

## Unit 1

# You Shall honour Your Father and Your Mother

כִּבֵּד אֶת-אָבִיךָ וְאֶת-אִמֶּךָ

Exodus 20:12

## A Difficult Obligation

This study unit explores how the rabbis understood the biblical commandments to honour and to revere our parents. As you will see, they saw this as an obligation that was both very demanding, and seemingly limitless. (The questions of limits will be explored in unit 3). This study unit represents only a small sample of some of the key approaches to the subject in our textual tradition, and we chose them so that you can grasp one key stream of thought about this subject, as well as some of the most important concepts. They do not represent a definitive Jewish answer to the question of what it means to honour our parents. Rather, this is a set of texts for a community to use as a basis for discussion and learning about how we honour our parents, and how our tradition may prompt us to do this in a thoughtful and ethical way.

This is a double unit as it is likely you will need to complete it in two one hour sessions.

and Your Mother

Honour Your Father

## Source 1

### Midrash Tanhuma Ekev part 3

The following discussion, from *Midrash Tanchuma*, explores the reason why God does not reveal the rewards we might receive for fulfilling the various different *mitzvot*, the biblical commandments.

Rabbi Chiyyah said, to what does this compare? It is like a king who had an orchard, and who brought in workers. But the king did not reveal to them the wages for their plantings, because if he had, they would see which planting earned a substantial reward, and then plant it.

It would turn out, in the work of the vineyard, that some of it would be abandoned, and other parts would flourish.

And so the Holy Belssed One does not reveal in the Torah the reward for each and every *mitzvah*,

becasue if this were revealed some *mitzvot* would be enduring and others would be abandoned.

And Rabbi Acha said, in the name of Rabbi Abba bar Kahana, the Holy Blessed One shifted the reward for observing the commandments to this world, so that the Jewish people would fulfil them in their entirety.

אמר ר' חייא משל למה הדבר דומה,  
למלך שהיה לו פרדס,  
והכניס בו פועלים,  
ולא גילה להם המלך שכר נטיעותיו,  
כי אילו גילה להם שכר נטיעותיו הן  
רואין איזה נטיעה שכרה מרובה  
ונוטעין אותה,  
נמצאת מלאכת הפרדס  
מקצתה בטילה ומקצתה קיימת,  
כך לא גילה הקב"ה בתורה  
שכר כל מצוה ומצוה,  
שאילו גילה נמצאו המצות  
מקצתן קיימות ומקצתן בטילות,  
ור' אחא בשם ר' אבא בר כהנא  
טילטל הקב"ה שכר עושה מצות  
בעולם הזה,  
כדי שיהו ישראל  
עושין אותם משלם.

**Source 2**

**Midrash Tanhuma** now continues...

Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai taught, The Holy Blessed One revealed the rewards for just two of the *mitzvot*, and they are, of all the commandments, the lightest of the light and the heaviest of the heavy.[ Or the easiest and the hardest]

The lightest of the light is “you shall surely shoo away the mother bird, and only then take of her young, so that it will go well with you and you shall lengthen your days.”

Deuteronomy 22:7

And the heaviest of the heavy?

“Honour your father and your mother, as the Eternal your God commanded you, so that your days will be long and so that it will go well for you upon the land

that the Eternal your God is giving you”.

Deuteronomy 5: 16

And these two commandments are equal in the rewards to be given in this world.

תני ר' שמעון בן יוחי שתי מצות  
גילה הקב"ה מתן שכרה,  
אלו הן קלה שבקלות  
חמורה שבחמורות.

קלה שבקלות  
שִׁלַח תִּשְׁלַח אֶת־הָאֵם  
וְאֶת־הַבָּנִים תִּקַּח־לָךְ  
לְמַעַן יֵיטֵב לָךְ וְהֶאֱרַכְתָּ יָמִים:  
(דברים כב ז).

חמורה שבחמורות,  
כַּבֵּד אֶת־אָבִיךָ וְאֶת־אִמְךָ  
כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּךְ ה' הוֹדָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ  
לְמַעַן יֵאָרִיכְךָ יְיָ  
וְלְמַעַן יֵיטֵב לָךְ

עַל הָאֲדָמָה  
אֲשֶׁר־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ נָתַן לָךְ:  
הרי הן שוין בעולם הזה כמתן שכרן.

Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai considered ‘hounour your father and your mother’ to be the toughest of all the commandments. Why?

Perhaps it was because the rabbis views this duty as being, essentially, without any limit, as this following story shows.

**Source 3**

**Babylonian Talmud Kiddushin 31b**

Rabbi Tarfon had a mother. When she wished to mount into bed, he would bend down to let her ascend [by stepping on him, and when she wished to descend, she would do so by stepping on him].

He went to to boast about himself in the house of learning, and they said to him “you have not even reached half the honour due to her, has she yet thrown her purse into the sea without you shaming her?”

See Unit 3 Source 1 for an expansion of ‘throwing the purse into the sea.’

רבי טרפון הוה ליה ההיא אמה,  
דכל אימת דהות בעיא למיסק לפוריא –  
גחין וסליק לה,  
וכל אימת דהות נחית – נחתת עלויה,  
אתא וקא משתבח בי מדרשא, אמרי ליה:  
עדיין לא הגעת לחצי כיבוד, כלום זרקה  
ארנקי בפניך לים ולא הכלמתה?

and Your Mother

Honour Your Father

**Source 4**

The Torah speaks of the commandments to honour and revere parents in two separate places.

*Honour*

כִּבֵּד אֶת־אָבִיךָ וְאֶת־אִמֶּךָ  
לְמַעַן יֵאָרְכוֹן יְמֵיךָ עַל הָאָדָמָה  
אֲשֶׁר־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ נָתַן לָךְ.

Honour your father and your mother, so that your days may be long upon the land which the Eternal your God gives you.

Exodus 20:12

*Revere*

אִישׁ אָמוֹ וְאָבִיו תִּירָאוּ  
וְאֶת־שַׁבְּתֹתַי תִּשְׁמְרוּ  
אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם.

Every person must fear their mother and their father and keep my Sabbaths.

I am the Eternal.

Leviticus 19:3

Why does the Torah use two different commands, *kabed*, meaning, honour and *tiyrah*, which means you shall fear or revere?

What other differences do you see between these two versions?

The Torah uses the language of respect and fear, but not of *love*. Think about this.

**Source 5**

Babylonian Talmud *Kiddushin* 31b

Our rabbis taught: What is ‘reverence’ and what is ‘honour’?

‘Reverence’ means that one must neither stand in his [parent’s] place, or sit in his place, nor contradict his words, nor tip the scales [ in a scholarly dispute] against him.

‘Honour’ means, give him food and drink clothe him and cover him, lead him in and lead him out.

ת"ר: איזהו מורא, ואיזהו כיבוד?

מורא – לא עומד במקומו, ולא יושב

במקומו, ולא סותר את דבריו,

ולא מכריעו;

כיבוד – מאכיל ומשקה,

מלביש ומכסה,

מכניס ומוציא.

How do the rabbis understand the words ‘honour’ and ‘revere’?

What do you think about these two categories?

Do you agree with their thinking about these definitions?

**Source 6**

What Might Honour You Father and Your Mother Mean for us Today?

From The DailyTelegraph, 2nd Feb 2010

**People Should be Forced to Look After Parents to Repay them for Free Childcare**

In a lecture, Baroness Deech will suggest it should be enforced as a payback for the 'free' childcare support they provide.

She will say: "In return for all that grandparents do, should there not be an obligation to keep them, and to keep parents, and reciprocate the care that was given by them to children and grandchildren in their youth?"

.....In the latest speech in a series on family law at Gresham College in London she will point to historical precedents for forcing children to care for their parents, such as the 400-year-old Poor Law.

This required sons to support their parents and grandparents throughout their lives, while for daughters the obligation only lasted until they married. This law was repealed in England and Wales in 1948, and in Scotland in 1985.

Lady Deech, a professor of law at Gresham College, will point out that legal obligations still exist in other countries, such as in France where there is "limited duty to support members of the wider family, known as l'obligation alimentaire".

In Singapore, the Maintenance of Parents Act 1995 means that anyone aged over 60, who cannot maintain themselves adequately, "can apply for an order that their child should do so via periodical payments or a lump sum".

Lady Deech warns that, with 20 per cent of pensioners in Britain living below the poverty line, the situation may worsen with "fewer earners to support the growing retired population".