

Unit 3

You Shall honour Your Father and Your Mother

כִּבֵּד אֶת-אָבִיךָ וְאֶת-אִמֶּךָ

Exodus 20:12

Limits

We have learned in the past two study units that our classical teachers regarded the duty to honour our parents as a complex and difficult obligation. We know today, as they knew then, that relationships between children and their parents are not always straightforward. Perhaps the only difference is that today we as a society are far more aware of the problems. What happens when things go wrong? How should a child behave toward a parent who has hurt them? Or who has neglected their role as a parent? How might a parent raise their child so that she or he grows up able to behave towards them with the honour and the reverence that our tradition expects?

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

Source 1

A Foolish Act?

Talmud Kiddushin 32a

Come and hear, they asked Rabbi Eleazer, to what extent is one required to honour one's father and mother. He said to them, to the extent that the father may take a purse of money and hurl it into the sea in front of him, and the child would not cause him shame.

ת"ש, שאלו את ר"א:
עד היכן כיבוד אב ואם?
אמר להם:
כדי שיטול ארנקי ויזרקנו לים בפניו,
ואינו מכלימו;

Source 2

The discussion continues

And if you were to suggest that the purse belonged to the father anyway, so what was the loss to the son...? then, clearly, it must have contained his inheritance!

ואי אמרת משל אב,
מאי נפקא לי' מיניה?
בראוי לירשו

Meaning that the son would really have had a job to hold his anger in check!

What is really happening here?

We do not know why the father is throwing away the purse, and the first part of the discussion does not tell us. We only know what the father does.

Perhaps he does it without any real reason, and this example is about holding one's temper in check when a parent behaves irrationally or foolishly.

Perhaps the father's motivations do not matter, and it is rather the reaction of the son we are asked to observe.

Note, the son is *not* told he shouldn't have a particular feeling, but rather he is

warned against unethical behaviour, shaming his parent.

Source 3

See how Maimonides takes this example, and the way he interprets it, in his legal code.

Mishneh Torah Law of Rebels 6:7

To what extent must one honour one's father and mother?

Even if they took a purse of golden coins belonging to the son, and hurled it, in front of him, into the sea, he should not shame them or show his anguish to them or become angry in front of them, but rather he should accept the written decree and keep silent.

עד היכן הוא כיבוד אב ואם,
אפילו נטלו כיס של זהובים שלו
והשליכו בפניו לים
לא יכלימם
ולא יצער בפניהם
ולא יכעוס כנגדם
אלא יקבל גזירת הכתוב וישתוק

Maimonides is known for his strict insistence on honour for parents at all times. What do you think? Is he asking too much? Or is he right?

Source 4

The Wicked Parent

Menorat ha-Maor, Chapter 9 (Honouring parents) p.18

And just as the father is obliged to teach his son ethics and to lead him on an upright path, and to command him to perform *mitzvot* and good deeds, so too is the son obliged to obey the father and to listen to his words, and to perform the *mitzvot*; this is true even for matters unrelated to the commandments.

But if the father sins, and his intention is to lead the son astray, pushing him away from doing the will of his Creator, such as one who teaches his child to rob or to thief or to kill, or any of the like, or to abandon even one of the *mitzvot*, then the child must remove himself from the father's command, and disobey his advice and not to fulfil any of his father's teachings; as it is said, "they shall not be as their fathers, a stubborn and rebellious generation." Psalm 78:8

וכמו שחייב האב ללמד לבנו מוסר ולהדריכו על הדרך הישרה ולצוותו לעשות מצות ומעשים טובים, כך חייב הבן לשמוע לאביו ולקבל דברו ולעשות מצותו, אפי' שלא לדבר מצוה.

אבל אם הוא האב חוטא, וכוונתו להטעות לבנו ולהדיחו מלעשות רצון קונו, כגון שיורה אותו לגזול או לגנוב או לרצוח, או כיוצא בזה, או לבטל אפי' מצוה אחת מן המצות, חייב הבן לעזוב מצות אביו וימרה את פיו ולא יקיים את דברו, שנאמר וְלֹא יִהְיוּ | כְּאֲבוֹתָם דֹּרֹת סוּרְרָה. וּמְרָה.

Source 5

Not to be Rigid or Inflexible
Sefer Chasidim 595 (954)

They shall not enrage their son so much that he cannot restrain himself but must rebel against them.

שלא יכעיסו את הבן כל כך שלא יוכל להתאפק עד שימרוד בהם.

Source 6

A Parent May Forgo the Honour Due
Maimonides Laws of Rebels 6:8

Even though we have been commanded [to honour our father and mother], a person is forbidden to place too heavy a yoke on his children, or to be too exacting with them in regard to his or her own honour, in case the parent causes them to stumble. Rather, he [or she] should forgive and shut his eyes. For if a father forgoes the honour due to him, his honour is forgoed.

אף על פי שבכך נצטוינו אסור לאדם להכביד עולו על בניו ולדקדק בכבודו עמהם שלא יביאם לידי מכשול, אלא ימחול ויתעלם שהאב שמחל על כבודו כבודו מחול.

This is an interesting new concept. A parent may forgo the honour due to them in order to prevent the child from 'stumbling.' How might a rigid or inflexible parent cause their child to stumble?

We have learned, then, that to a degree, the commandment to honour and revere is balanced by the reciprocity of the relationship. Just as the child must honour their parent, so too must the parent set out to bring up the child within an ethical framework, helping that child to grow into a responsible adult. The parent is warned against demanding so much from the child, that the child may never reach the standards the parent has set. We are not supposed to set our children up to fail.

Think about what you have learned.
What do these texts teach us about our traditions?
What do they have to teach us about ourselves?
And now you have read them, what is their impact?