
פרשת יתרו

פרק כ פסוק יב

כִּבֵּד אֶת־אָבִיךָ וְאֶת־אִמְךָ לְמַעַן יֵאָרְכוּן יָמֶיךָ עַל הָאֲדָמָה אֲשֶׁר־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ נָתַן לָךְ:

מושג

הַשְׁנָה הַפְּתוּב כְּבוֹד אָב וְאִם לְכַבֹּד הַמְּקוֹם

Translation:

The Torah equated honoring parents to honoring Hashem.

Explanation:

Our knowledge of Hashem and acceptance of the Torah is dependent on our Mesorah, the chain of transmission reaching back to Har Sinai. This chain is made up of links that are created each generation by parents who teach their children and by teachers who teach their students. The מצוה of honoring and revering parents is rooted in facilitating the creation of these links, becoming the very foundation on which our service of Hashem is based. The Torah thus highlights the command to honor and revere our parents, as only through this will we accept their teachings and continue the accurate transmission of our heritage.

Looking in the Pasuk:

We are troubled by the fact that the commandment to honor parents is included in the first five commandments, all written on the first לוח, which are all between Man and God, where it would seem to be better suited to be included on the second לוח, which relate the commandments between Man and his neighbor. We also seek to understand the connection between the fourth and fifth commandments and why both were taught in מרה, before the giving of the Torah on Har Sinai. Finally, the addition of the words את אביך and את אמך, are understood by הו"ל to add an obligation to honor stepparents and even one's older brother. We must explain why they should be afforded this honor even though they have no role in our creation.

NOTES

Our Musag is taken from the גמרא in (ל:): which equates honoring, fearing and even cursing ones parents to doing so to God.

ת"ר נאמר כבד את אביך ואת אמך, ונאמר: (משלי ג) כבד את ה' מהונך, השווה הכתוב כבוד אב ואם לכבוד המקום. נאמר (ויקרא יט) איש אמו ואביו תיראו, ונאמר: (דברים ו) את ה' אלהיך תירא ואותו תעבוד, השווה הכתוב מוראת אב ואם למוראת המקום. נאמר (שמות כא) מקלל אביו ואמו מות יומת, ונאמר (ויקרא כד) איש איש כי יקלל אלהיו ונשא הטאו, השווה הכתוב ברכת אב ואם לברכת המקום ...

The גמרא justifies this by stating that one's parents and God are considered equal partners:

וכן בדין, ששלשתן שותפין בו. ת"ר, שלשה שותפין הן באדם: הקב"ה, ואביו, ואמו, בזמן שאדם מכבד את אביו ואת אמו, אמר הקב"ה מעלה אני עליהם כאילו דרתי ביניהם וכבדוני.

With this we might explain a difficulty with the groupings of the עשרת הדברות. The מדרש teaches us that the commandments were divided on the two לוחות with five on each side. A cursory examination leads us to the conclusion that they were divided by the first five consisting of מצות בין אדם למקום and the second five consisting of מצות בין אדם לחבירו. This seems to hold true for every commandment except for the commandment of כיבוד אב ואם. However, according to our Musag we may explain that honoring one's parents should be included in the בין אדם למקום category, as honoring them is equated with honoring God.

The problem with this explanation is we are still left to ponder why this should be so. Why should honoring parents be equated with honoring God? And, while the גמרא did seek to explain this by telling us that they are all considered equal partners, how can one possibly equate the role of God in our creation to that of our parents?

One explanation is that the מצוה of כיבוד אב ואם is not an end in itself but simply a means by which one may come to honor God. By fulfilling the commandment to honor one's parents one will learn the trait of הכרת הטוב; recognizing and repaying the favors one has done for you. By appreciating all my parents have done for me, from giving me life to caring for my every need, I will come to appreciate all that Hashem has done for me. Thus we are not equating honoring parents to honoring God, but rather stating that fulfilling the former will lead to the latter. For this reason the commandment was placed with the other מצות בין אדם למקום.

However, this explanation seems a bit lacking. For surely the trait of הכרת הטוב is an end within itself and not only a means to acknowledging our debt to Hashem. And, if so, we return to our question of why it is not considered a מצוה בין אדם לחבירו. Additionally, if we are to honor our parents simply as a means to learn הכרת הטוב, how are we to understand the following parts of the חז"ל which parallel יראת אביו ואמו to יראת ה'? Are we to say that we fear our parents in order to learn the trait of fear so that we will fear Hashem? And finally, perhaps most problematic to the above explanation is the גמרא in (קג.) מסכת כתובות which teaches:

כבד את אביך ואת אמך את אביך זו אשת אביך ואת אמך זו בעל אמך, וי"ו יתירה לרבות את אחיך הגדול

The גמרא learns from the fact that the פסוק did not say כבד אביך ואמך but rather added the words את אב and an extra ו, that one is required to honor their stepparents and their older brother. If the מצוה of כיבוד אב ואם was simply an exercise in הכרת הטוב it would be impossible to explain why the Torah would command one to honor one's stepparents or older brother as one does not necessarily owe a debt of gratitude to either.

There is a different explanation, offered by Rabbi S.R. Hirsch, which seems to answer all of our questions. In his commentary on Chumash he writes;

Not on the results of our research into Nature, but on the actual events in the history of our people by which God became revealed to us, and made His will revealed to us, did God found our Jewish Knowledge and acknowledgment of Him, as the One Who directs our fate,

and Who is to be the guide of all our acts. ...It was only the historical revelations of God in the history of the Jewish people, which brought back the monotheistic idea to mankind for their understanding of nature and history. **מצרים** and **תורה** these two basic facts in the history of the Jewish People which constitute the basis for our submission to God, as the Guide and Director of our history and our lives, these facts are actual historical truths. But the knowledge and acknowledgment of historical facts depends solely on tradition, and tradition depends solely on the faithful transmission by parents to children and on the willing acceptance by children from the hands of their parents. So that the continuance of God's whole great institution of Judaism rests entirely on the theoretical and practical obedience of children to parents, and **כיבוד אב ואם** is the basic condition for the eternal existence of the Jewish Nation. Through father and mother, God gives the child not only physical existence, they are the actual bond that joins the child to the Jewish past, that allow it to be a Jew or Jewess, and they are those who are to hand over to them the Jewish mission in knowledge, morals and education. The child is to receive history and the Law from their hands so that ultimately he can transmit both to his children. In the same way that it looks up to its parent, are its children some day to look up to it. Without this bond the chain of generations is broken, the Jewish past is lost for the future, and the Jewish nation ceases to exist. That it is worthy to have this place in the Ten Commandments indicates this importance of parents and allows the Torah to say: **כבד את אביך ואת אמך** למען יאריכו ימיך על האדמה אשר ה' אלקיך נותן לך.

Rov Hirsch goes on to explain that this commandment is so fundamental to the entire transmitting of Torah that Hashem saw a need to present it to the Jewish people at **מרה** before they received the Torah, as the **גמרא** in (נו:): **מסכת סנהדרין** teaches: **אף על כיבוד אב ואם נצטוו במרה**. Just as the **מצוה** of **שבת** was given at **מרה**, due to the fact that it is fundamentally crucial to our keeping of all future **מצות**, so **כיבוד אב ואם**.¹

The central role of parents as the conduit by which we are to learn the values of our heritage is highlighted by Rov Hirsch in the **מצוה** of **פרו ורבו**, in which he explains what the word **ורבו** comes to add:

The parents are to multiply themselves by their children, they are to repeat themselves in their children. The children are to be the replicas not only of the physical bodily traits of their parents, but also of their spiritual, intellectual and moral selves. Accordingly, the parents have to plant the spiritual and moral best of themselves in their children, and carefully nurture and mature its development. In short, they have to form, educate and cultivate them...

The meaning of forming educating which is innate in the root **רבה**... even the name **רב** and **רבי** come from the same conception. For the true business of a teacher is in fact nothing but to make the pupil a replica of his own spiritual and intellectual self. Only by taking over **רבו** does **פרו** attain its high, moral importance for the building of mankind. And even from this point of view, extra-matrimonial births are the grave of mankind, for although children there do indeed get born from parent, they lack their bodily moral and spiritual education, the parental love, the parental home in which, and by which alone, the child blossoms to and Man to an Adam.

¹ **שבת** thus becomes the day in which we are to reflect on our values and spiritual selves, and **כיבוד אב ואם** becomes the conduit through which we are to learn those values. The significance of the Torah's placing the two commandments next to each other now becomes apparent. (דברים פרק ה' פסוקים יב וטז ורש"י שם)

We can now easily understand why the מצוה of ואם כיבוד אב ואם is placed together with the מצות בין אדם למקום, for this מצוה is that which facilitates any and all future relationships that we will forge with God. Additionally, we understand why this מצוה is not restricted to only biological parents, but extends to stepparents and even to an older brother. For any person in a position of influence carries the role of a transmitter of values, and thus must be respected so that their words and actions become the messages and models we will aspire to internalize and adopt. Thus, it goes without saying that our Rabbis and teachers most certainly will fall under this commandment², as the רמב"ם codifies in the משנה תורה (הלכות תלמוד תורה פ"ה ה"א):

כשם שאדם מצווה בכבוד אביו ויראתו כך הוא חייב בכבוד רבו ויראתו יתר מאביו, שאביו מביאו לחיי העולם הזה ורבו שלמדו חכמה מביאו לחיי העולם הבא³... ואין לך כבוד גדול מכבוד הרב ולא מורא ממורא הרב, אמרו חכמים מורא רבב כמורא שמים...

We can now understand our Musag השוה הכתוב מוראת אב ואם and השוה הכתוב כיבוד אב ואם לכבוד המקום, for honoring and revering our parents is the pathway by which we will come to honor and revere God. Our parents, and by extension all those who seek to act as transmitters of our heritage, become the bedrock of our מסורה which can only be faithfully and accurately transmitted if we treat them with honor and reverence.

Questions for Further Thought:

- A. What obligation should one have to honor and revere a parent who is not educated and does not take any part in your Torah education?
- B. What do you think is the connection between honoring and revering our teachers to accepting their teachings?

² Which would go a long way in explaining why the Torah does not explicitly command one to honor or revere Rabbis. Rather, Rov Hirsch would argue since the command to honor parents is due to their role as teachers, most certainly this would apply to Rabbis as well (see following footnote).

³ The Ramban here is quoting a משנה in בבא מציעא (פ"ב מ"ב) which teaches:

אָבֹת אָבִיו וְאִמֹת רָבוּ, שֶׁל רָבוּ קוֹדֶמֶת, שְׁאָבִיו הֵבִיאוּ לְעוֹלָם הַזֶּה. וְרָבוּ שֶׁלְמָדוּ חֲכָמָה מִבִּיאוּ לְחַיֵּי הָעוֹלָם הַבָּא.

This however seems to contradict the explanation of Rov Hirsch, as the משנה does not connect the honor afforded to parents to their roles as transmitters of morals and values, relegating that role to Rabbis and teachers. Parents, according to the משנה, seem to only deserve honor due to their role as providers of life. I believe that Rov Hirsch would answer that the משנה is not saying that the *reason* we honor parents is because they brought us into this world. Rather, the point of the משנה is that parents are not necessarily the primary source of moral education, frequently acting only as secondary transmitters in their roles as biological parents. Therefore, the משנה continues, it stands to reason that if our secondary teachers demand our honor, our primary teachers most certainly would be included in the commandment. One could go so far as to argue that the משנה is actually a proof to Rov Hirsch's explanation. For if the reason we honor our parents was only because they gave us life, then the reasoning of the משנה, learning a קל וחומר רבו would be faulty. One could easily deflect this reasoning by claiming that perhaps only a parent who was the source of life deserved honor. However, a teacher, who only takes that which the parent created and improves the product, so to speak, would not necessarily deserve honor. Even though it is true that רבו does more for a person than his parents, this does not prove that he most certainly deserves honor, since what he does is fundamentally different than what a parent does! Thus only if we claim that the reason the Torah demands that we honor parents is due to their role as transmitters - even though they might be only secondary transmitters - can we continue to argue that we most certainly must honor our primary transmitters.