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(by Rabbeinu Bachya ben Asher - 13<sup>th</sup> Cent)

## Honoring Father and Mother

HONOR THY FATHER AND THY MOTHER, THAT YOUR  
DAYS MAY BE LONG UPON THE LAND WHICH THE ETER-  
NAL THY G-D GIVETH THEE.<sup>1</sup>

This is one of the rational commandments of the Torah. Scripture, however, has not explained the precise meaning of this honor. We must therefore derive its requirements from the honor we owe our One Supreme Father, concerning which we are directed in the commandment, *I am the Eternal Thy G-d.*<sup>2</sup> The Eternal is thus stating: "Just as I have first commanded you with respect to My honor, so do I command you concerning the honor of your father and mother, my partners in your formation." His intention is to establish that just as we are commanded to acknowledge the One Father and His existence, so we are obligated to acknowledge our father and mother, who begot us. Just as one is charged by G-d, *Thou shalt have no other gods before Me,*<sup>3</sup> in order not to deny Him, one is similarly obligated not to deny his father and mother by saying that some other person is his parent. Just as it says, *Thou shalt not take the Name of the Eternal thy G-d in vain,*<sup>4</sup> thus prohibiting swearing in G-d's Name falsely or in vain, one is

(1) Exodus 20:12. This is the fifth of the Ten Commandments, and is engraved at the end of the first Tablet which deals specifically with our duties towards G-d. Honor of parents is thus the bridge leading from duties towards G-d to those we owe to our fellow man, being the theme of the commandments mentioned on the second Tablet. Thus, only where parents are honored can a society safe from crime exist and the blessing of longevity be assured. (2) *Ibid.*, Verse 2. (3) *Ibid.*, Verse 3. See Ramban, Commentary on the Torah, Exodus, pp. 318-319. (4) *Ibid.*, Verse 7.

similarly obligated not to swear by the life or name of his parents falsely or in vain. Furthermore, one must not serve his parents for the sake of an eventual inheritance, for some honor which may be derived from such service, or for any other selfish consideration.

There are many duties entailed in this commandment, as our Rabbis explained. Thus they said,<sup>5</sup> "One is obligated to give his parents food and drink, to clothe them, to shelter them, to take them out and to bring them in." The expression *honor* also applies to financial assistance for it is said, *Honor the Eternal with thy substance*.<sup>6</sup> One can honor G-d by financial means in giving charity to the poor and by setting aside heave-offerings, tithes,<sup>7</sup> gleanings, the forgotten sheaf, and corners of the field. Similarly, one is obligated to give money to his parents for their needs, if they have none. If the son has no money [to spare for this purpose], he must strive and even toil to support them. The Sages commented,<sup>8</sup> "The duty towards a parent is greater than that towards G-d. Concerning G-d, it is said, *Honor the Eternal with thy substance*<sup>6</sup>—if you have the means to do so. However, regarding the honor due a father and mother, Scripture does not express the obligation in that way, for even if you must go begging from door to door, you are obligated to provide them with support."

In Tractates Kiddushin<sup>8</sup> and Abodah Zarah,<sup>9</sup> the Sages related: "Rabbi Eliezer was asked to define the extent of the duty of honoring a father and mother. He replied, 'Go and see what a non-Jew, Dama the son of Nesina of Ashkelon, did to honor his father. The Sages once desired to purchase from him certain precious stones for the High

(5) Kiddushin 31 b. (6) Proverbs 3:9. Thus one should use his wealth in a manner approved by G-d, such as helping the poor, etc., as the text continues, or in a manner bestowing glory to the Creator. Similarly, one is to use his bounty in a manner to provide for the welfare and dignified way of life of his parents. (7) This is a general term which includes the first tithe of the Levites, the second tithe which had to be consumed by the owner in Jerusalem, and the poorman's tithe. See Ramban, Commentary on the Torah, Exodus, pp. 399-400, and Deuteronomy pp. 311-312. (8) Kiddushin 31 a. (9) Abodah Zarah 23 b-24 a.

Priest's ephod.<sup>10</sup> They offered him a profit of 600,000 dinars. Rav Kahana taught that the sum was 800,000. However, the key [to the safe where the stones were kept] was under the pillow upon which his father was sleeping. Since Dama would not disturb his father, the sale was lost. In the following year, Dama was rewarded by the birth of a red heifer<sup>11</sup> among his herds. The Sages of Israel came to buy it for him. He said to them, 'I know that you will pay any amount of money I ask for the red heifer, but I only wish you to make good the money I lost on account of [the honor I gave to my] father.' "

One who honors his father and mother thereby honors G-d, and one who spurns them dishonors the Glory of G-d. The Sages expounded in Tractate Kiddushin:<sup>12</sup> "Scripture has compared the fear of parents to the fear of Heaven. In the case of parents, it states, *Every man shall fear his mother and his father*,<sup>13</sup> and it is further said, *Thou shalt fear the Eternal thy G-d*.<sup>14</sup> Scripture compares the blasphemy of parents to that of Heaven. It is stated, *And he that curseth his father or his mother*,<sup>15</sup> and it is further said, *Whoever curseth his G-d*.<sup>16</sup> In the case of striking, the comparison is impossible.<sup>17</sup> It is furthermore logical that in respect of honor and fear, these three partners in the formation of the child—G-d and the person's father and mother—should be alike."

The Sages commented in Tractate Niddah,<sup>18</sup> "There are three partners in the formation of a child: G-d and the child's father and mother.

(10) Exodus 28:6-12. The ephod was a kind of apron which fastened at the back. The precious stones were inset upon its two shoulder straps. (11) For the significance of the Red Heifer, see Numbers 19:2-22. Since the birth of a red heifer is a natural rarity, the owner could of course ask any price for it. (12) Kiddushin 30 b. (13) Leviticus 19:3. (14) Deuteronomy 6:13. (15) Exodus 21:17. (16) Leviticus 24:15. (17) "It is impossible to compare parents to Heaven in this respect, since smiting cannot apply to Heaven" (Rashi, Kiddushin 30 b). The thought suggested is as follows: Surely the comparison between G-d and parents cannot be completely alike, but logically they should be equated, for each has a share in the creation of the child, and therefore to honor and fear one's parents is to honor and fear G-d. (Maharsha, *ibid.*). (18) Niddah 31 a.

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The father provides the white substance out of which are formed the bones, sinews, nails, brain, and the white of the eyes. The mother provides the red substance for forming skin, flesh, blood, hair, and the black substance in the eye. G-d provides the spirit, the soul, physical appearance, the faculties of sight, hearing, and speech, the ability to walk, knowledge, understanding and reason." There are thus a total of ten things which are given each child by his father and mother, each of whom provide five. G-d provides ten, a quantity equal to the sum provided by both parents.

[The Sages cited instances to demonstrate the eminence accorded to this precept.] "When a man honors his father and mother, G-d says, 'I consider his act as if I were living among them and he honored Me.'"<sup>12</sup> Expressing the weightiness of the obligation to honor parents, Rabbi Tarphon<sup>19</sup> often said,<sup>20</sup> "Happy is the one who has not seen his parents,"<sup>21</sup> for it is impossible for a child to entirely fulfill his duty towards his parents, and he might thus be found at fault and guilty of sin on account of his parents. However, one who has not seen his parents and thus never incurred the obligation to honor them, will not be held accountable on the day of judgment. Finally, the Sages relate,<sup>20</sup> "As soon as Rav Yoseif heard the sound of his mother's footsteps, he would say, 'I will rise before the Divine Presence that is approaching.'"<sup>22</sup>

(19) Rabbi Tarphon was one of the leading Tannaim in the second century, Common Era. — Our versions of the Gemara attribute this saying to Rabbi Yochanan, an Amora of the first Palestinian Amoraim who were active at the beginning of the third century. The Amoraim were the Sages who interpreted the Mishnah after its redaction in the year 200. Together with their Babylonian colleagues, this era continued for about 300 years when the Gemara was written down by Rav Ashi and Ravina. The Mishnah and Gemara together constitute the Talmud. (20) Kiddushin 31 b. (21) Rabbi Yochanan was orphaned of his father and mother at his birth (*ibid.*). (22) This statement is to be understood in the light of the preceding saying, "When a man honors his father and mother, G-d says, 'I consider his act as if I were living among them and he honored Me'" (Maharsha, *ibid.*). Rav Yoseif therefore welcomed his mother's coming by greeting the Divine Presence that accompanies her.

Great is the power of the commandment of honoring parents. Its reward is certainly assured, and people can see its reward manifested in material benefits in this world. G-d will either add tranquility and success to all one's endeavors, or He will bless him with longevity, the usual reward for fulfilling this commandment. The Gaon Rav Saadia<sup>23</sup> explained why the Torah established longevity as the reward for this commandment. Parents sometimes live a long time and become a burden upon their children. G-d therefore proclaimed that in reward for fulfilling this commandment, *thy days may be long*.<sup>1</sup> That is to say: "you are to honor them and live with them. If you will begrudge their years, know that you are begrudging your own life."

The Sages commented in Midrash Mishlei:<sup>24</sup> "*The hoary head is a crown of glory, it is found in the way of righteousness*."<sup>25</sup> You derive this principle from the righteous Joseph. Because he exerted himself for the sake of his father's honor in Egypt, he merited the crown of ripe old age, as it is said, *And Joseph saw Ephraim's children of the third generation*.<sup>26</sup> Whence do we know that Joseph did charity? We know it from the verse which says, *And Joseph sustained his father, and his brethren*.<sup>27</sup>

It is common knowledge that the reward of longevity which G-d established for the fulfillment of this precept is only the by-product of the commandment which a man enjoys in this world. The essential reward for its fulfillment will be conferred in the World to Come. The Sages received a tradition:<sup>28</sup> "*That thy days may be long*."<sup>1</sup> This refers to the World to Come which will endure for eternity." In the Ten Commandments as stated in the Book of Deuteronomy, Scripture added: *and that it may go well with thee*,<sup>29</sup> to the commandment of honoring parents. The Sages<sup>28</sup> interpreted this as a reference to the "World to

(23) See above in *Hashgachah* (Divine Providence), Note 52. (24) Midrash Mishlei, end of Chapter 16. (25) Proverbs 16:31. It should be noted that the Hebrew word *Tz'dakah* here translated as *righteousness*, also means "charity." It is this latter meaning that is referred to in the text. (26) Genesis 50:23. (27) *Ibid.*, 47:12. (28) Kiddushin 39 b. (29) Deuteronomy 5:16.

Come, which is entirely good." Hence, the essential reward for fulfilling this commandment is not in this world.

The Sages commented in Tractate Chullin:<sup>30</sup> "Rabbi Yaakov says, 'There is no commandment in the Torah accompanied by a promise of reward to which resurrection is not appended. Concerning the honor we must give our father and mother, it is written, *That thy days may be long, and that it may go well with thee.*'<sup>29</sup> Concerning the commandment to release the mother bird when her nest is taken, it is written, *That it may be well with thee, and that thou mayest prolong thy days.*'<sup>31</sup> Suppose that a father sent his son to the top of a certain building to fetch the doves nesting there, and the son did go up and sent away the mother bird and took the nestlings. If, however, he fell off the building as he was returning and died as a result, where is this individual's reward of longevity and well-being? You must therefore conclude [that Scripture is assuring you] *that thy days may be long*<sup>1</sup> in the world that will endure eternally, *and that it may go well with thee*<sup>29</sup> in the world that is entirely good.' 'Perhaps,' suggests the Gemara, 'the event supposed by Rabbi Yaakov never occurred, [and if that is the case, his conclusion is unfounded]!' However, Rabbi Yaakov actually witnessed such an incident himself. The Gemara again counters, 'But perhaps the person who was killed thought of some sin, [and thus did not deserve longevity and well-being in this world]!' The explanation is that G-d does not combine the intention to sin with the sinful deed itself. 'But' persists the Gemara, 'the individual who was killed intended to worship idols. [In that case, intention is punishable], as it is written, *That I may take the House of Israel in their own heart!*'<sup>32</sup> Rabbi Yaakov, however, reasoned as follows: 'If there is reward in this world

(30) Chullin 142 a. The thought suggested is that all commandments which are accompanied by a promise of reward must necessarily allude to reward in the hereafter. (31) Deuteronomy 22:7. (32) Ezekiel 14:5. The prophet there dealt with the sin of idolatry, declaring that sinners will be punished even if their idolatry will be *in their own heart* only.

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for performing commandments, that reward should have benefited him and protected him from such sinful thought as idolatry. Hence, no harm would have befallen him. Since this was not the case, you must conclude that reward for the observance of the commandments is not conferred in this world.' The Gemara argued further, 'Did not Rabbi Eleazar say that messengers on a religious mission will not be harmed either upon going or upon their return?' The explanation is that this incident involved a broken ladder, and where danger is imminent, Rabbi Eleazar's rule does not apply, for it is written, *And Samuel said to G-d: How can I go to anoint David? If Saul will hear it, he will kill me.*<sup>33</sup> Rav Yoseif said, 'If Acheir (the Other One)<sup>34</sup> had interpreted the verse [*that it may be well with thee*]<sup>35</sup> as his nephew Rabbi Yaakov did, he would not have sinned.' What did Acheir see that caused him to commit apostasy? Some say that he saw an incident such as Rabbi Yaakov described, and some say that he saw the tongue of Rabbi Chutzpith the Interpreter<sup>35</sup> lying upon a dunghill. Acheir exclaimed, 'Oh that the mouth which brought forth pearls should now be licking dust!' He did not know, [however, that Scripture's promise of reward meant] *that it may go well with thee*<sup>29</sup> in the world that is entirely good, *and that thy days may be long*<sup>29</sup> in the world that will endure for eternity."

Commenting upon the word '*eth*' in the expression, *Honor 'eth' thy father and 'eth' thy mother*,<sup>1</sup> the Sages said in Tractate Kethuboth,<sup>36</sup> "*'Eth' thy father* refers to your stepmother. *'Eth' thy mother* refers to your stepfather. The extra *vav* in *v'eth (and) thy mother* includes your older brother."

(33) I Samuel 16:2. (34) Acheir, was the pseudonym given by the Sages to Elisha ben Abuyah, a contemporary of Rabbi Akiba. Living in the times of the cruel persecutions by Emperor Hadrian in the middle of the second century C.E., Acheir was disturbed by problems involving Divine Providence as the text here suggests. Consequently, he turned against his faith. (35) Rabbi Chutzpith was one of the ten martyred Sages sentenced by the Romans to death by barbaric torture for practicing their religion, which was then under Hadrian's imperial proscription. (36) Kethuboth 103 a.

"Come and see how much G-d loves this commandment, for He does not withhold His reward<sup>37</sup> for its performance from anyone, whether he is righteous or wicked. We know this from wicked Esau. Because he honored his father Isaac, G-d rewarded him with all this power [in this world]. Now, if that wicked Esau was so extensively repaid by G-d because he honored his father, a righteous man who honors his parents will certainly be rewarded. G-d said, '*Who hath given Me anything beforehand, that I should repay him?*'<sup>38</sup> Who has given honor to his father that I should not have given him children?' "<sup>39</sup>

The commandment to honor parents is the fifth commandment, and it concludes the first of the two Tablets. The first Tablet began with *I am the Eternal*,<sup>2</sup> which concerns the honor of the True Father, and concludes with *Honor thy father*,<sup>1</sup> who is the natural father. The true purpose of this commandment to honor parents is that we must honor G-d, our True Father. Just as the person who begets the child is called the father, so the Creator, Who brings forth the soul from His sacred spirit, and blows it into the child, is called Father. The mercies of the True Father toward His creatures are far greater than those of the natural father toward his child, as David said, *For though my father and my mother have forsaken me, the Eternal will take me up.*<sup>40</sup> This thought was similarly expressed by Isaiah: *For Thou art our Father, for Abraham knoweth us not, and Israel doth not acknowledge us; Thou, O Eternal, art our Father, our Redeemer from everlasting is Thy Name.*<sup>41</sup> He is saying: "Abraham did not know us in the Egyptian exile, nor did Jacob know us in the wilderness, for they had already passed away. Hence, You are our True Supreme Father; *our Redeemer from everlasting is Thy Name*,<sup>41</sup> for You have redeemed us from Egypt." Thus, Moses stated, *Is He not thy Father that hath gotten thee? Hath He not made thee, and established thee?*<sup>42</sup>

(37) The reward spoken of here is only the by-product of the commandment which a person enjoys in this world, while its true reward is reserved for the World to Come. (38) Job 41:3. (39) This entire paragraph is found in Tanchuma, *Kedoshim*, 15. (40) Psalms 27:10. (41) Isaiah 63:16. (42) Deuteronomy 32:6.