

Maimonides 613 Series
The Ten Commandments: Fifth Commandment
Honor Your Father and Mother

Exodus 20:12

כְּבֹד אֶת אָבִיךָ וְאֶת אִמְךָ לְמַעַן יָאָרְכּוּן יָמֶיךָ עַל הָאֲדָמָה אֲשֶׁר ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ נֹתֵן לָךְ

Honor your father and your mother in order that your days be lengthened on the land that the Lord, your God, is giving you.

Leviticus 19:3

אִישׁ אִמּוֹ וְאָבִיו תִּירָא וְאֶת שַׁבָּתִי תִשְׁמֹר

Every man shall fear his mother and his father, and you shall observe My Sabbaths.

Maimonides Positive commandment #210

The 210th mitzvah is that we are commanded to honor our parents. The details of this mitzvah are explained in many Talmudic passages, mostly and primarily in tractate Kiddushin. The Sifra says, "What constitutes 'honor'? To give them food and drink, to clothe and cover them, to bring them inside and take them outside."

Maimonides Positive commandment #211

The 211th mitzvah is that we are commanded to fear our parents. We should think of them as we do of someone whom people fear, and who is able to administer punishment, such as a king; and act towards them as we do with someone we fear can do us harm.

Pshat - The Surface Level

Rambam explains that in order to fulfill the commandment to honor one's father and mother, one must give them food and drink, clothe them, take them out, and bring them in. To fulfill the commandment of fearing them, one must not sit in his father's seat, contradict his parents, or call them by their first names. The Sefer haChinuch says that this mitzvah is very logical; one need not be G-d-fearing or even Jewish to understand its importance or reason. By honoring them, you are paying back a debt--your parents gave you everything, starting with life. This is why we do not make a blessing on this mitzvah, because we do not make a blessing on a rational mitzvah. Honoring one's parents is so logical that even Pharaoh understood it: the Rebbe explains that when Moshe went to Pharaoh with G-d's demand, "Let My people go," Moshe told Pharaoh, "Just like you want your children to serve you, so G-d wants His children to serve Him.

Remez - The Level of Hints

In the Code of Jewish Law, it says that even though one is allowed to hit their children in order to discipline them, one should not hit their adult child so that one should not put a stumbling block before the blind. For if a person hits their adult child, their child may one day not be able to take it anymore, and may hit them back and wound them. In this case, the adult child becomes liable for the death penalty. The Friedicker Rebbe stated that a chossid does not hit his child; the Rebbe once wrote that hitting children is counterproductive.

This alludes to our relationship with G-d, our Heavenly Father, Whom we ask not to put us in situations we cannot overcome. We have been in exile so many years; we've been hit, harmed, and oppressed. It's high time He takes us out of exile because we cannot take it anymore. Please, bring us back to Israel and rebuild the Temple.

Drush - The Halachic Level

If a person tells their child to violate the Torah, the child must not listen to them. The verse states “a man should fear mother and father and protect my Shabboses.” The meaning is that one may think that the obligation to honor one's father and mother takes precedence and overrides the obligation to keep Shabbos, but the Torah immediately goes on to command us to keep Shabbos--for your father and mother must also keep Shabbos. Similarly, the Fifth Commandment is preceded by the commandment to keep the Shabbos holy, and only after this, honor your parents.

Sod - The Level of Secrets

The Zohar asks: does the mitzvah of respecting one's mother and father apply only when they are alive? It answers: just as you are obligated to serve them while you are alive, you are obligated even more after their passing. How is this possible? There is no food or drink to give them. The Zohar says that if a child, G-d forbid, goes down a negative path, they embarrass their parents in the next world. If, by contrast, a child works on themselves to become a better person, they are honoring their parents both in this world and the World to Come. The example is given of Rav Elazar, son of the Rashbi, who enlarged the praise of his father in this world and the World to Come. The Rebbe gives a similar insight into the unveiling ceremony: the tombstone is not written only on one day. Every day it is rewritten in your heart. When you are a mensch and serve G-d, you honor your parents. Every day you have the opportunity to rewrite the tombstone and add good things to it. A person can bring true nachas to their parents even after their passing, when their souls repose in Paradise.

Chassidus - The Deepest Level

In the two passages in Torah dealing with this mitzvah, the first states to “honor” your father, then mother; the other says to “fear” your mother, then father. The simple interpretation: normally a child is afraid of their father but not of their mother, and one honors his mother but not always his father, so the Torah reverses this. First you must work hard to (also) honor your father because normally you fear him. Similarly, first you must first fear your mother and not only respect her. In this context, fear denotes distance and honor denotes closeness. The father represents the Written Torah, and the mother represents the Oral Torah. In the creation of a child, the father emits seed. In this seed is the entire child, though it cannot be distinguished. The mother takes the seed and expounds on it for nine months; now there are ears that hear and eyes that see. So it is with the Written and Oral Torahs: the Written Torah with its exact amount of letters and words is very hard to understand. It tells us to keep the Shabbos holy, to put on tefillin, but doesn't tell us how we keep it holy or what tefillin are. We cannot understand it unless we consult the Oral Torah: Talmud, Rambam, kabbalah, etc. The Oral Law is therefore close to us--we internalize it, we understand it. And so the Torah commands us to fear our mother, the Oral Law: we might think that since we understand it and much of it is of rabbinic origin, we do not need to take it so seriously... Therefore we are told, fear your mother (the Oral law). The Written Law is easy to fear, to feel a distance from it. We are therefore commanded to honor it first, even though we don't understand every detail of it. The halacha says that even a bar mitzvah boy who cannot read Hebrew should be called to the Torah and make the blessings over it. How can he make a blessing if he does not understand what he is reading? Because the Torah scroll is the Written Law. No one understands it, even if they think they do. There are so many layers and secrets to the Written Torah that even if we can read it, each one of us is like the illiterate bar mitzvah boy. He knows that this is G-d's Torah, his rightful inheritance and, therefore, truly honors it.

A Story

There are three circumstances in which a person need not respect his parents: if they tell him to violate Torah, if they tell him not to go to yeshivah or to a certain yeshivah, and if they tell him not to marry someone (even though he and she are Jewish)...

I heard the following from my uncle:

A young couple came to the Rebbe for yechidus, telling him that they'd been having trouble with one of their daughters and her faith. The Rebbe asked, "Did you get permission from your parents to get married or not?" The groom replied

that they had not, that his wife's parents were against the shidduch. The Rebbe instructed him to go to the grave of his in-laws and ask forgiveness. "Okay," said the groom, "but they're buried in Hungary!" The Rebbe told him to get a minyan together and go instead to the grave of the Previous Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchok, who was the leader of the generation and could grant forgiveness on behalf of his in-laws. The couple did, and their prayer was answered.

We need to find a balance between the Written Law and the Oral Law, the Shulchan Oruch and the Menschlichkeit, by honoring our parents and, subsequently, our Father in heaven. We will be loved and blessed even more...