

“Honor your father and your mother.” (20:12)

To what extent must one honor his parents? *Horav Yitzchak Zilberstein, Shlita*, focuses on the degree of *kavod*, honor, one must accord to a parent who, due to illness or advanced age, has a deteriorated mental capacity. The question becomes stronger in situations when the illness has advanced to the point that there are serious issues of extreme hardship for the children, both as sons or daughters to their parents and as husbands or wives to their respective mates. How much does one have to sacrifice for a parent? How much hardship, and – at times – abuse must one endure from a parent who is ill and whose mind does not function properly?

Horav Zilberstein writes that when he posed this question before one of the preeminent *poskim*, *halachic* arbiters, of the generation, the answer he received was: a son or daughter must do for their parents to the same degree that their parents will do for them. In other words, parents sacrifice their lives for their children, should we not at least do the same for them? Hashem commands us to honor our parents out of a sense of *hakoras hatov*, gratitude and appreciation. We owe them. While at times fulfilling our obligation might be extremely difficult, and even crushing, it is our obligation. Perhaps, when the situation becomes difficult, we should ask ourselves: what would our parents do for us if the situation was reversed? No one has ever said that life was going to be easy. Regrettably, some of us would rather take than give.

Horav Y. Eliyashiv, Shlita, feels that a child's obligation goes beyond what a parent would do for a child. There is no comparison. He cites the *Rambam* who says that the *chiyuv*, obligation, is “*ad shekocho shel ha'ben magia*,” as much as the son can physically endure. We might be so bold to add that emotional endurance on the part of the child might also be taken into account.

It is noteworthy that the famous *gaon*, *Horav Chaim Pelagi, z.l.*, merited to live to a ripe old age. He was revered by all. The Turkish government accorded him the honor due to royalty. When asked by one of his students to what he attributed his exceptional longevity, he wrote down ten acts that merit longevity. One of them is attending to one's parents, despite their mental infirmity.

There is no doubt that caring for an elderly parent can, at times, be an overwhelming burden. The response to “How much can I take?” is an individual one. People react differently to this burden, and they must acknowledge when they are responding inappropriately.

In the *Talmud Kiddushin*, *Chazal* describe a situation in which a son feeds his father the finest delicacies, yet loses his reward in *Olam Haba*. The son places the food before his father. His father asks him from where he obtained the money for such delicacies. The response is a terse, “What difference is it to you? Eat.” *Horav Reuven Feinstein, Shlita*, questions how such a paradoxical attitude could exist within a human being. On the one hand, the son seeks to provide his father with the finest delicacies. On the other hand, the manner in which he offers the food bespeaks of cruelty and disdain. He explains that quite possibly, the son has spent more than he could afford for the food. His obligation to provide the very best for his father has guided him. Now that he must come

to terms with the cost of the food, he resents his father for placing him in such a position.

Regrettably, such combinations of obligation and resentment, love and hate, joy and bitterness, coexist to one degree or another, when the situation becomes overwhelming. We have to consult with a *talmid chacham*, *Torah* scholar, and decide whether our inability to cope is overriding our ability to love.

We also have to remember that what goes around comes around, and the respect we accord our parents is, in effect, the type of respect we might receive one day from our children. They are watching us. We must provide them with the proper models for *Kibbud Av v'Eim* – ourselves. While we might forget how we have acted towards our parents, our children remind us.