

Honor your father and mother. (5:16)

To render honor to one's parents is an awesome task. Honor means much more than respect. It means: to value; to cherish; to appreciate; to understand that one's presence in this world is attributed to his parents. The *Sefer HaChinuch* writes: *Heim sibas heyoso b'olam*, "They are the cause of his being in this world." When one realizes that his basic "being" is due to them, he should be filled with an overwhelming sense of gratitude. Honor should be the result of this emotion. Sadly, this emotion, or lack thereof, can backfire, when one has determined for himself that he owes his parents nothing. There are individuals raised in families that function only by some Divine miracle, who feel that whatever they have achieved in life is despite their parents. Thus, they have little to no respect for their parents, because, in their minds, they owe their parents absolutely nothing. Understandably, this is not a Torah-oriented perspective on the *mitzvah* of *Kibbud Av v'Eim*. Hashem commands us to respect parents, because they partner with Him in our creation. To honor parents is to honor Hashem. To disrespect parents is to dishonor Hashem.

For some, the respect they harbor for their parents is the last vestige of what is left of their relationship with *Yiddishkeit*. They have long reneged the yoke of *mitzvos*, turned their backs on Judaism in general, but, out of respect for their parents, they return home during the year for milestone celebrations and traditional festival family gatherings. There are those who wake up too late to accord their parents the respect they deserve. By the time they return to their senses, their parents are in the *Olam HaEmes*, World of Truth. So, they memorialize their parents in *shul* via the *Yizkor* service. This affords them the opportunity to visit the synagogue four times each year for the specific purpose of reciting a memorial prayer in honor of their parents. The following story underscores this idea.

Prior to World War II, Germany was a den of iniquity. The wave of assimilation had taken its toll on German Jewry. What the secular movements had initiated over a century past had long devastated the spiritual relationship the Jews had with Hashem. For the most part, traditional Judaism had become a relic of the past, *mitzvah* observance being adhered to only by a small minority who still clung to the Torah as their anchor in a sea of confusion. The most illustrious families had been breached, especially in the larger cities, such as Berlin.

Nonetheless, there were still those who clung steadfastly to the Torah, guided by such illustrious leaders as **Horav Yechiel Yaakov Weinberg, zl**, author of the *Seridei Eish*, and rector, *Rosh Yeshivah* of the Hildsheimer Rabbinical Seminary in Berlin. In Western Europe at that time, *Rav* Weinberg was the *posek acharon*, final adjudicator, of Torah law. A brilliant *talmid chacham*, Torah scholar, he held the respect of the entire *frum*, observant, world. In addition to his encyclopedic knowledge of the Torah, he was a symbol of *middos tovos*, positive character traits. His *eidelkeit*, pleasant disposition, and humanity were the products of the many years he had spent in Slabodka *Yeshivah* under the guidance of *Horav Nosson Tzvi Finkel, zl*, reverently known as the *Alter* of *Slabodka*. His distinguished disciple, *Horav Avraham Abba Weingort*, has spent years publishing his revered *Rebbe's* works and disseminating his *chiddushim*, innovative discourses.

One day, *Rav Weingort* was asked by a resident of Modiin to deliver a lecture in the community *shul*. *Rav Weingort* acceded to the request and delivered a *shiur*, lecture, on the topic of the *mitzvah* of *Kibbud Av v'Eim*. During the course of the lecture, *Rav Weingort* reminded himself of an incident that had occurred many years earlier in Berlin. Since there is nothing like a good story to concretize an idea, he related the story in middle of his *shiur*.

The central Orthodox synagogue in Berlin was filled to capacity during *the Yamim Noraim*, High Holy Days. For many members of Berlin's Jewish community, this was the one and only time that they entered the holy sanctuary of a *shul* to pray. While prayer was not part of their daily ritual, and public prayer was certainly not their norm, *Rosh Hashanah*, and especially *Yom Kippur* were special days. The spark of Judaism, the *Pintele Yid*, which is concealed within each and every one of us, begins to burn and glow brightly on these days. Indeed, the Jew to whom these holy days have no significance is truly distant from his source of life. On *Yom Kippur*, *Rav Weinberg* would walk the long distance from his home to the central synagogue, because he wanted to *daven* with the community. A special place in the front of the *shul* was reserved for the leader of Western European Jewry.

The *davening* was in accordance with tradition, adhering to all of the *minhagim*, customs, of the Berlin community. Each Jew prayed, conversing with Hashem, expressing his regrets over the past and articulating his aspirations for the future. It was a solemn worship service, since, after all, it was *Yom Kippur*. There was no looking back – only looking forward, praying, beseeching, begging Hashem to accept their sincere *teshuvah*, repentance, and grant them and their families another year of life.

Finally came that solemn moment when the *gabbai*, sexton, called out, “*Yizkor!*” The time had come for the reciting of the prayer memorializing the dead. The young people, whose parents were still counted among the living, made their way to the exits. This was a time when the senior members of the *shul*, those who had sustained the loss of parents, were to be alone, to pray for the dead, and to be inspired by the temporal nature of life.

The doors to the sanctuary were closed, and the prayer of *Yizkor* was about to begin when suddenly a government limousine pulled up to *shul*. In front of the limousine rode two motorcycle police and two other motorcyclists brought up the rear of the motorcade. The doors to the limousine were opened and out stepped Walter Rathenau, the Foreign Minister of the Weimar Republic. He was one of the most powerful statesmen of the German government. (He was assassinated on June 24, 1922 an act of violent murder which many believe was the result of anti-Semitism due to his Jewish heritage.) The minister walked up the steps of the synagogue and entered the sanctuary. It was *Yizkor*. He was here to recite the prayer service for his Jewish parents.

A tumult broke out in the *shul*. This man was probably the most infamous assimilated Jew in Berlin. How dare he enter the sanctuary on this holiest day of the Jewish calendar year? This man had long ago turned his back on the religion of his ancestors. *Yom Kippur* certainly had no meaning to

him. He did not acknowledge his Jewish heritage. Why would he be coming to *shul*? They were outraged.

Walter Rathenau did not care what people might have been whispering. He was the Foreign Minister – a Jew like everyone else in the synagogue. He wanted to recite the prayer for his parents. It was as simple as that. As soon as he concluded his prayer, he left the synagogue, went to the limousine and was driven off.

The worshippers were in a furor. The *chutzpah*, nerve, of this apostate Jew: To come by car and publicly desecrate the holiest day of the year was an outrage! He had profaned *Yom Kippur* and humiliated the Jewish community. The *chazzan*, cantor, ascended to the lectern and was about to begin *Tefillas Mussaf*, when suddenly *Rav Weinberg* left his seat and walked up to the lectern and asked everyone to be seated. A lull fell over the entire assemblage. Not a sound was heard, as everyone sat quietly to listen to the *Rav*.

“*Rabbosai*! My friends,” the *Rav* began, “how does it enter your minds to shame a Jew who came to *shul* to honor his parents? The man had no ulterior motive, other than a sincere desire to pay his respects to his departed parents.” The *Rav* was silent for a moment, and then he raised his voice, declaring, “Anyone who honors the memory of his parents is assured that one day his descendants will return to the embrace of the Jewish people!”

With these words, *Rav Weinberg* returned to his seat, and the *Mussaf* service commenced. His words impacted the worshippers. No one would ever forget what the *Rav* had said.

Rav Weingort concluded the story and waited to see how it would impact the audience that had sat on edge to listen to him. Suddenly, one of the members of the audience stood up and asked to be recognized. The man seemed quite nervous, actually shaking, as he asked *Rav Weingort*, “Did the *Rav* say Rathenau? My name is Rathenau, and the Foreign Minister about whom the *Rav* is speaking was my great-grandfather! He was my father’s grandfather!” When asked how it occurred that he, the great-grandson of Walter Rathenau was *frum*, he explained that his father was *chozeir b’teshuvah*, having become an observant Jew when he moved to *Eretz Yisrael*.

Rav Weinberg’s words rang true. When one honors the memory of his parents, his descendants will ultimately become observant.