

This is the decree of the Torah. (19:2)

Rashi explains the concept of *chok*, a *mitzvah* whose Divine rationale eludes us. While Hashem certainly has a reason for every one of the *Taryag*, 613 *mitzvos*, the reason behind every *mitzvah* is beyond our grasp. Understandably, one might say that not all *mitzvos* are beyond our ken. Ostensibly, specific *mitzvos* – such as *Kibbud Av v'Eim*, Honoring father and mother – are rationally based.

The *Rambam* (*Shemoneh Perakim*) distinguishes between *mitzvos sichlios*, rational *mitzvos* (which supposedly anyone who possesses a modicum of intelligence can understand on his own), and *mitzvos shlmios*, *mitzvos* we accept and perform purely because we “heard” them – not because we necessarily understand them. Nonetheless, just because a *mitzvah* is given to human rationale, that rationale does not necessarily define it, since we must view every *mitzvah* as an *afkaata d'Malka*, Heavenly decree, which supersedes human understanding. Just because a *mitzvah* makes sense to us does not necessarily mean that we truly understand it, since Hashem's reasoning is different than ours, and may actually conflict with others. The following vignette, so poignantly described in amazing detail by the well-known *Maggid*, *Horav Reuven Karlinstein*, *zl*, is a classic example of such a conflict.

The *mitzvah* of honoring one's parents is quite sensible. Parents do everything (or at least they should) for their children. It makes sense that the child should show his gratitude and reciprocate. What about parents that are unworthy of such reciprocity, parents who have been far from appropriate to their children, who have mistreated, ignored or even abused their children? Is the *mitzvah* of *Kibbud Av v'Eim* relevant under such conditions? While all of these questions require a rabbinic response and elucidation which go beyond the scope of this paper, the following story will suffice.

A young couple was blessed with a child. After a fairly easy labor and delivery, the physician came out and presented the parents with a freshly cleaned baby boy. *Mazel tov!* The joy in the room was palpable as the young parents shared the *simchah* with one another. A few hours later, after their pediatrician checked out the baby, he returned with some difficult news to accept: their newborn had a problem. The condition was not life-threatening, but it would require years of therapy and medication. Their baby was not well. The parents were distraught. (We should not judge; everyone reacts differently to life's challenges.) The parents hastily discussed the issue. They decided that they were both young, and this was their first child. They were not prepared to raise a child that would present such great challenges. They were putting their newborn son up for adoption.

It took some time to find the right couple for this child. In the interim, the baby was shuffled from home to home, foster care to foster care, until a benevolent and loving couple without children of their own agreed to adopt the boy and raise him as their own child. The child now had a home and parents who would care for him. His biological parents moved on with their lives. There was really nothing further to do. They neither had any idea who had adopted their son, nor what was

transpiring in his life.

The adoptive parents did everything within their power to raise “their” child in the best way possible. They placed him in the best schools, providing him with the finest education that they could afford. They also consulted with various doctors and medical centers concerning how to best treat his impediment. *Baruch Hashem*, over time, through the agency of the appropriate treatment, he was able to overcome his challenge, and he could look forward to a normal, healthy life. His *bar mitzvah* was celebrated amid much pomp, since it was also a *seudas hodaah*, celebration of gratitude, for all of Hashem’s beneficence. Their son was now ready to enter the *yeshivah* world, which he did with the support of his parents. During this entire time, he heard nothing from his biological parents. It was as if they did not exist. Veritably, as far as they were concerned, he, too, did not exist.

Years passed, and the young boy turned into a young man, married and entered the next phase of his life: *kollel*. He sat and learned as his family grew; the whole time he was supported by his parents who had done so much for him. Indeed, they had given him back his life. His biological parents had never attended any of the milestone occasions of his life. They just were not present.

Years later, our young man was a distinguished pillar of his community, involved now in helping others in need. One day, as he sat in his study contemplating a communal issue, he heard a knock at his front door. He went to answer the door and met an elderly Jew who asked to come in. He invited the man to sit at his table. “How can I help you?” he asked. The old man began to tell a story that floored him, “I would like you to know that I am your biological father.” The host was in a turmoil. “Where have you been these last fifty years?” he asked. “We had our reasons. We made a decision that is of no concern to you. All you must know and accept is that I am now over eighty years old and in failing health. The doctors informed me that I require treatment for my illness and that following the treatment, I will probably have to move into a nursing facility. I will no longer be able to take care of myself,” the biological father explained.

“What does that have to do with me?” his “son” asked.

“Simple,” the father replied. “All of this costs money which I do not have. As my son, you must support me. There is a *mitzvah* of *Kibbud Av v’Eim*, and I demand that you do your part!”

The son looked at his father incredulously and exclaimed, “Suddenly, now I am your son! Where have you been for the last fifty years? Do you think that I am wealthy? I barely make enough to support my family.”

When the father heard such “insolence” from his son, he became angry and raised his voice, “Is this how a son speaks to his father? Where is your respect? There can be no excuses. As a son, you are obligated to minister to my needs. I will tolerate nothing less!”

End of story. Now, let us return to our earlier hypothesis that *Kibbud Av v'Eim* is a logical, rational *mitzvah*. What should be our response to the father? Obviously, everyone's indignation had passed the boiling point. From a rational, human, logical point of view, the father should have been asked to leave with the words, "You forgot about me fifty years ago. I did not exist. Make believe that I still do not exist!" If we were to ask the *rav* for a *halachic* perspective, his response would be, "The father is correct in his demand. He might be a terrible person and worthy of nothing, but *halachah* is *halachah*. He is the father, and the *mitzvah* of *Kibbud Av v'Eim* prevails."

Now, I ask you: Is *Kibbud Av v'Eim* a rational *mitzvah*?