

The story is told of three elderly Jewish women sitting on a park bench in Miami Beach, each one bragging about how devoted her son is to her. The first one says: “My son is so devoted that last year for my birthday he gave me an all expenses paid cruise around the world.”

The second one says: “My son is more devoted. For my seventy-fifth birthday last year, he catered an affair for me. And he even gave me money to fly down my good friends from New York!”

The third one says: “My son is the most devoted. Three times a week he goes to a psychiatrist. A hundred and eighty dollars an hour he pays him. And what does he speak about the whole time? Me!”

This humorous story points to the one of life’s inescapable truths: we all have parents. And our relationships with our parents, for better or worse, influence and shape us from the day we are born until the day we die.

The Torah first defines the relationship with the commandment: “Honor your Father and your Mother. There is, perhaps, no other mitzvah whose observance is so complex, or changes so radically over the course of a life-time. Consider the stages:

- An eight-year-old, who honors her parents by following instructions.
- A seventeen year old, who honors his parents by trying not to show disrespect.
- A twenty-five year old, who honors her parents by including them in her busy life.
- A forty-five year old, who honors his parents by emulating their best qualities in his own life.
- A sixty-five year old, who honors her parents by, ironically, becoming their parents, tending to matter of their health and safety.
- A seventy-five year old who honors his parents by honoring their memory.

Indeed, the way we honor our parents changes over the span of our lives and of theirs. And our age is only one factor that colors its observance. In our congregation this morning, perhaps sitting right next to you, is:

- Someone who enjoys a close relationship with parents who live locally, and revels in having grandparents and grandchildren together on a regular basis.
- Someone whose parents are far away, or deceased, and who misses their companionship.
- Someone who just lost a parent and is struggling with that void.

- Someone whose parents are divorced and whose sense of loss is amplified during these holy days.
- Someone whose parents live here nearby, but for whom that relationship has grown entangled and difficult.
- Someone who is trying to help a parent make the transition from her own home to a retirement community.
- Someone who mourns the passing of a parent with whom she had a painful relationship.

What does the Torah mean when it says that we should honor our parents? Are there ever limits to those obligations? And how can we reach a mature adult relationship with those very souls who brought us into this world?

To begin, Jewish tradition defines honoring parents as assuming responsibility for their physical well-being and safety. In Leviticus, however, we are commanded not to honor, but to revere our parents. The rabbis of the Talmud understood revering parents to mean respecting them, protecting their dignity, avoiding assuming their place, embarrassing or shaming them. Thus, when a parent enters the room, says the Talmud, it is customary to rise. When a parent is forgetful, or in danger of transgressing, we have an obligation to be gentle and respectful in our response.

While revering parents is a matter of attitude, honoring parents requires a physical commitment. In generations past, this frequently meant taking aging parents into one's home and providing them with food, comfort, and company.

In a century in which our life span has essentially doubled, however, honoring one's parent has become more complicated. As parents grow older, medical and ethical issues multiply. How can we possibly maintain a parent's dignity:

- When failing health necessitates skilled care for even the most basic bodily functions?
- When dwindling financial resources begin to affect health care decisions?
- When ever-more miraculous medical interventions can extend life, at times, almost indefinitely, making necessary advanced medical directives and living wills?

Such dilemmas are further compounded when siblings are involved, by the different roles they play in time of crisis. Which child lives closest? Which child is best equipped, emotionally or organizationally, to handle the crisis? Which child's family is best able to adapt to the new

demands? How will the children divide the roles of honoring and revering their parents while trying to maintain their own sibling relationships?

Despite these questions, the mitzvah to honor one's parent is not meant to be burdensome. For example, if a parent is financially independent, the child is not obliged to deplete his own resources in their care. She is, however, responsible to see that everything is taken care of. If the child cannot attend to those details personally, he is allowed to delegate that responsibility to another.

It is important to note that, according to Jewish tradition, honoring one's parents does not mean necessarily to agree, to obey, or even to love. Judaism understands that the relationship between parents and children is complicated; either love exists or it doesn't; in any case, it cannot be legislated. Even so, the command to honor and revere can be observed even when love is lacking.

And though the tradition speaks at length, and in detail, about what we owe our parents, these obligations are not absolute. For example, we are not obligated to follow our parents to do wrong. Some years ago, the son of family friends joined the family law firm and discovered his father had not been paying income taxes for years. He had a choice: file a return and thereby expose his father or join his father in evading taxes. Years later the father died, the son was exposed and punished. That kind of fidelity is not what the Torah has in mind. Honoring our parents does not mean allowing them to control our consciences or our behavior.

Nor are we obliged always to support our parents in their disputes with others, though we should avoid disagreeing with them publicly. When I was in High school, a friend led a student strike against the school's administration. The school board was represented by his father. While he was within his rights to disagree with his father, he crossed the line when he publicly sided with his father's opponents. And it didn't help when his photograph at the battlements made the front of the local paper.

All of these Mitzvot apply equally to biological parents, adoptive parents, and step-parents. But what about mothers-in-law? Here the tradition yields, acknowledging, perhaps, that as problematic as one's relationships with one's parents can be, the in-laws can be worse. According to the 12<sup>th</sup> century sage Maimonides, both husband and wife can bar the in-laws from entering the house. If a wife is feuding with her in-laws and they live near by, the husband is obligated to move the family. Such rulings, it should be noted, speak to placing priority on the

needs of one's spouse rather than to excluding one's in-laws. Indeed, Maimonides teaches that if a husband has banished his mother-in-law from the house, he has to make sure the family goes to visit the in laws' in their home.

These Mitzvot of honoring and revering set out how we are expected to treat our parents. But is every parent worthy of honor and reverence? What about parents who are abusive: sexually, verbally, physically, or emotionally? Are children obligated to honor such a parent?

On this question, the tradition follows the great 11<sup>th</sup> century sage, Rashi, who taught that children are exempt from honoring an abusive parent. A parent who violates the sacred trust of being a parent forfeits the rights of parenthood. Maimonides adds that one is still obliged to refrain from striking or cursing an abusive parent, but that if one does, only a reduced punishment applies. Isserles comments that an abused child may not seek to cause the parent pain. And Rabbi David ibn Zimra adds that we have to leave open the possibility that such a parent, if alive, may yet repent.

While the tradition gives us guidelines about how to live with our parents day to day, and in what ways our obligations are limited when that relationship is less than healthy, it also addresses the question: how can we come to terms with our parents once they've gone?

The Torah offers a model of intergenerational reconciliation in the story of Jacob and his son Joseph. Why was there any need for reconciliation? Joseph, you'll recall, was Jacob's favorite son, which caused tremendous family friction. It led ultimately, to his being sold into slavery. Joseph felt anger toward his father. What else could explain that not once during the 21 years he lived in Egypt did he try to contact his father just to let him know he was alive?

What was the source of Joseph's anger? In addition to the parental favoritism that so affected his childhood, the rabbis assumed Joseph felt abandoned by his father. "Didn't you send me away to my brothers knowing the danger, aware of the tension between them and me? And when I disappeared in the field did you do anything? Did you investigate? Did you ask forgiveness for letting me go without escort, without protection?"

With mixed emotions, Jacob prepared his entire household, seventy souls in all, for the journey to Egypt. Along the way, Jacob stopped to offer a sacrifice to the God of his father Isaac. Earlier, Jacob sacrificed, but to "The God of Abraham." Why the change?

The rabbis surmised that in anticipation of the reunion with his son, Jacob was struggling with the memory of his father, Isaac. The rabbis imagined Jacob speaking to God:

Look God, said Jacob. I am sorry about the way things turned out with my family but try to understand! It's not my fault! Look at my father, Isaac! Okay, I wasn't a model parent. I loved one son more than the others, but I came by it honestly. I behaved just like my father who discriminated against me!"

Well, replied God. If that is the case, why are you so ready now to go down to Egypt to enjoy Joseph's beneficence?"

"Look God, just as my father enjoyed the food prepared for him by my brother Esau, I too should enjoy being cared for by my son."

"But why then are you now going to leave the Holy Land of Israel? You're father Isaac never did that!"

"So he didn't leave the land of Israel. But he only had himself to take care of. There is a famine in Canaan, and I have seventy souls to worry about!" "My father," Jacob continued, "only worried about himself."

Clearly, Jacob has much to reconcile with the memory of his father, Isaac. He felt discriminated against when his father favored Esau; he explains his own flaws in light of the treatment he received as a child.

The Midrash that details Jacob's thoughts on his journey to reunite with Joseph depicts a man caught in struggling to make sense of his life. Jacob has come full circle; having identified the flaws he so vilifies in his father, he understands the ways in which he has perpetuated those same flaws in his own family. As the Midrash continues, Jacob remembers that his father, in whom he found so much to criticize, is a man who suffered much, a matter that Jacob himself could scarcely comprehend as a child or a young man.

Jacob's forgiveness is complete when he realizes that his own relationship with God is founded on that of his father's. Without his father's example and blessing, his link with God would be nonexistent. By linking his father's name to God, by making a sacrifice to the God of his father Isaac," Jacob finds that it is possible to leave pain and hurt behind, and to remember Isaac with love.

Joseph's and Jacob's reconciliations with their fathers remind us of our own struggles with our pasts and our futures. We (too) stand in receipt of hurtful things associated with parents as well as pleasant and inspiring ones. We hope for the courage and independence to be

ourselves and yet still desire blessing and approval. There are weaknesses to be overcome and sometimes, just to be endured.

And yet, even as our tradition tells us that the prophet Elijah will someday come to turn the faces of children and parents toward one another, we know that reconciliation between the generations is closer than a messianic dream. It is an important step in becoming fully human.

The story of Jacob and Joseph teaches us: just as Joseph reached out to his father after 21 years, reconciliation is possible between us and our parents even after decades.

The story teaches us that, just as Jacob came to terms with his father Isaac's legacy after Isaac's death, reconciliation is possible, even once our parents are gone.

The story teaches us that Jacob was able to be close to God only once he had come to terms with his father's memory. So, too, for us; a mature and enduring relationship with God requires an encounter with the God not of our ancestors, but of our parents.

As Professor Michael Rosenak put it: "The Torah is not a fairy tale in which everyone lives happily ever after. Torah is about life; it's complicated and its truth is to be found where we find ourselves. Among the things it teaches us is that it is never too late to grow up, to reach the stage of faith wherein self pity is vanquished and where outrage at the complexities of life is left behind. And when one does grow up, learning to cope without hardness of heart or cynicism, one stands before the God of one's immediate parents, not a romantic concept of a never known past, but a slice of one's own imperfect life, the only life for covenant - and for Torah, we have."

***Shanah Tovah.***

Rabbi David B. Cohen  
Congregation Sinai, Fox Point, WI  
Rosh HaShanah 5783 ©2022