



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

VAYIKRA > Kedoshim

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May 14, 2016

Kedoshim

**Timeless Jewish Parenting
Advice**



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

Parents are everything to us. Without them we wouldn't exist.

Yet, many a child has spent countless an hour in therapy because of a complex relationship with his or her parents.

This week, two mitzvoth are juxtaposed in our Torah portion: respecting parents and observing Shabbat. What does this teach us?

The Talmud considers this question via the following conundrum: Say a parent instructs a child to transgress the Shabbat. On one hand, G-d obliges the child to respect a parent; on the other hand, G-d commands the child to observe the Shabbat. What (in addition to therapy) should the child do?

The Talmudic answer (and its mystical interpretation) contains profound soul-stirring earth-shattering lessons for us as parents and children of our parents.

The great Chassidic Master, the Sfot Emet, takes this Talmudic discussion to another level by asking, “If G-d is our father in heaven – what does it mean to respect and revere Him? And what does that teach us about respecting and revering our parents here on earth?”

TIMELESS JEWISH PARENTING ADVICE

1. Parental Warning (Joke)

Abe was 75 years old and had a medical problem that needed complicated surgery. Because his son Jacob was a renowned surgeon, Abe insisted that Jacob perform the operation. On the day of his surgery, as he lay on the operating table waiting for the anesthetic, Abe asked to speak to his son.

“Yes Dad, what is it?” asked Jacob.

“Don’t be nervous, son,” said Abe. “Do your best and just remember – if it doesn’t go well and something should happen to me, your mother is going to come and live with you and your wife.”

2. Jewish Mother (Humor)

Ah, you have to love parents.

Perhaps this is why the parent-child relationship (especially between Jewish mother and child) has become the butt of so many jokes. Like this one:

Three Jewish mothers are sitting on a bench at the local shopping center talking about (what else?) how much their sons love them.

Sadie says: “You know the Chagall painting hanging in my living room? My son, Arnold, bought that for me for my 75th birthday. What a good boy he is. See how much he loves his mother.”

Minnie says: “You call that love? You know the Mercedes I just got for Mother’s Day? That’s from my son Bernie. What a doll.”

Shirley says: “That’s nothing. You know my son Stanley? He’s in psychoanalysis five days a week. You know what that costs! And what does he talk about? Me.”

Why do children often have strange and strained relationships with their parents? How is that the most natural of all relationships – that of child and parent, parent and child – could ever become so dysfunctional? Is there a reason? Is there a cure?

As we discover in this week's Torah reading, the answer is yes.

3. Holiness, Parental Reverence and Shabbat Observance

This week's Torah reading is called *Kedoshim*, which in Hebrew is the plural form of "holy." And we don't need Sherlock Holmes to deduce that within its holy words lies the secret to holiness.

And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying: "Speak to the entire congregation of the children of Israel, and say to them, 'Holy [Kedoshim] you shall be holy, for I, the Lord, your God, am holy [kadosh].'"¹

And how to be holy? The very next verse offers this clue:

"Every man shall revere his mother and his father, and you shall observe My Sabbaths. I am the Lord, your God."²

Thus, two ingredients – revering parents and observing Shabbat – seem to be the fulcrum of holiness. What does that mean and how exactly is it central to being holy?

4. A Few Questions

The commandment to "honor your father and your mother,"³ is one of the Ten Commandments. But here, another commandment is added –

¹ Leviticus 19:1-2.

² Leviticus 19:3.

³ Exodus 20:12. Deuteronomy 5:16.

as well as honoring our parents, we must also revere our parents. What is the difference between honoring and revering parents, and why does the Torah, find it necessary to institute a second mitzvah of revering parents in addition to honoring parents?

Both in the Ten Commandments and in this week's Torah portion, the mitzvah of honoring/revering parents is juxtaposed with the mitzvah of Shabbat. Indeed, in our portion the two mitzvot are actually in the same verse. So what is the connection and how does it make us holy?

And while we are pondering the answer to those questions, we might as well also ask: What lessons does this teach us in being better parents, better children, better Jews, so that we honor and revere all the people around us and all the things that are important?

To uncover the deep layers of wisdom that are embedded here, let us examine two fascinating selections from the Talmud, the encyclopedia of the Jewish Oral Tradition.

5. The Talmud

In explaining the difference between honoring and revering one's parents, the Talmud states the following (as paraphrased by the great 11th century Torah commentator Rashi⁴):

What constitutes "reverence"? One must not sit in one's parents' place, interrupt them, or contradict them. And what constitutes "honor"? One must give one's parents food and drink, clothe them and put on their shoes, and escort them when they enter or leave.⁵

Now, in explaining the connection between parents and Shabbat, the Talmud⁶ states that if a parent instructs a child to violate the Shabbat, the child must not listen to the parent and must observe the Shabbat.

⁴ Rashi's commentary to Leviticus 19:3.

⁵ Torat Kohanim 19:3. Kiddushin 31b.

⁶ Bava Metziah 32a.

Indeed, this principle applies to all mitzvot. If for whatever reason a parent tells a child to violate any of the commandments of the Torah, the child's obligation not to contradict the parent's wishes is suspended.

This principle is derived from the juxtaposition of the mitzvah of Shabbat and the mitzvah of revering our parents. Why? Because although we are obligated to honor our parents, all of us – our parents included – are obligated to keep mitzvot, including Shabbat – the obligation of honoring our parents cannot override the obligation that we and our parents have to honoring G-d on Shabbat.

But then the question arises: Why is this lesson learned specifically from *Shabbat*? The Torah could have used any mitzvah to get the point across that, if a parent instructs a child to transgress, the child should not listen?

6. Good Parenting and Shabbat

The fact that the Torah juxtaposes parenting and Shabbat would suggest that the secret to good parenting lies in Shabbat, and the secret of Shabbat lies in good parenting.

Indeed, the Zohar⁷ – the classic work of Jewish mysticism – states that this is so. Quoting Rabbi Yosi, the Zohar goes so far as to say that Shabbat observance and parental reverence are one and the same, and that those who revere their parents will keep Shabbat.

What can this mean? After all, we see many people who revere their parents and who do not necessarily keep Shabbat...

Regarding this point, the mystics⁸ teach something beautiful:

⁷ See Zohar II, Kedoshim, 81b-82b.

⁸ See Sfat Emet, Kedoshim.

To create a child takes the dual partnership of father and mother and it takes a third partner, G-d. Each of the partners provides an essential material element in that creation, and in addition, G-d provides the essential spiritual element, the soul. The soul is a pure divine spark, and it is not created in partnership with parents. Indeed, the entire purpose of this triangular partnership to create the body is so that the divine soul may have a “container” in which to reside and a vehicle with which to transform this earth.

Shabbat and the six days of the week are similarly constructed. The six days of the week are a dual partnership between matter and spirit, heaven and earth, working together in order to sanctify, refine and bring G-dliness into this world. Shabbat, however, is called a “holy day” – *Shabbat Kodesh* (the holy Shabbat) – it is a day of pure G-dliness, not a material partnership between matter and spirit. The entire purpose of this partnership is so the divine soul of Shabbat may have a vehicle with which to transform this earth.

Thus, if a parent instructs a child to desecrate the Shabbat, the parent is undermining the child’s entire reason for being. A parent’s sole purpose is to be a partner with G-d in forming the child’s body so that it may serve and project the soul. The workweek’s sole purpose is so that it may serve and project Shabbat.

The greatest gift a parent could give a child – indeed, the very reason why G-d partners with parents in the first place – is to teach the child and infuse the child with Shabbat – with soul, peace and tranquility.

To this end, the Zohar states, when parents act in this divine way, living up to their very purpose and partnership with G-d, their children will revere them and observe the Shabbat as well.

Thus, observing Shabbat and revering parents are one and the same. They both are about elevating the soul over the body, spirit over matter.

7. Personal Lesson

To sum up:

The Talmud teaches that we revere our parents when we:

- do not sit in their place
- do not interrupt them
- do not contradict them

And we honor our parents when we:

- provide them with food and drink
- clothe them and put on their shoes
- escort them when they enter and leave

In addition to the literal meaning of these prescriptions, let us analyze their deeper meaning (with the Zohar as our guide), applying all these principles and obligations to our Heavenly Father, G-d:⁹

Do not sit in your Parent's place

What is G-d's place? The Prophet Isaiah states: *The whole earth is full of His glory.*¹⁰ If G-d is our father, and the entire universe is G-d's – i.e. our father's place – then we cannot sit in our father's place; rather, everywhere in the world we must find and discover our father's place and ensure that the space we take up never replaces or displaces it. Rather, every space should reflect the divine space.

This is achieved by ensuring that our lives are synchronized with G-d's divine plan in a seamlessly synergetic way. And it begins with parents educating children to this truth and vision.

When we are one with our parents' vision, we revere them and never take their place. When we are one with our father in heaven, we can never take His place, only reveal it.

⁹ Zohar ibid 82a-b.

¹⁰ Isaiah 6:3; cf. Psalms 72:19.

Do not interrupt or contradict your Parent

Reverence is not interrupting or contradicting G-d. When we hear a divine message, we do not interrupt it with anything prosaic or mundane and definitely do not contradict or defile it with anything profane.

Provide your Parent with food and drink

Honoring our parents means providing them with food and drink. How do we do that for G-d? G-d calls an offering to G-d “my offering, my food.”¹¹ The sages use this interesting expression: “Israel sustains their Father in heaven.”¹² We “feed” G-d with righteous sustenance through our deeds. We know that Torah is compared to water, and its commandments are compared to the limbs and sinews of the body. When we study Torah (water) and fulfill its commandments (body sustenance), we are honoring our father in heaven by providing Him with “food and drink,” so to speak.

Clothe your Parent

Honoring our parents also means clothing them. Thought, speech and action are our garments – the way we interact with the world and projects ourselves to others. Our mitzvot also create “garments” to enclothe the divine presence in our lives. By aligning our speech and action with G-d’s will and word, we are (in effect) “clothing” G-d and allowing His divine message to walk this earth.

Escort your Parent

Honoring our parents means escorting them as they enter and exit a room. In life, we enter and leave many different places; we enter into partnerships and hopefully make lucrative exits; we enter and leave different stages of life. Perhaps the way we honor G-d is when, in everything we enter and leave, G-d is with us. We escort G-d in all our paths and journeys, by infusing our lives with divine purpose and acts of nobility and virtue.

¹¹ Number 28:2.

¹² Zohar III 7b. Yalkut Shemoni Pikkudei 418. See Shir Hashirim Rabba 1:9.

8. Parenting and Psychology (Joke)

Max, a student at Harvard, calls his mother on Mother's Day. "Hi Mom," says he. "I thought you should know that I've just switched my major and I'm now taking psychology. I want to be a psychologist. Oh, and happy Mother's Day!"

"Oy vey," exclaims his mother. "I suppose you'll now be analyzing everyone in the family."

"Oh no, Mom," Max replies. "We don't do abnormal psychology until next semester."

9. Conclusion

Sadly, we live in a time where many family dynamics are complex, abnormal, and unhealthy; parents and children, children and parents are all too often at odds.

By juxtaposing and conflating parental reverence and Shabbat observance, the timeless Torah provides timely solutions to these complexities. It teaches us that Shabbat/holiness is synonymous with wholesome families, and healthy and functional relationships between parents and children.

When father and mothers do everything in their power to convey Shabbat, soul, purpose, peace and tranquilly – a transcendent element – to their children, their children will come to honor and revere them, seeing their parents as divine messengers.

This in return will also ensure that children observe Shabbat and pay it forward for generations to come. For honoring and revering one's parents is the same thing as honoring and revering Shabbat – both happen when we recognize our purpose on earth to fuse matter and spirit.

The result of all this is holiness. As the Torah states, "*Kedoshim tiyhu, holy shall you be, ki kadish ani, for holy am I, Hashem Elokeichem, the L-rd your G-d.*"

A holy and peaceful Shabbat Shalom to all!

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