

And he (Yaakov) said, “I will work for you seven years, for Rachel your younger daughter.” (29:18)

Chazal teach us that Yaakov *Avinu* was taken to task for offering to remain in Lavan’s employ and not seeking to return home to his parents. He ended up being away from home for a total of thirty-six years, of which he spent fourteen studying *Torah* in the *Yeshivah* of Ever. For the duration of time he spent studying *Torah*, he was not criticized for failing to honor his parents. For the next twenty years that he spent in the house of Lavan and two years traveling, *Chazal* feel that Yaakov was derelict in regard to fulfilling the *mitzvah* of *Kibud Av v’Eim*. His punishment was that Yosef was separated from him for the same number of years. This punishment apparently was to be a lesson; he was to experience what it is not to have his son at home. Perhaps he would understand what his parents underwent when he was gone. The punishment does not really seem to equal the transgression, because Yaakov did not go for a pleasure trip. He was compelled to run for his life from his evil brother, Eisav. On the other hand, he should have returned as soon as possible. He seems to have taken time off to start a family before returning home. In contrast, Yosef was thought to be dead, the victim of a wild animal. There is a “slight” difference between the emotion which a parent feels at the death of a child, w”x, and one which he feels when the child leaves for an extended period of time.

Perhaps the parallel between the two is that it is not up to us to determine what is easier for our parents to handle. Regardless of the circumstances, we are not permitted to cause them any sort of pain. Every person is different and, consequently, reacts differently to a given situation. For one parent the pain of having a child leave for a long time – and not knowing where he is – is similar to the agony of losing him. We are required to honor our parents. We do not define what constitutes honor. The *Torah* does that for us.

Honoring parents properly is not as simple as we might think. Moreover, one should view the chance to honor his parents as an opportunity, a unique privilege. Indeed, it is an honor for the individual to have been granted the chance to honor his parents. This applies even if the task of honoring his parents is an incessant toil for him. This applies equally if the parents do not appreciate what one is doing for them, due to illness or plain self-centeredness.

Even if one’s parents publicly humiliate him, he may not retaliate. According to the *Rambam*, he should not even feel bad about it! Although honoring one’s parents is a form of expression of gratitude to them for all they have done on our behalf, we may never assume that if they are currently doing nothing for us – or even embarrass us – that we are no longer obligated to honor them.

Nonetheless, at times it becomes increasingly difficult to overcome one’s emotions and ignore the situation when a parent continuously abuses and scorns. I recently was privy to such a situation. I had occasion to be out of town and *davened* in a *shul* which has a proliferation of *minyanim*. It was

Shabbos morning right before *Krias HaTorah*, when the door to the *shul* flew open – and a man burst into the room with much ado. One look at him said it all. He was dressed in *chassidisheh* garb, but it was quite apparent that what he was wearing was ill-fitting and filthy. His beard and *payos* were disheveled and grimy. In short, he looked like a wild man. If there had been any doubt concerning his normalcy, it became quite clear that he was not well as soon as he began to speak. In truth, “speaking” is not a proper word to describe what emanated from his mouth. He did not speak – he screamed, he disparaged, he berated. Yet, there was something different about the way he expressed himself: he was funny. Much of what he said was sarcastic and facetious. He talked about himself, claiming that he was the undisputed *gadol hador*, *Torah* leader of the generation, and should, thus, be accorded special honor. While it was pathetic, it was also laughable. There were things this man was saying that evoked laughter within everyone in the *shul* – well, almost everyone. There was a young man in the *shul*, who – regardless of what the man said, in spite of its utter absurdity – remained blank, impassive, never once cracking a smile.

I wondered why he would sit there and seem to ignore totally what was happening in *shul*. True, it was a *rachmanus*, a situation upon which we should take pity, but, it was nonetheless somewhat funny. While not every person in the *shul* was in stitches, one could not ignore the fact that some of the things that he was saying were a bit amusing.

Perhaps I was wrong, but I asked the young man, “Why are you so impassive? You must agree that what he is saying is somewhat humorous.” He looked at me with piercing eyes and said, “If he were not my father, I would also laugh!”

What more can I say? His answer struck a chord as it penetrated deep into my heart. Yes, it might be humorous, but what right do we have to laugh at another Jew’s plight? Furthermore, and probably more compellingly, I realized something we all seem to ignore: Everyone, regardless of his situation, is someone’s father, husband, son, or brother. We forget that they are all people with a history behind their present pathology. Moreover, I now understand the depth of this young man’s *Kibud Av*, the respect he accorded his father, even under the most trying circumstances. Last, I hope I learned to think before I ask such a question.