YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

***Bein Adam Le-chavero:* Ethics of Interpersonal Conduct**

**By Rav Binyamin Zimmerman**

For easy printing, go to:

[www.vbm-torah.org/archive/chavero3/04chavero.htm](http://www.vbm-torah.org/archive/chavero3/04chavero.htm)

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

This week’s *shiurim* are dedicated in memory of Rhona Albert *z”l*by Jose and Fay Poliak

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

**Shiur #04: The Godly Element within Parental Care**

In last week's lesson, we noted that although the *mitzvot* requiring special treatment of one's parents express gratitude, there is an additional element as well, a uniquely Jewish message of respecting parents. This may help explain the placement of the mitzva of *kavod* in the Ten Commandments and the placement of *mora* at the beginning of *Kedoshim*. These are two foundational texts, and what we find in them has clear significance. Furthermore, the magnitude and extent of the obligation demand that we seek a fuller understanding of this mitzva: specifically, God's role in the parent-child relationship.

**A Godly Element**

The Talmud (*Kiddushin* 30b) states:

The Rabbis taught: “There are three partners in a person: God, his father and his mother. When one honors his father and mother, God says, ‘I consider it as if I live among this family and they show Me honor.’”

The Talmud (*ibid*.) goes so far as to equate the honor one should accord one's parents with the honor due to God:

The Rabbis taught: “It is written, ‘Honor your father and your mother,’ and it is also written (*Mishlei* 3:9), ‘Honor God with your resources.’ Thus the Torah compares the honor due to parents to that due to the Omnipresent."

Evidently, honoring one's parents is connected to revering God. In light of these sources, a number of commentaries maintain that beyond the element of gratitude, this mitzva promotes developing a proper relationship with God through one's parents.

**The First Half of the Ten Commandments**

Rav Yosef Albo, in his monumental work *Sefer Ha-ikkarim* (Book of Fundamental Principles), notes (Book III, Ch. 26) that the Ten Commandments were given on Two Tablets because they embrace two classes of *mitzvot*. The first five address one's acceptance of God and one's relationship with God, while the second five regard how one must relate to his fellow man.

The Ten Commandments were placed on the Two Tablets to show that these two classes of commandments are distinct and that both are necessary for human perfection: one for perfection of the man as an individual, and one for his perfection as being part of the state.

What is interesting according to this explanation is that the fifth commandment, honoring one's parents, is found on the first tablet, placing it amongst the other *mitzvot* relating to one's relationship with God. Rav Albo is quite aware of this; in fact, he explains that that is indeed the nature of the commandment. He compares this to a king who appears once before his subjects and later relies on the elders among them to transmit that experience to their children. So too, God having revealed himself to mankind at Sinai, relies on the parents to impart the knowledge of this national revelation to their children. If the younger generation does not respect their forebears, they may mistake their lack of seeing God for proof of His nonexistence.

There is no way of escaping such folly except by submitting to parents and receiving their instruction, for the parents will inform their children that they were slaves… Hence, so that the rule of the king and the benefit he conferred upon them through redeeming them from slavery may not be forgotten, the children of every generation must obey their parents and accept their instruction. Hence the fifth commandment teaches respect for tradition, by way of teaching children to follow the tradition of their fathers… as one cannot conceive the truth of the past without being obedient to the tradition of the fathers and the wise men of one's religion.

Thus, to a certain degree, God does not only collaborate with one’s parents in order to create a child as a physical being with a spiritual essence; He must continue to partner with one's parents in order to ensure that future generations will be aware of the spiritual tradition they have been born into.

A similar idea is mentioned by the Keli Yakar (*Shemot* 20:12), who also notes that the name of God appears only in the first five commandments, further indicating that the *mitzvot* in the first half of the Ten Commandments focus on one's relationship with God.

This mitzva concludes thefirst five commandments, which discuss honoring God. It is for this reason that in these first five commandments it says “Lord, your God,” whereas there is no mention of God in the last five commandments, which discuss obligations between individuals. Although honoring one’s father and mother is essentially an obligation between people, it is also related to God since there are three partners in [the creation of] a person: God, the father and the mother. If I respect my father and mother who are the ones who created my physical body – which will eventually wither and die – how much more I should honor my Father in Heaven, who grants me the superior component, my eternal soul!

Although the Keli Yakar focuses on the fact that proper treatment of one's parents by definition requires proper treatment of God as well, Rav S.R. Hirsch (*ad loc*.) captures the idea originally presented by Rav Albo regarding one's obligation to his parents as being essentially a means of knowing God.

The Exodus from Egypt and the Giving of the Torah are the two foundations on which the nation of Israel is built. It is they that serve as the basis for our submission to God as the Ruler and Master of our destinies and lives. These two events are historical facts, and we know them and recognize them to be historical truths. However, the only guarantor of their truth is tradition, and the basis for tradition is the faithful transmission to children by their parents and the willing acceptance of it by the children from their parents… It emerges from this that respect for one's parents is the precondition for the eternity of the Jewish people. Through the father and the mother, God imparts to the child not only his basic existence, but the link to the Jewish past that enables him to be a Jew… They transmit to him the lessons of Jewish history and the teachings of Torah, so that he too will bequeath them to his children when the time comes… Indeed, the role of parents in Jewish life is pivotal, and for this reason the Torah assigns it a place of prominence by declaring in the Ten Commandments, "Honor your father and your mother."

**Bridging Two Worlds: Relating to God and Relating to Humanity**

While these commentators note the placement of this mitzva in the first of the Two Tablets, it is also significant in that it is the fifth and final mitzva in this group, the one that is immediately followed by the various interpersonal *mitzvot* that are found on the second tablet.

While one's relationship with one's parents may reflect and be built upon one's relationship with God, it is still essentially an association with fellow human beings. The way in which one treats one's parents is liable to reflect both on one's relationship with God as well as one’s connection to others.

This idea may form the basis of the Ramban's explanation (*Shemot* 20:12) of the verse in the Ten Commandments mandating *kavod* for parents. He explains why this mitzva appears after the ritual obligations:

Having finished mentioning one's obligations towards the Creator Himself, He now commands us regarding the treatment of fellow created beings. He begins with the father, for in relation to his offspring, he is akin to a creator, being a partner with Him in the forming of the child. God is our first Father, and the male who begets us is our last father. For this reason, God says (*Devarim* 5:15): "Honor your father and your mother, as Lord, your God, has commanded you.” This means: just as I have commanded you concerning My honor, so do I command you concerning the honor of those who have joined Me in your formation. The Torah does not even describe the honor one must accord their parents for it may be derived from the honor we must show our first Father, Blessed be He… The Sages have already said that honoring parents is likened to honoring God.

Thus, parents play an essential role in teaching their progeny the proper way to serve God, but perhaps more important is their role in testifying to God's existence, as stated by Rav Yosef Albo above.

**Remembering the Experience at Sinai through the Parental Chain**

Furthermore, let us consider the Moshe’s warning about Sinai (*Devarim* 4:9-10), also known as Chorev:

Only beware for yourself and greatly beware for your soul, lest you forget the things that your eyes have beheld and lest you remove them from your heart all the days of your life. Rather, make it known to your children and your children's children, the day that you stood before Lord your God at Chorev, when God said to me: “Gather the people to Me and I shall let them hear My words, so that they shall learn to fear Me all the days that they live on the earth, and they shall teach their children.”

The Ramban (*ad loc*.) explains the nature of this mitzva to recall the Sinai experience and to impart it to one's children in every generation:

This is meant to be a negative commandment, warning the Jewish people neither to forget the revelation at Sinai nor to remove it from our hearts; rather, we must convey it to our children.

He further charges in the form of a positive commandment that we should inform all our children, from generation to generation, of everything that happened.

The Ramban continues by arguing that there is tremendous benefit to be gained by fulfilling this commandment. In fact, God ensured that one could cast no doubt upon the veracity of the Torah by teaching the entire people as a whole, instead of just teaching Moshe, even though Moshe was known for his signs and wonders. This national revelation allows the Jewish people to hear a "first-hand account" of Sinai, through the tradition handed down by parent to child in every generation.

When we shall also transmit the matter of the revelation to our children, they will know that the thing is true without doubt as if all the generations had seen it, for we would not testify falsely to our children to cause them to inherit "vanity and things wherein there is no profit"(*Yirmeyahu* 16:19). They will not doubt at all the testimony we will give them; instead they will believe with certainty that all of us saw it with our eyes, and likewise they will believe all that we tell them.

Essentially, the Ramban maintains, an entire nation would not lie to their children as they tell them the events which they witnessed at the Giving of the Torah. Therefore, when they impart the instructions to their children and educate them to live their lives based on its teachings, the truth of God and the Torah will be an eternal part of Jewish tradition. God collaborates with parents in the formation of a soul, and they partner with Him to impart to future generations the tradition of Godliness which is at the heart of Jewish life.

With this in mind, it is very understandable why according proper respect to the generation of the parents also ensures that this message is retained.

In fact, as we noted in two lessons ago, this connection between revering God and revering parents may also be connected to revering Shabbat, as an example of the principle that under all conditions, God's law must be maintained. The Meshekh Chokhma explains that the mitzva of reverence "involves also the revelation at Sinai and the law Moshe received from God which have been handed down through the generations, from father to son; without filial respect and trust, the Torah would disappear from Israel. This mitzva could therefore be deemed to be of overriding importance, even in relation to Shabbat, and therefore the Torah must teach us that under no conditions does reverence for one's parents outweigh His commands.”

This idea of connecting the special treatment accorded to one's parents with their part in transmitting the Jewish tradition is captured in a well-known story told of Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetsky:

On a flight back to the United States from Israel, Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetsky was accompanied by his son Rabbi Avraham Kamenetsky and by one of his granddaughters. Sitting in the next seat to Reb Yaakov was one of the heads of the Histadrut (the Israeli labor federation). The two discussed many issues, among them difficult passages in Tanakh, throughout the flight. All the while Reb Yaakov’s son and granddaughter came regularly to see if he needed anything. Reb Yaakov’s seat-mate couldn’t contain his amazement. “Rabbi,” he said, “I rarely see my grandchildren, and certainly do not enjoy that type of relationship with them; I don’t think I ever would receive such loving treatment from my children and grandchildren. Tell me, Rabbi, what is the secret of your close connection with your family?”

Reb Yaakov replied, “For those who believe in Darwin and his theory of random evolution, every successive generation is more refined and developed than its predecessors. Why, then, should the young honor the old? However, in our tradition, every earlier generation is closer to the Sinai experience and the source of our specialness as a people. My children and grandchildren look up to me because it is through me that they have a connection to our people.” (Rabbi Moshe Lieber, *The Fifth Commandment*, p. 25)

With all these sources in mind, we can return to some of our original questions. While gratitude is an essential element of these *mitzvot*, it is only a portion of the overall picture. As we have seen, the placement of honoring parents in the Ten Commandments puts it at the culmination of the section of ritual *mitzvot* and as the bridge to the interpersonal ones. The parental role is the one most directly related to that of God, and honoring one’s parents allows one to truly worship the Almighty.

In fact, based on these sources, it is very understandable why the mitzva of *mora* appears in *Kedoshim*. This mitzva is essential for understanding how God's holiness is immanent in our very existence.

Before we look at the halakhic ramifications of these different elements, let us consider the view of the Rav, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik.

**Three Elements: Pragmatic, Ethical, Ontic**

The Rav (*Family Redeemed,* pp. 130-147) notes that there are three different motifs that are bound with the *mitzvot* of parental care. First, there is the pragmatic: the Torah recognizes the helplessness of an individual in terms of his inability to remain self-sufficient his entire life. For this reason, one basis of all *mitzvot bein adam le-chavero* is the interdependence of individuals. The Torah is not embarrassed to recognize man's utilitarian nature: just as without parental care a child is helpless, so too without the care of the child as the parent ages, the elderly will be left without the wherewithal to care for themselves. Although the rules of parental treatment are moral, they are not divorced from the fact that they promote the interests of the doer. One who takes care of his parents will in turn be cared for by his children in his time of need.

This pragmatic element recognizes that God created man as a needy being who cannot gratify all his physical drives without employing the help of others. The basis of *chesed* is the utilitarian’s realization that to be charitable is practical and useful. (See Year 2, Lesson 1; viz. *Family Redeemed*, pp. 134-137.) God created the need for a society of individuals dependent on each other. Therefore, He charges all with interpersonal duties, in order to ensure that these needs are met.

Thus, honoring and revering parents is rooted in a realization, the selfish awareness that just as the child cannot make it through infancy and youth without his parents, they need him in their period of infirmity, just as he will need the assistance of his children in his elder years.

However, there is a second element to the utilitarian motif, that of ethical idealism. The recognition that parents take care of the needs of a child may lead to one of two responses. As mentioned, on the pragmatic level, the child may realize that everyone needs help at times, and therefore it is worthwhile to care for others in order to receive the same treatment in one's time of need. However, this recognition may also inspire a completely different response, an unselfish display of gratitude towards those who have cared for one over the course of many years.

To this end, the child must feel indebted to his parents for all their selfless care on his behalf in a way that recognizes a new ontic perspective: "The self is not the exclusive property of the person himself. The benefactor contributed to the development of myself, my talents, abilities and skills, possibly more than myself…”

With this in mind, it is possible to understand the tremendous importance that the Torah places on the *kavod* of one's parents as denouncing narcissism. One must realize that all achievements, as great as they may be, involve others who help one bring out them to fruition.

Simultaneously, the concept of gratitude teaches that "no action, inward or external should be exclusively I-directed. Any concern for oneself points at the same time toward the other." As one embraces his dependent nature, his focus is not on the first element, that we all need each other's help at some time or another; rather, one he feels his incompleteness without others. Therefore, one will generally desire to help and repay those who have made him who he is. Gratitude therefore involves awareness of others.

Thus, being grateful towards parents expresses one’s awareness of their role in his creation, in the literal sense of the word; that recognition requires care and concern on the part of the child.

While the utilitarian motif exists, it is only a part of the obligation. In fact, there are times when this element is utterly absent, as an individual may not have the opportunity to raise children of his own, while one is bound to help parents even if they were not caregivers to the infant and the child.

The general mitzva of loving one’s fellow as oneself ([see Year 1](http://www.vbm-torah.org/chavero.html), Lessons [28](http://vbm-torah.org/archive/chavero/28chavero.htm) and [29](http://vbm-torah.org/archive/chavero/29chavero.htm)) mandates the prevention of harm and the commission of good for another. Above and beyond that, it requires that one do for another whatever one might do for himself. Nevertheless, there are limits, as the Talmud (*Bava Metzia* 62a) teaches:

Two are travelling on a journey, and one has a canteen of water; if both drink, they will [both] die, but if one only drinks, he can reach civilization. Ben Petura said, “It is better that both should drink and die, rather than that one should behold his companion's death,” until Rabbi Akiva came and taught: “'And your brother shall live with you’ (*Vayikra* 25:36) — your life takes precedence over his life.”

Rabbi Akiva deduces that the obligation of tending to others applies only after taking care of one's own life.

This dispute is cited in the Talmud regarding the obligation of loving one's fellow that applies to all Jews: “your life takes precedence.” Regarding a parent, however, the obligation goes even further. One cares for a parent's needs even when their needs have not been met, as they put the needs of their parents before their own needs. This obligation is not only rooted in the first two motifs of the self-interest of kindness and the Jewish ideal of gratitude; it recognizes the parents’ part in the formation of one’s personality, as well as the higher calling that the parents' existence imparts to him.

This third element requires a union of love, ontic oneness with one's parents; this leads to devotion indistinguishable from one’s self-preservation.

These three motifs express the complex underpinnings of this basic requirement. Nevertheless, as we have noted previously, there are in fact two *mitzvot* here, *kavod* and *mora*, honor and reverence. How do they relate to each other? Is there a difference between showing respect to one’s parents out of gratitude and doing so out of a realization of their partnership with God? These are the questions which we hope to answer next week.