and that children reciprocate when they reach the proper age." Should there be emotional exceptions in this relationship as well?*

3) Rav Assi [a Babylonian sage] had an aged mother. She said to him: "I want jewelry!" He made some for her. "I want a husband!" He replied: "I'll look for one for you." "I want a husband as handsome as you!" He left her and went to Israel. When he heard that she was coming after him, he asked Rabbi Yohanan: "Is it permissible to leave Israel for the Diaspora?" He replied: "It is forbidden." He asked: "Towards his mother - what is the law?" He replied: "I don't know."... In the meantime, Rav Assi heard that her coffin was coming. He said: "Had I known, I would not have left Babylon!" (BT Kiddushin 31b).

a) *What led Rav Assi to absent himself from his mothers' care?*

b) *What circumstances might lead a person to take a similar action today?*

4) The halachic authorities interpreted this story in two conflicting directions. Maimonides (1135-1204) and his followers used it to legitimate custodial care, while Ra'avad of Posquieres (1120-1198) and his followers came to the opposite conclusion. Maimonides codified the story as follows: If one's father or mother should become mentally disordered, he should try to treat them as their mental state demands, until God has pity on them. But if he finds he cannot endure the situation because of their extreme madness, let him leave them and go away, *commanding others to care for them as befits them (Mamrim 6:10)*. According to the last sentence, it is perfectly legitimate to institutionalize a parent with Alzheimer's disease, even though this is not explicitly stated in the story about Rav Assi.

Ra'avad of Posquieres (1120-1198), Maimonides' classic critic, disagrees: This is not a correct ruling! If he goes and leaves him, who shall he command to watch him?! Apparently, in Ra'avad's time and place there was no option of custodial care and, indeed, the first Jewish old age home seems to have been founded in Amsterdam in 1749.

All subsequent halachic authorities aligned themselves with either Maimonides or Ra'avad. The Maimonidean camp, replies that since Rav Assi's mother was brought to Israel in a coffin, he must have ordered others to take care of his mother... Ra'avad's followers reply that it is clear from the end of the story that Rav Assi regretted having left his mother and therefore the story proves that custodial care is prohibited. Furthermore, if, as Maimonides claims, "others" can take care of the parent, then why can't the child do so himself since he has a better understanding of his parent's desires and idiosyncrasies? In addition, this camp seeks support from R. Jacob ben Asher (1270-1343) who in his code (*Tur, Yoreh Deah 240*) quotes Ra'avad *after* Maimonides, which seems to indicate his agreement with the former. Lastly, this camp asserts that Rav Assi's mother was *not* mentally disturbed but rather old and crotchety. Rav Assi left her because he knew he could not honor her requests properly. But a demented or senile parent needs *extra* physical care from the child while his demented requests can be ignored because he no longer has all of his faculties. (*R. David Golinkin, Institutionalizing Parents with Alzheimer's Disease [http://www.responsafortoday.com/moment/2\\_2.htm](http://www.responsafortoday.com/moment/2_2.htm)*)

a) *To what extent are Maimonides' and Ra'avad's argument applicable and relevant today?*

b) *Do you think that personally caring for one's aging parents is always the best policy? If so, what sacrifices should we be willing to make to do so?*

- c) *How might the Maimonides-Ra'avad dispute be helpful for us today in making moral judgments in caring for our aging parents? In what ways were the circumstances in their times different from today?*

### III. Reflections

We've touched on just one of the many issues raised in Rabbi Nevin's discussion of parent-child relationships. The Jewish tradition attempts to define the character of these relationships, both in terms of the responsibilities of a parent to his or her children and a child's relationship to his or her parents. At a time when we are likely to live at great distances from one another and when one can no longer speak of a normative nuclear family structure, these issues become more and more complex. Only a generation or two ago, families were likely to live in close proximity to one another and many households were multigenerational. That is no longer true. And yet, for many, the ideal of family is still among the most sacred and popular aspects of our Jewish tradition (even if it is somewhat mythic). When potential candidates approach rabbis with an interest in conversion, one of the things that they find most attractive about Judaism is the importance placed on family life. I have to wonder, however, if Jewish families are so very different from non-Jewish families in this day and age.

As a rabbi, I have always found the notion of reverence and honor as defined by the sages to be most helpful in counseling people in times of loss. Occasionally, I am called upon to officiate at a funeral in which the surviving children did not necessarily have an ideal relationship with one or both of their parents. There is often disappointment and hurt in the way the parent fulfilled his or her duties as a parent. Similarly, children are sometimes called on to care for aging parents with whom they had an ambivalent relation. What I often explain to such people is that we are not commanded to love our parents; we are commanded to honor and revere them – and even then, these are specific behavioral expectations for us.

There is something comforting in knowing that even if one's parents are not 'lovable,' and even if they disappointed us, there are ways in which we can still fulfill the fifth commandment. Whatever else they may have done, our parents gave us the gift of life – and that is significant. This commandment to honor your father and your mother does not demand a commitment of the heart (though it would be wonderful if one felt that way, naturally) but a sense of responsibility for the person or people who brought us into the world. The same might be applied to the care we give our parents as they grow old and are incapable of caring for themselves. There is something in knowing that we can still fulfill our duties to God under such circumstances.

*Don't depend on the quotes from The Observant Life in Torah Table Talk. Get a copy and read the whole chapter! It is also available on Kindle and Nook. Would you consider becoming a sponsor for TTT for a week, a month, for a whole book of the Torah or for an entire year? Weekly sponsorships are \$54. Dedications can be made in memory of loved ones or in honor of special occasions on the week of your choice. All donations will be used to support the Oceanside Jewish Center, my congregational sponsor. For more information or to subscribe to or unsubscribe from Torah Table Talk, write to [haravmark@optonline.net](mailto:haravmark@optonline.net). Rabbi Mark Greenspan*

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