

## Honor Thy Mother and Thy Father

*Shabbat Acharei-Kedoshim 5777*

May 5, 2017

Rabbi Barry Block

Spoiler alert: In her *D'var Torah* tomorrow morning, Sydney will compare this week's Torah portion to the Ten Commandments. Some of those teachings, which seem identical to the "big ten" are in the selection that Sydney has prepared for tomorrow; others are in Isabella's reading tonight.

Whenever a commandment seems to be repeated, the rabbis look for any difference between one iteration and another. Tonight, we read, "You shall each revere your mother and your father." In the Ten Commandments, the wording is different: "Honor your father and your mother." In one case, the verb is "revere;" in the other, "honor." In the Ten Commandments, the father is listed before the mother; in this week's portion, the Holiness Code, mother is named before father.

The great commentator Rashi teaches that the variations are related. Children, according to Rashi, are more likely to revere or "fear" their father than their mother. Therefore, since one is less likely to be in awe of one's mother, she comes first this time. Rashi makes the opposite argument when it comes to "honor." Offspring are more likely to honor their mother "because she speaks to them in such a way as to keep them on good terms with her." The duty to honor the father is emphasized first to balance the natural inclination.

And how are we to fulfill these commandments? Yes, parents point to these verses to emphasize that their young children are obligated to do as their parents say, but I'm not so sure they're right. First, there's a perfectly good Hebrew word for "obey," and the commandment isn't to "obey" father and mother, mother and father, neither in the Ten Commandments nor in the Holiness Code. We must also consider who may be commanded. For that, we need look no farther than the celebration this Shabbat. As Sydney becomes a Bat Mitzvah, a young Jewish adult, she takes on the obligation to observe commandments for the first time in her life. Yes, young children should obey their parents. And yes, *mitzvot* apply to children, although their parents are responsible for seeing that they fulfill those requirements until reaching Bat or Bar Mitzvah. In short, honoring or revering one's parents is a duty that the Torah places on adult children, not young ones.

Rashi makes a clear distinction between "honor" and "revere." "Fear and reverence," he writes, mean "not sitting in one's parents' place" and "not

contradicting them.” Honor, on the other hand, means “making sure they are fed, clothed, and shod; taking them where they need to go and bringing them home.”

Now, my boys know that they can sit at my place at the breakfast counter – that is, if they don’t want to move when I wish to take my seat. Still, I doubt that a favorite chair is the point of the commandment.

Early this week, Rabbi Hara Person, who was our special guest speaker two weeks ago, went to a conference in her official capacity as Publisher of Reform Jewish Press. However, in this particular assembly of social activists, mostly young adults, Rabbi Person found that she was known neither as book producer or leader of a rabbinical organization. Instead, she was “Liya Rechtman’s mom.”

To be sure, Liya didn’t transgress any commandment, but suppose she had been at the conference in our nation’s capital instead of thousands of miles away in Israel. Suppose that somebody had come up to inquire about one of her mother’s publications, and Liya pushed her mother out of the way, inserting her views or answering questions posed to Rabbi Person. Perhaps that’s what Rashi means by “sitting in one’s parent’s place.”

Truth be told, we’re all guilty of such transgressions from time to time. Teenagers are, for sure. Nobody was ever dumber than the parent of a teenager. Just ask me. I’m told I’ll get smarter when my kids are out of college. For now, I’m dismissed and dispatched to “Urban Dictionary,” whenever I ask Daniel means by using a word in a context that doesn’t make sense to me.

As our parents age, the issue is more fraught, and no longer a laughing matter. How does an adult child know when to step in, to help a parent decide to stop driving? To move out of the beloved home and into a safer environment? To turn over financial management?

Here, the two commandments, “revere” and “honor,” begin to meet.

“Honor your father and your mother,” ultimately requires adult children to care for their aging parents. Actuaries will tell you that we are likely to have to care for our fathers sooner than our mothers, so perhaps that’s the reason for the order there. Either way, the burden can be a heavy one.

How do we care for our parents without compromising their autonomy? Or, put Rashi’s way, how do we honor the older generation, taking care of them, without “sitting in their place?”

How do we care for our parents and still live our own lives? The rabbis taught, nobody was ever commanded to destroy themselves in order to perform the *mitzvot*. The balance is delicate. Some older people won't allow their children to care for them, worried that they will be a burden. Often, those adult children would be more comfortable if their parents would let them do more. And then, of course, there are those who are only too happy to be a burden – "I took care of them when they were young; now, it's their turn to take care of me."

How do we see to our parents' needs when we have difficult relationships with them? Not everyone is fit to be a parent. Some are abusive – physically, sexually, or emotionally. Some have committed crimes so heinous that their children must absolutely be absolved of any responsibility for them. Other situations are less clear. An adult child recalls a childhood marred by a parent who was too often physically or emotionally absent, perhaps abusing substances, perhaps just too self-absorbed to provide what a child needs. An adult child justifiably nurses resentment: A parent favored one child over others. Parents divorced and remarried, reorienting their priorities away from the children of the previous marriage. In cases such as these, I remind adult children that the commandment is limited. One is not required to see to every need and request of aging parents, but only to assure that they have adequate food and clothing, shelter and transportation.

Our Arkansas Jewish Community is blessed. No family must go it alone, as they struggle to meet the needs of aging parents. Even more importantly, no Jewish senior need navigate the process of aging at all – with or without the involvement of their children. That's because our Jewish Federation of Arkansas, under the visionary leadership of Marianne Tettlebaum, has developed an outstanding department -- led by a priceless professional, Cindy Brown – to see to our social service needs, particularly those of seniors. I can't tell you how many times a week I communicate with Cindy, to assure that we are helping individuals and families in tandem.

Some fifty years ago, in what many viewed as a socialist plot that would destroy medicine, Congress established Medicare, and President Johnson signed it into law. Our nation's most beloved safety net is founded on the principle that we are all responsible for caring for the "parents" of our society, the elders of this country.

As individuals and families, as a congregation and Jewish community, as a society and as a nation, we share a collective obligation to respect our mothers

and to honor our fathers, according them their due and assuring that their most basic needs are met. That's not only the right thing to do, it's in God's "Top Ten," worth repeating in the Code that teaches us how to be holy, as Adonai our God is holy.

Amen.