

**“Honoring Parents” Is Not for Kids**  
**Shabbat Kedoshim 5779**  
**Rabbi Alex Freedman**

Consider this a friendly reminder that very soon you owe your parent a gift, a visit, or at least a phone call. It’s the very least you can do for the one who brought you into this world. I just can’t wait for *Father’s Day*!

My wife doesn’t like that joke - for some reason - so I only tell her once a year. But not during years like this one when she actually *has a baby*.

Mother’s Day, tomorrow, is all about her and all the other amazing moms in the world who deserve a lot more than just one day.

Mother’s Day and Father’s Day are not Jewish holidays in the technical sense. We don’t light candles, make Kiddush, or add extra prayers. But they *are* Jewish in spirit, showering love and honor to our parents for at least one day each spring.

I want to recognize that while the holidays are days of joy for many families, for people who have lost parents they are also sad. It’s important we remember this.

By coincidence, in the days leading up to these holidays, the Torah speaks of mothers and fathers.

Parashat Kedoshim, which we read today, opens: “*Kdoshim Tihiyu Ki Kadosh Ani Hashem Elokeichem. Ish Imo VAviv Tira’u*” (Lv. 19:2,3).

We all know the famous verse: “You shall be holy for I Hashem your G-d am holy.” What’s the very first instruction that follows? “Everybody, you must each revere your mother and father.” In other words, You want to be holy? Revere your parents. Holiness begins at home.

This Mitzvah reminds us of another well-known verse about parents: “*Kabed et Aviha V’et Imecha*, Honor your father and mother” (Ex. 20:12). That’s from the Ten Commandments.

Revere your parents. Honor your parents. This deep respect for parents leads to holiness because honoring parents is like honoring G-d, for they too are our creators.

As a child, I thought I knew what it meant to honor my parents:

Listen to Mom and Dad.

Keep my room clean.

Keep the toilet seat down.

Don’t complain about the menu.

Don’t embarrass Mom or Dad.

Limit the “Are we there yet?” from the back seat.

When they sit down to watch TV for a few minutes at the end of day, let them watch what they want. (Avi, Elie, Oren, you hear that?)

Some of these really felt like sacrifices. But what did I know? I was in grade school.

But while I was in rabbinical school I learned how the Talmud defines what it means to revere and honor one's parents.

It says revering parents means to not sit in their place, not contradict them, and not argue them down (Kiddushin 31b). In other words, we must each check our contrarian urge - that each of us sometimes feels - to prove our parents wrong.

The Talmud then defines *how* to honor parents:

offer them food and drink,  
help them get dressed,  
provide a place to live,  
and help them walk in and out.

In short, provide them with life's necessities.

At first I didn't understand this text because children don't provide life's basics to their parents; it's the reverse! The Talmud clearly understands that the Mitzvah of honoring one's parents is *not* given to little kids at all. It's given to *adult* children taking care of their *aging* parents. It's given to *you* sooner or later, and one day hopefully far in the future, to your children. While I speak today of caring for parents, I'm including the experience of caring for other relatives or friends.

But - you may object if you're part of the Sandwich Generation - that's immensely difficult. You are busy with your own careers and families. Your dollars are already stretched saving for the kids' college educations, Simchas, and other family needs. You don't have time to be with your parents every day, especially if they're far away. Caring for aging parents is endlessly challenging: physically, emotionally, financially, and time-wise. But it's non-negotiable for the Torah. Simply because they're our parents and they cared for us when we were unable to do so ourselves.

You want to be holy? First revere your parents. Holiness begins at home.

Only now as a parent do I realize what I subjected my parents to when I was a child. I bet the same is true with the other parents here today for the "Blessing our Babies" event, and generally parents of young kids:

The sleepless nights.

The days and nights spent home with a sick child.

The constant messes.

The lack of a social life with friends.

The exorbitant expenses of daycare, school, and babysitters.

The endless worrying.

And I was a good kid! (I think).

If you've forgotten what it's like to be a parent for little kids, you're invited to my house!

Now I know, being a parent is really, really hard. And my kids have no idea at all. None. They're too young to remember these days. In a real sense, they owe me and Laura. And that's why I owe *my* parents. And that's why we all owe *our* parents.

The most challenging aspect of the Mitzvah may not even involve our hands or our wallets but our tongues. The Talmud teaches that Rabbi Tarfon felt proud of himself for honoring his mother.

When she was old, he would serve as her footstep, and he literally crouched down for her to step on his back as she climbed into bed. His colleagues were not impressed. They asked him, "Has your mother ever thrown a purse full of gold coins into the ocean in front of you and you didn't shame her? If you've never been tested in this way, you haven't come close to fulfilling the Mitzvah of honoring your parents" (Kiddushin 31a).

My JTS Talmud Professor Judith Hauptman writes, "In other words, as hard as it may be to feed and attend regularly to the needs of parents, it is even harder to hold one's tongue when dealing with a parent who is 'slipping away.' Not to dishonor parents turns out to be the deeper meaning of the requirement to honor them."

Our relationships with parents can be complicated. They can and do change over time. But the fact that they are our parents and brought us into this world, never changes. So our responsibility to care for them must not waver either.

Rabbi Joseph Telushkin understands this when he writes that while the Torah says we must honor our parents, it never says we must love them. We must love - insists the Torah - ourselves, our neighbors, the stranger, and G-d. But we are not commanded to love our parents. Why?

He writes that "many children, much as they might love their parents most of the time, go through periods of estrangement from them. Thus, what the Torah is offering us is a guideline for behavior even during those periods when we might not be feeling loving toward our parents. Even at those times when we feel our parents have not been fair to us, or even when we have seen them do something we regard as wrong, we are still obligated to honor them." He continues that there might be exceptions in extreme cases, like abuse.

Moving away from the texts and toward real life, I am inspired by the palpable love and devotion that so many of *you* show toward your own parents. I see this most often when one of your parents is at shul, in the hospital, or rehab. The same is true for other relatives or friends. I know those days are sometimes not easy. I am in awe at how committed you are when your parents need your help. Though you are busy with your own daily sprints, you drop everything to be there with your mom and dad. You are there early in the morning, all day, and late at night. If you can't be there, you arrange for someone else to be. You do not allow your parents to be alone, to feel alone, to receive anything less than the best medical attention and care.

And in all of your efforts, I see so much love. Not the *Mother's-Day-card-with-hearts* love, but an unwavering *I-am-always-here-for-you-because-you-were-always-there-for-me* love. I have thought many times, I hope my own children care for me like some of you care for your parents.

Mother's Day and Father's Day are nice but they only fall once a year. For the Torah, revering and honoring your parents are everyday responsibilities.

It's never easy to care for aging parents, relatives, or friends. Today, I want to give you *Hizzuk*, strength and encouragement. As difficult as caring for aging parents is, nothing else is more important. Nothing else conveys more love. Nothing else is more holy.

An unknown writer noted: "You spend years wishing your parents would get off your back, only to realize they're the only ones who ever really had your back."

Shabbat Shalom.