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/chavero3/05chavero.htm](http://www.vbm-torah.org/archive/chavero3/05chavero.htm)

**Shiur #05: The Holiness of *Mora***

**The Ramifications**

In last week's lesson, we saw a number of sources which point to God's collaboration with parents in the creation of a child as the reason for the extra respect towards them which the child must show. This stands in contrast or in addition to the reason for the mitzva provided by the Chinnukh: the need to show gratitude for everything one's parents have provided.

Now we may ask the following question: is the special honor to be accorded to one's parents an interpersonal mitzva, requiring an added show of gratitude, due to the great care parents have provided for their children; or is the mitzva of honoring one's parents essentially a ritual obligation, wherein the parents are the conduit for honoring God?

This question is not merely academic, but one with halakhic ramifications. Different conclusions in specific cases may help us shed light on the distinction between these two rationales and the nature of this mitzva*.*

**Two Types of Waiving**

Let us consider the issue of *mechila*, waiving. Halakhically, *mechila* may refer to forgiving a debt, forgoing one's honor or forgiving someone for an offense. How is *mechila* applicable when it takes the form of waiving parental rights of respect and deference?

If showing *kavod* is an interpersonal mitzva directed at one's parents, then logically a parent should be able to forgo this honor. On the other hand, if honoring one's parents is a ritual obligation, a *mitzva bein adam la-Makom,* wherein the parents are merely the address of the obligation as a means of showing honor to one's heavenly Parent, then logic would dictate that the parents aren't capable of waiving this, as the honor is not really due to them but due to God.

The Talmud comments on this issue (*Kiddushin* 32a):

A father who has waived his honor, his honor is forgone.

The fact that the Talmud states explicitly that a parent can remove the obligation of a child to honor him seems to be unequivocal proof that the mitzva of *kavod* is an interpersonal mitzva, due to the debt of gratitude owed to one's parent.

However, this is not necessarily true. A number of commentaries argue that this principle derives not from the fact that parents own their honor, as it were, but from the following concept: "fulfilling the desire of a person is the way to honor them." (See Shulchan Arukh Ha-rav in a different context, 128:60.) Even if the honor is ultimately due to God, the way to express *kavod* is by deferring to the parents’ wishes. If one’s parents are fully capable of dressing or feeding themselves and the child insists on doing these actions for them out of a sense of obligation, this is not an act of *kavod*, because the parent doesn't want it. Therefore, the Maharam Schick and others say no proof can be brought from the father's right to forgo his honor, as even if honoring one's parents is a *mitzva bein adam la-Makom*, it would still be dependent on the parents' wishes.

Furthermore, a number of Rishonim point out that even if the father forgoes his honor, it is still proper to honor him as much as possible (Tosafot Ha-Rosh *ad loc*.) and to treat him with a modicum of respect. For instance (Ritva *ad loc*.), the child may not rise for the parent upon seeing him, but the child should at least rise slightly when the parents comes close. (See also Shitta Mekubbetzet, *Bava Metzia* 32a, s.v. *Od*.)

The question regarding a different type of *mechila* is also discussed in this context. The Rambam (*Hilkhot Teshuva* 2:9; see Mishna *Yoma* 8:9) codifies that Yom Kippur, as well as the standard process of repentance throughout the year, only serve to absolve a person of sins between man and God, but not of those between man and his fellow. In order to atone for the latter, an individual must first right the wrong by either making restitution for the loss or fixing the damage caused, and then one may proceed to obtain verbal forgiveness from his fellow.

If we classify honoring parents as a *mitzva bein adam la-Makom*, then if one doesn't wrong his parents but is too busy to show them the proper honor, would he be obligated to repent to God only or must he also ask his parents for forgiveness?

The Minchat Chinnukh (33) actually entertains the possibility that one might only need to repent to God, as the parents are only the object of this *mitzva bein adam le-chavero*. However, logic dictates that here as well, even if the parents are only the object, failure to satisfy their wishes is defined as violating this mitzva, and their forgiveness must be sought when one has been deficient in honoring them.

**What Type of Parents?**

Logically, one may also assert that the reasoning behind the mitzva should determine whether everyone’s parents must indeed be honored. If gratitude is the basis, the mitzva may be applicable only to parents who deserve to be thanked. Nevertheless, in some cases, it appears that the mitzva pertains even to parents who have been deficient in their parental responsibilities.

This may be evidence that the source of the obligation is not gratitude; however, some view it as an indication that both elements of the mitzva in fact exist: the mitzva of *kavod* is both a mitzva to honor one's parents for what they have done and to use their stature as a means of recognizing and connecting to God, our Heavenly Father. For instance, the Meshekh Chokhma (*Devarim* 5:15; see also *Vayikra* 19:3) takes note of the peculiar lengthy language that describes the mitzva of *kavod* when recorded in the second description of the Ten Commandments. There the Torah sates:

Honor your father and your mother, as Lord, your God, has commanded you; so that your days may be lengthened and so that it shall be good for you upon the ground that Lord, your God, gives you.

The Meshekh Chokhma begins by explaining that this indicates that one must honor their parents even if their parents have abandoned them and are not deserving of excessive gratitude. Then he continues:

Amongst the Jews there is another basis for respecting parents, for they raise their children to achieve “true” success by transmitting to them the *mitzvot* and the Jewish tradition from generation to generation…Therefore [the Torah] says that even if one’s father did not transmit to him the correct traditions, he should still honor him “as Lord, your God, has commanded you” – for you [who were present at Mount Sinai] are in a generation where the children also heard directly from God and do not require their parents’ tradition, as you heard the Oral Law directly from Moshe. Yet, despite this, “Lord, your God, has commanded you” to honor your father and mother.

The divine connection mandates a level of honor even for ostensibly undeserving parents (though the exact parameters are beyond the purview of this discussion).

However, the Talmud (*Bava Kamma* 94b) states that if a man steals an animal and he then dies, his children must return the stolen animal to preserve their father's honor, but only if the father had repented before his passing. As the Tur (*YD* 240) notes, this seems to be compelling evidence that one need not honor a parent who is sinful. How is it, then, that the Rambam rules (*Hilkhot Mamrim* 6:11) that the mitzva of *kavod* applies even to one whose parents are sinners?

Rabbi Mordechai Willig explains that the Rambam only requires honoring sinful parents during their lifetime, as one can only prove from the Talmud that no obligation exists towards sinful parents after their death. How does this relate to our two rationales? Gratitude might understandably be limited to a parent's lifetime, but recognition of a parent’s collaboration with God applies even after death, as long as the parent was a true partner with God and lived an ultimately righteous life. (See <http://www.torahweb.org/torah/2000/parsha/rwil_lechlecha.html>)

Similarly, one might be free from obligation of servicing a parent’s needs if the parent is already cared for by others, as this is akin to waiving parental rights. Nevertheless, the Rambam (*op. cit.* 11) rules, regarding an elderly parent, that one should ideally care for the parent personally, and only if unable to do so, may one employ another. This ruling may be based on the fact that showing gratitude by ensuring that a parent’s needs are met may be accomplished through another, but paying respect to one's parents as partners with God should, at least preferably, be done personally.

***Kavod* versus *Mora***

While there are sources that indicate that *kavod* of one's parents actually entails both these elements, there is room to advance this idea one step further: perhaps the two different *mitzvot* of parental care are actually rooted in these two different motifs. As noted, a child carries two responsibilities to his parents, *kavod* and *mora*, honoring and revering.

The Talmud (*Kiddushin* 31b) states:

The Rabbis taught: “What is meant by honoring parents? Honor means serving food and drink, helping them get dressed, welcoming them when they enter and escorting them when they leave the home.”

The Rabbis taught: “What is meant by revering parents? Reverence means neither standing in his customary place, nor sitting in his seat, nor contradicting his words, nor passing judgment over his father’s opinion.”

While the placement in the Torah of the mitzva of *kavod* might to point us in the direction of focusing on its ritual content, the nature of the obligation pushes us in the opposite direction. The nature of *kavod* requires one to tend to one’s parents' physical needs. The most basic background for the mitzva is the debt of gratitude one has towards one's parents; just as they provided physically for their child, the child should do the same for them. True, honoring one's parents may also include an element of recognizing the parental role in transmitting the tradition; however, the focus of the mitzva is the gratitude displayed to these transmitters. For this reason, the Talmud can learn the obligation of honoring one's parents from the behavior of the non-Jew from Ashkelon, Dama ben Netina, whose devotion to his father prevents him from waking his father even at the cost of a major potential windfall. The grateful nature of *kavod* is understood by all of humanity.

Understanding that the mitzva of *kavod* addresses the physical needs of one's parents makes it difficult to view it as a means of deepening our relationship with God. It would appear to be an interpersonal mitzva of gratitude. The mitzva of *mora*, however, goes beyond this. For this reason, we may entertain the idea that although *kavod* is rooted in gratitude, coupled with an appreciation of God's place in the family, *mora* is the mitzva of revering the partners in one's creation, focused on God, the third partner in the birth of a child. By revering the first two tangible partners, one recognizes where one comes from, expressing the appreciation one has for God as well.

While *kavod* is placed at the epicenter of the Ten Commandments, *mora* also has a place of pride, as the first mitzva mentioned in *Parashat Kedoshim*. Evidently this mitzva is a guiding force in elevating a Jew to the level of *kedusha*. In order to live in this world a life of holiness, one must be cognizant of one’s origins and realize the potential for *kedusha* there.

While *kavod* leads one to embrace the Jewish ideal of gratitude, *mora* brings an additional element, connecting through one's parents to the third partner in one’s creation, God Himself.

The Talmud (*ibid.*) records:

Whenever Rav Yosef heard the footsteps of his mother, he would say: “Let me rise because the Divine Presence is coming.”

While the mitzva of *kavod* ensures we take care of our parents' needs, *mora* reminds each and every member of the Jewish people to know his or her place. Indeed, the child may one day collaborate with the divine if God is generous enough to grant that child the gift and responsibility of becoming a parent.

**Frame of Reference**

Understanding *mora* as underscoring the connection between one's parents and God might also explain why it is found in *Parashat Kedoshim*.

The Or Ha-chayim (*Vayikra* 19:3) explains how the mitzva of “*Kedoshim tihyu*,” often associated with maintaining control regarding forbidden sexual unions, relates to the commandment to revere one's parents. He cites the Sages’ tradition (*Sota* 36) that Yosef was able to resist the temptation of Potiphar's wife because a vision of his father’s face appeared before him. It was his father and all he symbolized that allowed Yosef to retain his holy inner character at the critical moment of extreme temptation. The Or Ha-chayim writes:

I have heard it said in the name of Kabbalists (*Kav Ha-yashar,* ch. 2) that the image of one's father's face strengthens the forces of sanctity within his child and helps him resist becoming a victim of temptation involving sexual abominations.

One's parents are the conduit through which they come to be knowledgeable about tradition and committed to its teachings. Therefore, one tempted by sin, especially regarding an illicit relationship, should try to use the image of one's parents to remain true to their ideals. The Or Ha-Chayim goes on to say that this is also a factor in the shame a parent may feel when a child leaves the spiritual path of tradition.

**Rooted in the Divine Relationship**

Rav Soloveitchik notes that the added element of *mora* may be understood in light of the Rambam's codification (*loc. cit*. 7) of the Talmudic delineation of the obligations of *kavod* and *mora*.

To what degree does the mitzva of honoring one's father and mother extend? Even if one's parents take his purse of gold and throw it into the sea in his presence, he should not embarrass them, shout, or vent anger at them. Instead, he should accept the Torah's decree and remain silent.

To what degree does the mitzva of fearing them extend? Even if one was wearing fine garments and sitting at the head of the community, if one's father and mother came, ripped the clothes, struck him on the head and spit in his face, he should not embarrass them. Instead, he should remain silent and fear the King of kings who commanded him to conduct himself in this manner. Were a mortal king to decree something which would cause him even more suffering, he would not be able to move a limb in protest. Certainly, this applies when the command emanates from He Who spoke and caused the world to come into existence as He desired it.

While both obligations express an advanced degree of care and concern, there is a clear difference between them. A parent’s wasting a child’s money might be unpleasant, but under certain circumstances the child might resort to similar acts and would waste his own money without a sufficient reason; therefore one must continue to honor one’s parents in such a case. However, the obligation of *mora* applies even when parents completely embarrass a child, even though one would never knowingly subject himself to utter humiliation.

Rav Soloveitchik explains the distinction. *Kavod* recognizes equality, treating another in the manner one would expect to be treated. The mitzva of *mora* goes one step beyond, requiring not only equal love but preferential treatment, not only tolerance of the whims of a parent but patience and perseverance while dealing with a parent who has completely lost control and the ability to discriminate between right and wrong. This *mora* involves sacrifice, self-denial for the sake of the parent, serving him with an unqualified commitment, even suffering on his behalf.

The mitzva of *mora* means not only equality, but "reverence, which in turn expresses itself in self-giving to the parent, in placing him above myself, in assessing my relatedness to him as something sacred and indispensable for my own being, in experiencing a unique dependence upon him which can only be understood if placed within a metaphysical transcendental realm" (*Family Redeemed*, p. 152).

The only question left is the following: what is the reason for such selfless devotion? As we noted above, the requirements of *kavod*, while extreme, are understandable: one must love another as oneself, so demanding that a child do for his parents whatever he might want for himself is logical, even if in the current situation he would have chosen something else. However, Rav Soloveitchik notes, this concept of reverence involves a selfless care almost incompatible with human existence, as it itself is borrowed from the religious realm.

In truth, although we have been translating "*mora*" as reverence, it is also the term used to express fear. When describing one of the emotions man is supposed to have in relation to God, the Torah says:

Lord your God shall you fear, Him shall you serve and in His name shall you swear. (*Devarim* 6:16)

The commentators note that there are at least two different types of fear or reverence one must experience in their relationship to God.

The first is fear of punishment, expressed by the Rambam in his *Sefer Ha-mitzvot* (Positive 4):

He has commanded us that we are to fear Him and that we are to venerate Him, so that we may not by like those unbelievers who walk in the stubbornness of their hearts and in a spirit of contrariness. Instead, we are to live in fear of His punishment at all times.

However, there is also a second level of *mora*, awe of the exalted and majestic. This is the experience wherein one is not only cognizant of the power of God to punish, but rather "the feeling of awe arising from one's encounter with the infinite, mysterious, unknowable, and wholly other." It involves an awareness of something far beyond the human experience. This is described by the Rambam elsewhere (*Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah* 2:2): when one obtains a glimpse of God's greatness, one realizes the gap between his lowly self and the infinite. "When he ponders these matters, he will recoil affrighted and realize that he is a small creature, lowly and obscure… standing in the presence of Him Who is infinite in His knowledge…"

Regarding one's relationship with God, both elements of *mora* are involved. However, man is not supposed to live in fear of his parents, only awe. This involves a relationship of admiration, profound adoration and awe. This is the meaning of revering one's parents, as they arouse within one’s soul a craving, a longing, a deep fearful love, a tremor and a great joy.

This is an inner relationship, rooted not in the realm of interpersonal relationships but in the transcendental realm of a higher consciousness, by which we become aware of the mystery of being. It enables the realization that when in their presence, one does not only stand beside one's parents, but one feels his absolute dependence on a Higher Being. How does one reconcile the varying concepts of reverence? The Rav writes (*loc. cit.* p. 155*)*:

The answer is implicit in the question and has already been suggested: the *mora* relationship to a parent must not be torn out of the context of relations to God. There is a secret unity beneath the surface diversity. Relationships and relatedness to a parent hides in its essence man's longing and craving for God; there is a final oneness in our surrender to parent and God. In fearing the parent, one stands in awe and tremor before God himself, before the "Before," the source of his existence; in giving parents respect and reverence one adores and worships God.

This distinction explains nicely why *mora* is placed in *Parashat Kedoshim*: to be holy and come close to God, reverence for one’s parents is essential. This dovetails with a point made by the Shulchan Arukh Ha-Rav (128) in a different context, regarding the *kohanim*, the priestly descendants of Aharon. He explains that they may waive the honors due to them, but not elements of their *kedusha*. *Kavod*, as mentioned earlier, is dependent upon the will of the one being honored, and the honoree may waive this entitlement because one pays homage to an individual best by fulfilling the individual’s wishes. However, elements related to *kedusha* brook no *mechila*, for the holiness of the individual is not dependent upon that person’s whim.

Similarly, parents may waive their *kavod*, as that is due to them as an interpersonal obligation; however, the option of *mechila* is not applicable to that which mandated as *mora*. This appears in *Parashat* *Kedoshim* as the first mitzva of *kedusha*, indicating that it reflects the reverence we must show to God. It is a way of expressing the *kedusha* that the partners in our creation share, bequeathing us our spiritual legacy. We hope that the parent-child relationships amongst the Jewish people will serve to impart the message of holiness that only the mitzva of *mora* can convey.