

The Challenge of Honoring Parents in Contemporary Social Conditions

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There can be no doubt that the duty of honoring one's parents is regarded by the halacha as one of the paramount obligations of Judaism. This mitzvah is among the basic precepts enunciated in the Ten Commandments and is repeated elsewhere in the Torah as well. The importance of the mitzvah is emphasized by the reward the Torah promises for its observance:

למען יאריכון ימך על האדמה אשר ד' אלוך נותן לך

So that your days will be lengthened on the land which the Lord your G-d gives you.¹

Further confirmation of the weightiness of this obligation is provided by the Mishna which tells us:

אלו דברים שאדם אוכל פרותיהן בעולם הזה והקן קיימת לעולם הבא... כיבוד אב ואם.

Honoring one's parents is included among those things for which one is rewarded both in this world and the next.²

1. שמות כ', י"ב.

2. פאה א', א'.

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The Torah refers to two separate aspects of behavior which are required towards one's parents. The first is *Kavod*, honor, the second is *morah*, fear or reverence. These attitudes are based on two different verses of the Torah.³ Both the Talmud⁴ and Midrash⁵ define these two requirements in the same way:

איזהו מורא ואיזהו כבוד, מורא לא עומד במקומו ולא יושב במקומו, ולא יסתור את דברו, ולא מכריעו. כבוד, מאכיל ומשקה, מלביש ומכסה, מכניס ומוציא.

What is reverence and what is honor? Reverence is not to stand in his place or sit in his place, not to contradict his words or even agree with them. Honor is to provide food drink, and clothing, and to bring them in and out.

The general parameters of this mitzvah seem to be clear enough. Its philosophical justification appears to be similarly distinct. However, there still remain a number of questions which require elucidation in regard to this commandment. By providing such additional clarification we obtain a more faithful idea of exactly what it is that this mitzvah entails.

The ambiguous areas referred to pertain to details in the observance of *Kibud av v'em* (honoring father and mother). Some of these questionable points have arisen as the result of the impact of modern culture on the Torah-true community. It is a truism that whenever a new lifestyle is adapted by the Jewish community new halachic problems are created. Although difficult issues of *Kibud av v'em* have been present throughout the centuries of Jewish existence, many of these problems have been highlighted by the conditions of modern life.

The focus which American society has always placed on democracy and equality is probably the strongest distinguishing mark of this country's culture when contrasted to that of other

3. שמות כ', י"ב, ויקרא י"ט, ג'.

4. קידושין ל"א, עמוד ב'.

5. ספרא, ויקרא ל"ט, ג'.

nations. This is, of course, still true today. As a result of this focus, the structure of the family is viewed very differently by contemporary American society than it was, and indeed still is, in many other cultures. The family is not considered an authoritarian structure by contemporary American notions. The relationship between parents and children is not conceived of as a distant, cold and commanding one. Parents are thought of as respected guides and companions rather than as removed and remote figures of authority. Members of the observant Jewish community live in contemporary society and to a great extent partake of its concepts and frame of reference. It is important to realize that the mores and standards of society do impact on the halachic requirements and definition of "honor." As a result, problems of definition and observance are created for the observant Jew living as a member of a family in twentieth century America.

It is the purpose of this article to examine aspects of the mitzvah of *Kibud av v'em* in the light of current social conditions. As observant Jews, we accept halacha even when its demands are at odds with the cultural atmosphere around us; nevertheless, there are many instances where a clear study of halacha provides grounds for leniency in the practice of certain mitzvot which appear to clash with the thoughts and self-image of those living under modern social conditions. In such cases, we would appear to be justified in accepting these leniencies. This is especially true if thereby we can justify the behavior of substantial portions of the observant Jewish community. It is obviously not the purpose of this article to decide questions of halacha. Rather, it is hoped that by suggesting certain lines of thought and logic, further discussion of these very relevant halachot will be stimulated within the Torah community.

Obeying Parents

One of the duties included in the mitzvah of *Kibud av v'em* is the requirement to obey the instructions of a parent. When a parent makes a request, the son or daughter fulfills a positive mitzvah by complying with this wish. This is true no matter how mundane the request may be. The Talmud tells us of the following question:

שאל בן אלמנה אחת את רבי אליעזר אבא אומר השקיני מים
ואמא אומרת השקיני מים איזה מהם קודם.

The son of a certain widow asked Rabbi Eliezer "If my father says, 'Give me water,' and my mother says 'Give me water,' who comes first?"

Obviously the giving of water is here being considered a mitzvah act.

This requirement is generally not the source of any great difficulty. There are, however, a number of cases where compliance with such a mitzvah seems to present problems for the observant Jew. In a very real sense the impact of modern society has changed the cases where such problems exist from the status of being rare to that of the commonplace.

The first place where a problem exists for the religious Jew in obeying the wishes of a parent is when such a request entails a violation of halacha. If a parent demands that a child perform an action which is otherwise forbidden by Jewish law, a true quandary has been created for that child. Whatever he does would seem to be considered condemnable. If he follows the wishes of the parent he violates the rules of halacha, yet if he disregards the demand of the parent he also goes against the guidelines of halacha.

This problem was quite unusual in earlier times. Jews were generally Torah-observant and not likely to ask their children to violate halacha. Of course, such a case could occur but it was very rare. Far more common, especially in the last century, was the reverse situation. Children would fall away from the religious observance of their elders and attempt to influence their parents to violate Jewish law to conform to the children's lifestyle. Such a demand obviously bears no connection to a discussion of the mitzvah of *Kibud av v'em*.

Due to the resurgence of Orthodoxy in the last thirty years a complete reversal of this situation has taken place. As a result of both the growth of yeshivot and the *baal teshuvah* movement, an

6. קידושין ל"א, עמוד א'.

ever increasing number of young people are returning to strict standards of halachic observance. Today we have an unprecedented situation within the Jewish community — thousands of observant Jews are confronted with the reality of dealing with irreligious and sometimes anti-religious parents. These parents can, and quite often do, make demands on their children to violate different halachic norms. These requests may involve issues ranging from disregarding a *minhag* (custom) to transgressing basic Torah principles such as Kashrut and *Shabbat*.

The key to dealing with this question is found in the following statement by the Midrash:⁷

יכול אמר לו אביו ואמו לעבור על אחת מכל מצות האמורות
בתורה ישמע להם, תלמוד לומר אני ד', כולכם חייבים
בכבודי.

Do not think that if a parent requested a child to violate any mitzvah of the Torah that the child should obey. The Torah says "I am your G-d" [in plural]—both parent and child must honor Me.

The Talmud agrees with this principle.⁸ The *Shulchan Aruch* decides in accordance with this that if a parent commands a child to violate any rule of halacha, whether it is a Torah law or a rabbinic one, the child is forbidden to obey the parent.⁹

This would seem to resolve most questions in this area. An observant son or daughter would be required to ignore a parent's anti-halachic wishes and continue to obey the halacha despite the parent's feelings. Generally, however, a child is required to give his non-religious parents full *Kavod* in all other respects.^{9a} However, one questionable point remains. The *Shulchan Aruch* refers to a violation of either a Torah law or a rabbinic law. What is the status of a *minhag* (custom), something that is not halachically required

7. ספרא, ויקרא י"ט, ג'.

8. יבמות ה', עמוד ב'.

9. יורה דעה ר"מ סעיף ט"ז.

9a. יורה דעה ר"מ י"ח, שדי חמד מערכה כ" ק"ג.

but nevertheless still commonly observed? If the parent objects to the child following such a practice, can his wishes be ignored? This too is a common problem today. Many members of the older generation may have been observant of the broad outlines of halacha, and yet have an aversion to the observance of such *minhagim* which were not commonly practiced in the American community of their youth. If they express opposition to the observance of such *minhagim* by their children, are the children permitted to ignore their wishes? It goes without saying that this same question applies to those within the observant community who have totally anti-religious or non-religious parents who express such wishes.

This question appears to remain unresolved. Rabbi Shlomo Luria, the Maharshah, discusses a case where a mother has died and the father forbids the son to say kaddish for her. He argues that the son should ignore his father's wish and say kaddish. One of the reasons he gives is that the father is in effect asking his son to violate a rabbinic requirement to say kaddish for a parent, and in such a case the son should not obey the father. The Maharshah is aware that the saying of kaddish is nowhere mentioned in talmudic literature as a rabbinic law. Nevertheless he adds that since our ancestors have accepted this as a binding *minhag* it has received the status of rabbinic law.¹⁰ Rabbi Chaim David Azulai (Chida), objects to this reasoning. How can the saying of kaddish be considered a rabbinic law, he asks, when it is a *minhag*? In such a case one has no sanction to ignore the mitzvah of honoring his parent. He must rather disregard the *minhag*.¹¹ In this category he includes any practice not mentioned openly in the Talmud and Midrash.¹²

A somewhat different dilemma arises for a child whose parent asks him to do something for him which is harmful — to the parent. Should the child obey the parent in causing himself harm which is itself forbidden? If the doctor has said the father must lose weight

10. ים של שלמה, קידושין פרק א', סימן ס"ג.

11. ברבי יוסף, יו"ד ר"מ, ס"ק ח'.

12. שאלות ותשובות חיים שאל, חלק א', סימן ה'.

to stave off further heart problems, but he insists the son bring him sweets, or if a diabetic parent insists the child bring him food which is forbidden, there is a real halachic problem. Generally, it seems that if it is not a life-threatening request, the child is obligated to fulfill the parents wishes, although the *poskim* are not wholly in agreement.^{12a}

Marriage

We have discussed the permissibility of ignoring parents when their wishes conflict with clear halachic imperatives. There are other cases as well where refusal to follow the desire of a parent can be defensible. A prime example is the question of marriage. In former generations marriages were arranged by the parents of the bride and groom. There was little regard for the ability of the couple to choose for themselves. Of course, halacha has always required consent by both parties to the match,¹³ but this demand was often followed in a formal, *ex post facto* sense—after the match had been arranged, the children were asked for their approval. Today, obviously, the situation has completely changed. No one expects parents to arrange their children's marriages, and it would be regarded as a great infringement on personal rights for a parent to attempt to perform this function for his child. This attitude has been adopted by a great proportion of the observant community as well. Due to this social development, conflict between parents and children over the choice of a mate has become not uncommon.

This problem was discussed by the Maharik in response to a question whether a father has the power to forbid his son to marry a woman whom the son desires. After all, it would seem that by virtue of the mitzvah of honor, the father should possess such rights. The Maharik disagrees. He argues that the son is not required to obey his father's wishes in this matter, for three reasons. Firstly, a child is not required to undergo an inordinate amount of financial loss for *Kibud av*. Certainly then he does not have to

12a. ערוך השולחן יו"ד ר"מ, מ"א, ברכי יוסף שם, ט"ו, ספר החסידים, רל"ד.

13. שולחן ערוך אבן העזר מ"ב סעיף א'.

impose the personal suffering on himself that would result from not marrying the woman of his choice. Secondly, the mitzvah imperative of marriage is not fulfilled by marrying just anyone, but only by choosing the mate of one's preference. Consequently, by forbidding a child to marry the bride of his choice the parent is asking him to violate a mitzvah. Finally, Maharik argues, *Kibud av* is irrelevant in this case since the parent derives no benefit from his son's obeying him in this situation. The mitzvah of honoring one's father and mother applies when the parent asks for something that benefits the parent directly. However, this matter is one that really is of no immediate concern to the parent. As such, the mitzvah of *Kibud av* does not apply.¹⁴

The *Shulchan Aruch* accepts this opinion as authoritative.¹⁵ This permissibility is broadened by the *Nodah Biyehudah* to include a daughter as well as a son. In both cases he says, it is clear that the child does not have to obey the parent.¹⁶ One word of caution must be added. If the parent claims that such a marriage would shame him, then, according to the *N'tziv*, he does have the power to stop his child. This is because if shame results, it does affect the parent directly.^{16a} Furthermore it is doubtful if one may shame a parent in order to perform a mitzvah.¹⁷

The logic of the previously mentioned argument of the Maharik can be applied to a different case as well. This is the question of whether a child can choose to follow a *minhag* or prayer *nusach* different from that of his father, when the father objects to such an action. One might think that if the parent instructs the son not to follow such a course of action, the son is required to obey. However, if we accept the logic of the Maharik, that *Kibud av* only applies when the parent derives direct personal benefit from his request, then the conclusion will be different. Since

14. שאלות ותשובות מהרי"ק סימן קס"ו.

15. יורה דעה ר"מ, סעיף כ"ה.

16. נודע ביהודה, תנינא, אבן העזר, סימן מ"ה.

16a. Relevant to the issue of "shame" is the question whether a son may call his father to a *din Torah*. See קמ"ד כ', שדי חמד מערכה כ'.

17. שאלות ותשובות משיב דבר יורה דעה סימן ג'.

it is of no immediate concern to the parent which *minhag* or *nusach* his child follows, the child would be free to do as he wishes. *Kibud av* does not enter into the question. This indeed is the conclusion of a number of *Acharonim*.¹⁸ (Of course, it must be pointed out that there is a complicating halachic factor here. This is the prohibition of changing one's traditions, not because of *Kibud av* but rather because of the binding power of *Masoret Avot* (family tradition). There would, therefore, remain a question as to whether a person is permitted to change the *nusach* of his ancestors, with or without his parent's opposition. Much has been written on this question. There are those who permit change from one *nusach* to another, and those who do not.¹⁹)

Torah Study and Aliyah to Israel

Another area where it is permitted to ignore the wishes of a parent concerns Torah study. In today's world it is not uncommon for young adults to desire to attend a place of Torah study not approved of by their parents. This is due in part to the younger generation's increasing devotion to more exacting standards of Torah study than was common for their elders. By the standards of modern American society it would appear to be tyrannical for parents to attempt to practice thought control on their children and to restrict them from studying that which they choose. However, is honor of parents involved here? Should not the express wishes of a parent against a child's studying at a certain yeshiva have to be obeyed by that child?

This problem is to some extent symptomatic of modern social conditions. However, it existed in a more limited form in earlier centuries as well. The *Terumat Hadeshen* asks whether a son who wants to study Torah in a certain city can be forbidden by his father from going there if he fears for his son's safety in that location. He answers that the son does not have to obey his father's

18. שאלות ותשובות תירוש ויצהר סימן ע"ב, שאלות ותשובות שואל ומשיב מהדורה ג', סימן קנ"ט

19. שאלות ותשובות חתם סופר א"ח ט"ו, שו"ת דברי חיים ח"ב א"ח ח', שו"ת אגרות משה א"ח, ח"ב, כ"ד

wishes in this case, because the Talmud tells us that it is part of the mitzvah of learning Torah to study with a teacher of one's choosing. He reasons that in order to find such a teacher one is permitted to violate rabbinic laws of *Tumeah*. On the other hand one may not violate these same rabbinic laws for the mitzvah of *Kibud av*. By analogy we see that studying with a teacher of one's own choosing is more important than honoring one's parents.²⁰ It should be noted that this is true even if the son's going away causes the father anguish. The *Shulchan Aruch* decides in accordance with the *Terumat Hadeshen*.²¹ In light of the above argument, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef decides that a son who wishes to study in a yeshiva with no secular studies may do so despite his parent's insistence that he attend a yeshiva that teaches such subjects.²² Since the son feels that he will learn Torah better in the environment of his choice he is free of the obligation to obey his parents.

A common question in the contemporary community occurs when a son wishes to go to Israel to study in a yeshiva and his parents oppose this wish. In accordance with the previous discussion it is obvious that the son is not required to obey his parents in this case, since it involves a desire on his part to study Torah in a location where he feels he would grow in Torah knowledge. However, a second question remains. This concerns a problem every bit as common as the first. If a child wishes to go on aliyah to Israel and his parents object to his leaving their place of residence, is the child required to obey their wish? At first glance it would seem that here too the child does not have to follow his parents' demand. Living in Israel is after all a mitzvah, and we know that when *Kibud av* comes into conflict with any other mitzvah the duty of obeying one's parents is removed. Indeed some authorities use this reasoning to decide that the son should act on his wish and go on aliyah to Israel.²³

20. תרומת הדרשן סימן מ'.

21. יורה דעה ר"מ, סעיף כ"ה.

22. שאלות ותשובות יחזקאל דעת, חלק ה' סימן נ"ו.

23. שאלות ותשובות מבי"ט, ח"א סימן קל"ט, שו"ת יחזקאל דעת חלק ד', סימן מ"ט.

However, there is a complicating factor here. The Talmud permits a person to leave Israel and go elsewhere in order to fulfill the mitzvah of *Kibud av v'em*.²⁴ This implies that in this particular case the mitzvah of honor takes precedence. Similarly, the Midrash says that Abraham was given special permission to leave his parents and go to Israel unlike other people.²⁵ This again suggests that the mitzvah of *Kibud av* outweighs the command to settle in Israel. Based on these arguments other authorities decide that in a case of conflict between *Kibud av v'em* and this particular mitzvah the child is not permitted to go to Israel but must obey his parents' wish and remain with them.²⁶

Standing for Parents

One of the requirements of *morah*, reverence, as defined by the halacha is rising upon the approach of a parent. The Talmud tells us:

רב יוסף כי הוה שמע קל כרעא דאמיה אמר איקים מקמי
שכינה.

When Rav Yosef would hear his mother's footsteps approaching, he would say, "Let me get up for G-d's Spirit."²⁷

This requirement is codified by the *Rishonim* and brought down as binding in the *Shulchan Aruch*.²⁸ The obligation is obviously to be viewed as similar to the mitzvah of rising before one's Torah teacher or indeed before any Torah scholar as a sign of respect.²⁹

This requirement, unanimously approved of by all the *Poskim* is seemingly neglected by most Jews in America, for it seems

24. שאלות ותשובות תשב"ץ, חלק ג' סימן רפ"ח.

25. בראשית רבה, ל"ט, ז.

26. חכמת אדם שער משפטי הארץ, בינת אדם ג', פנים יפות לבעל הפלא"ה, פרשת לך לך.

27. קידושין ל"א, עמוד ב'.

28. יורה דעה ר"מ, סעיף ז'. Does one have to stand up for a father who is blind? See שו"ת שער אפרים ע"ח.

29. ערוך השולחן, י"ד ר"מ, סעיף כ"ד.

glaringly at odds with contemporary practice. Simply said, this requirement would be viewed by the average American as totally out of step with what constitutes respect for one's father or mother. Injunctions such as not sitting in a parent's usual place, not contradicting a parent or not calling a parent by his or her first name can be accepted by the standards of the present day world as normal forms of respect for a father or a mother. The same cannot be said of rising for parents.

The truth of this assertion is proven by the fact that of all the requirements relating to *Kibud av*, it is this one which is most commonly neglected. Even people who are generally knowledgeable and careful with halachic obligations apparently make little effort to observe this law.

The question we face is whether such behavior is defensible. Can sources be found to justify that which seemingly has become the practice of a great part of the mitzvah-observant world in contemporary America, or are we required to ignore changed social conditions under which we live because there is no halachic sanction for any change in this matter?

I would suggest that a path towards a solution can be found. The Talmud tells us³⁰ that a parent can voluntarily renounce the honor due to him. If he does so, the child is no longer obligated to fulfill the requirements of *Kavod* and *Morah*. The *Shulchan Aruch*³¹ decides in accordance with this opinion. Indeed, it recommends that a parent look away from a child's violation of the requirements of honor and reverence and forgive the child, so that he not be held guilty of this sin. The *Radvaz*³² points out that, while this is true, the child still fulfills a mitzvah by honoring a parent despite the parent's renunciation of such honor. In other words, the relinquishment of *Kavod* by a father or mother removes the mandatory obligation on the child, but still allows the son and daughter to be rewarded for honoring the parent despite such a renunciation. Conversely, a child who did not fulfill the obligations

30. קידושין ל"ב, עמוד א'.

31. יורה דעה ר"מ, סעיף י"ט.

32. שאלות ותשובות רדב"ז חלק א' סימן תקכ"ד.

of *Kavod* or *Morah* after such a renunciation would not be guilty of any violation of halacha.

Using the principle of renunciation it is now possible to say that children in today's world are not obligated to stand at the approach of a parent since parents have renounced this form of honor as irrelevant to today's social conditions. Of course, the sticking point here is that how can one know that one's parents have done so without the parents having stated this specifically? We are, after all, dealing with a general situation here rather than a specific one in which parents have clearly verbally absolved their children from such an obligation. Is one able to make such an assumption and rely on it in practice?

It is suggested that if a certain practice becomes the generally followed way of doing things within the observant community, then, unless we know otherwise, parents accept this procedure as proper and renounce any rights they have which run counter to such an action. If, according to prevailing social conditions, children do not rise at the approach of parents, and parents do not protest, then we are justified in claiming that parents have renounced their right to demand such rising. Of course, in accordance with the previously cited view of the Radvaz, they would still be performing a meritorious deed if they did rise. However, the practice of those in the contemporary community who do not perform this action could not be condemned.

That such logic is justified is exemplified by a different ruling of the *Aruch Hashulchan*, in discussing a further requirement of *morah* for parents. The Talmud, as previously cited, states that one may not stand in his father's specific place of standing, just as he may not sit in his father's place in the synagogue even when the father is absent. Yet, notes the *Aruch Hashulchan*, the popular practice is for sons to do this very thing. He then finds justification for the custom from the fact that since almost everyone does this, it is as if the father has given permission for it as we see that fathers do not protest against the practice.³³ In other words, we can assume,

33. ערוך השולחן, יו"ד ר"מ, סעיף ט'.

mechila (renunciation) when prevailing social conditions are such that a large body of the Jewish community does not observe a detail of *Kibud av* and we see no protest on the part of the parents. This is so, even though no indication of *mechila* was ever given by either the specific parents involved or the generality of parents in the contemporary situation. The analogy to our problem seems clear. We have thus succeeded in finding solid halachic justification for the practice of much of the contemporary Jewish community in this matter.

Calling Grandparents By Name

As mentioned earlier, one of the requirements of *Kavod* is to refrain from calling parents by their proper name. Such practice is obviously a strong expression of disrespect. The Talmud tells us:³⁴

חכם משנה שם אביו ושם רבו.

A Torah scholar who quotes Torah from his father may not refer to him by name. [He merely says "my father."]

The *Shulchan Aruch* codifies this as law.³⁵ The seriousness of the prohibition is shown by a disagreement among *Rishonim* and *Acharonim* as to whether one may refer to someone else having the same name as a parent, by that name in the presence of the parent. The fear is that it might appear as if the child is calling the parent by name.³⁶

Although it may be in vogue in certain avant-garde circles for children to call parents by their first names, it is well-accepted by the mainstream of contemporary American society that such behavior is not desirable. The great majority of even the present day non-Jewish world would clearly view such action as an expression of lack of respect to one's parents. There is no

34. קידושין ל"א, עמוד ב'.

35. יורה דעה ר"מ, סעיף ב'.

36. יורה דעה ר"מ, ט"ז סימן ד', ש"ך סימן ג'.

contradiction in this matter between halachic imperatives and our present day cultural conditions.

The problem comes up in regard to grandparents. Families whose children are blessed with two sets of grandparents are faced with the question of how to distinguish one grandfather from another and one grandmother from another. Due to longer life spans this is, quite happily, an increasingly common situation within the Jewish community. One way in which this question has been resolved is to refer to one grandfather by his name prefaced by the title "grandfather" or "grandpa" and to the second grandfather in similar terms. In this way, both grandparents are distinguished from one another. While there are other ways to referring to two grandfathers or two grandmothers, the above-mentioned method is quite common in general American society and more and more to be found within the Jewish community as well.

The question, of course, is whether such action is permissible. Again, we have a case here where the prevailing practice of a noticeable segment of our community might seem to contradict halacha. It should again be noted that this way of referring to grandparents is not viewed as disrespectful by our contemporary social environment. Nevertheless, should such a practice go against halacha it would be much more difficult to excuse it on the basis of *mechila* as discussed previously. This is because there is a substantial body of opinion that allows *mechila* to repeal the requirements of *Kavod* and *Morah* but not to permit actual "shaming" (בזיון) of one's parents.³⁷ It is obvious that calling a parent or grandparent by their first name can be viewed not only as lack of respect but as a positive act of disrespect as well.

A major key to answering this question is determining whether the requirements of *Kavod* and *Morah* apply to grandparents as well as to parents. The Talmud is silent on this point. The Maharik³⁸ argues that there is no such obligation for grandparents. He uses this to postulate that grandchildren who say kaddish for

37. ברבי יוסף יורה דעה ר"מ, סעיף י"ד.

38. שאלות ותשובות מהרי"ק שורש ל'.

grandparents have no right to push aside children saying kaddish for parents, since the saying of kaddish is part of the mitzvah of *Kibud av*. This assertion is disputed by the *Darchei Moshe*³⁹ who quotes the Midrashic comment on *Beresheet* 46:1:

ויובח זבחים לאלוקי אביו יצחק, חייב אדם בכבוד אביו יותר מכבוד זקינו.

A man is required to honor his father more than he honors his grandfather.⁴⁰

This clearly implies, says the Ramo, that while honor for a grandparent is less than for a parent, it is still a binding requirement. This is indeed the way the Ramo decides in *Shulchan Aruch*, and the decision is accepted by subsequent codifiers.⁴¹

Since this is so, the problem of referring to grandparents by name does seem to be real. If part of *morah* is not to call a parent by name, how than may one do so with a grandparent?

A possible solution to this problem is indicated by a question raised by Rabbi Akiva Eger. He asks how can we say that one may not call a parent by his or her name when we find many places in the Talmud where different sages referred to their fathers as "Abba so and so?"⁴² This same question is asked by the *Beit Meir* who answers that when the title "Abba"- "father" is added to the proper name it becomes permissible since it is now a respectful form of address. This is disputed by the Maharshal (Rabbi Shlomo Luria) who says that any mention of a parent's name is forbidden even with a preceding title.⁴³ Later authorities have pointed out that the current practice of a son, who is *gabbai* of a synagogue, calling his father to an *aliyah* by name can be justified in accordance with the opinion of the *Beit Meir* and those who follow him. This is because such a son precedes his father's name with the title "Abba" when

39. דרכי משה יו"ד ר"מ, סימן ז'.

40. מדרש רבה שם.

41. יורה דעה ר"מ, סעיף כ"ד, ט"ז סימן כ', ש"ך סימן כ"ג.

42. חידושי רע"ק יו"ד ר"מ סעיף ב'.

43. בית מאיר יו"ד ר"מ סעיף ב', ים של שלמה, קידושין פרק ראשון סימן ס"ח.

calling him to the Torah.⁴⁴

Rabbi Moshe Feinstein pointed out that even if we decide in accordance with the negative opinion of the Maharshah, we still would differentiate between one's parent and one's Torah teacher. The halacha is that just as one may not call his parent by name, he may not refer to his Torah teacher by name.⁴⁵ Yet we find that students in the Talmud did refer to their teachers as "Rabbi so and so." The reason this would be permitted, says Rabbi Feinstein, is because in this case, the name is used for identification purposes. If the student just said "my teacher", it would be unclear which teacher he meant. Therefore, he is permitted to add his teacher's name after the title to clarify whom he means. This is not a form of disrespect, but merely a utilitarian solution to a problem. In regard to one's father, where there can be no doubt whom one means, it would be forbidden according to the Maharshah to add the parent's name after the title "father" since such an addition is unnecessary for identification. Everyone has only one father.⁴⁶

Using the logic of Rabbi Feinstein we can now say that the case of grandparents is clearly similar to that of a teacher, rather than a parent. Here too, if one says "grandfather" without an additional name it will be unclear to whom he is referring. This is so because there are two grandparents of the same sex. Therefore, even if one is concerned about the opinion of the Maharshah that using a prefixed title does not permit reference to a parent by name, the same prohibition would not apply to a grandparent in the case of there being a second grandfather in the family. According to those who disagree with the Maharshah it would be permissible to refer to "grandfather so and so" under all circumstances, since this is permitted for a parent as well.

Divorced Parents

One of the most unfortunate social trends of our time has been

44. שערים המצויינים בהלכה סימן קמ"ג סימן א'.

45. יורה דעה ר"מ סעיף ט"ו.

46. שאלות ותשובות אגרות משה יורה דעה חלק א' סימן קל"ג.

a tremendous rise in the divorce rate. This trend has affected the observant community as well. While in former years divorce was almost unheard of within Torah-true circles, this is no longer true today. Thus, the relationship of children to divorced parents has become a matter of practical halachic concern today, while formerly it was of mostly theoretical interest.

The first place where the mitzvah of *Kibud av v'em* is affected by divorce concerns the case of the fulfillment of the wishes of parents. As previously noted this is a basic part of the requirement of *Kavod*. The Talmud discusses the question of whether the wishes of the father or the mother have priority for the son. It states that if both parents request a drink of water the father should be served first, since the mother is required to provide for her husband's needs. This is, however, not true when the couple are divorced.⁴⁷ The *Shulchan Aruch* decides accordingly that if parents are divorced the child has free choice as to whose wishes he decides to regard as superior.⁴⁸

This would mean that in a case of conflict between the wishes of divorced parents the child would have free rein in making a decision. It should be noted that the Maharshah understands the Talmud as saying that in the case of divorce a child should not put the wishes of one parent ahead of the other, and therefore he is in a very difficult position. The directive of the halacha is that if his father asks him for a glass of water and his mother asks him for a glass of water (after they are divorced), he should take the glass of water, put it on the table, and let them work out who gets it. With this in mind, the child of divorced parents has to gingerly and carefully observe the laws of honor which he owes them both.

Another result of divorce may be the presence of step-parents on either side. This raises the issue of how a child must treat these new family members. The Talmud tells us that the extra word *אב* before "father" in the Ten Commandments comes to include the

47. קידושין ל"א, עמוד א.

48. יורה דעה ר"מ, סעיף י"ד.

49. ים של שלמה, קידושין פרק א' סימן ס"ב.

father's second wife in the requirement of *Kavod*, and the extra word **אם** which precedes "mother" does the same for the mother's second husband. This requirement only applies while the father or mother are still alive but lapses after their death.⁵⁰ The Rambam points out that the honor due to step-parents is not given to them in their own rights but rather as a part of the honor due to one's parent.⁵¹ Nevertheless, it is clearly a Torah duty to give them this respect since we derive it from a Scriptural inference. The *Shulchan Aruch* codifies this as authoritative. It adds that even after the death of the parent it is proper to continue honoring the step-parent, although it is no longer strictly required.⁵²

The case of one divorced parent objecting to his child's honoring the new spouse of the other parent is unfortunately not uncommon. In such a situation there would seem to be a conflict for the child whether to obey the wishes of the parent or continue to honor the step-parent. The *Birkei Yosef* indicates that in such a case the objections of the parent to respecting the step-parent should be ignored.⁵³ He doesn't give his rationale. However, it would seem that when a parent tells the child not to honor the other step-parent he is actually ordering the child to violate halacha. In such a situation we know that the mitzvah of obeying the wish of a parent is suspended.

Older Parents

One of the most far-reaching social developments of our time has been the tremendous increase in the average human life span that has taken place in recent years. While in the not distant past people usually died in their sixties and seventies, they now are increasingly living into their eighties and nineties. Scientific studies indicate that this trend will continue to intensify.

As a result of the ability to prolong life, society is increasingly

50. כתובות ק"ג, עמוד א'.

51. משנה תורה, הלכות ממרים, פרק ו', הלכה ט"ז.

52. יורה דעה ר"מ, סעיף כ"א.

53. ברכי יוסף, יורה דעה ר"מ, ס"ק ט"ז.

confronting the problem of dealing with a large older population which is often too feeble, both physically and mentally, to care for themselves. Just because their life span has increased does not mean that people's productive years have been expanded. Science has succeeded in keeping older people alive, but is often unable to maintain their mental or physical ability. We thus have a growing population of older peoples who are increasingly unable to care for even their own basic needs.

Obviously the problem of dealing with incapacitated older parents impacts on the mitzvah of *Kibud av v'em*. While such cases were not unknown in the past, the triumphs of modern medicine have made them a matter of routine today. The observant Jew is faced with a real halachic question in dealing with this situation. What are one's obligations to parents under circumstances of mental or physical feebleness, or even incompetence? No one would disagree with the point that the child must see that his parents are cared for adequately. However, appropriate attention can also be given in an institutional setting. The question is whether the personal involvement of the child in giving such care is absolved at some point; if so, when does that time arrive?

The Talmud tells us that if one spends money to honor his parents, it should come from the resources of the parent, not from one's own possessions.⁵⁴ After the assets of the parent are exhausted, there is no further monetary requirement on the child. This position is adopted by later codifiers and the *Shulchan Aruch*. However, they add that if the son has adequate assets he must support his parents, not out of the requirement of *Kibud av v'em* but as an act of *tzedakah*.⁵⁵ His obligation will therefore be no greater than it would be to other causes of charity. There are other authorities who disagree and claim that the child is required to support impoverished parents to a greater degree than other charities. However, they also add that the child is not obliged to make himself a pauper by doing this.⁵⁶ This latter position is

54. קידושין ל"ב, עמוד ב'.

55. יורה דעה ר"מ, סעיף ה'.

56. דרכי משה, יורה דעה ר"מ ס"ק א', ש"ך יורה דעה ר"מ ס"ק ו'.

adopted by several later *poskim*.⁵⁷ This would mean that a child is required to accept the financial burden in caring for parents up to the point where it is fiscally possible for him but not beyond that.

In accordance with this, if a parent reaches a stage of feebleness which requires around-the-clock attention, there would be halachic justification for considering institutional care for such a person. This is because the expense involved in providing such care at home is so heavy that most people would not be able to financially manage their own family's budget if they were required to absorb this additional expense. It is obvious that when extreme measures such as constant care are not necessary but less expensive solutions suffice, that the child is not free of the financial responsibility of caring for feeble parents. It is also clear that when the wealth of children is such that they can absorb the cost of constant care, they are responsible to provide these services.

There is an additional problem in looking after older parents, which involves mental feebleness rather than physical incapacity. This is a question that is independent of one's financial responsibility in caring for parents. Advancing years are unfortunately often accompanied by senility. There can be different degrees of this condition, but they all make dealing with parents very difficult. The problem children face in this situation is how does one conform to the requirements of "honor" when parents are not mentally balanced?

The Talmud tells us that even if parents publicly embarrass children and destroy their property the children are forbidden to shame or insult their parents. The duty of *Kibud av v'em* remains binding.⁵⁸ The *Shulchan Aruch* decides in accordance with this view.⁵⁹ However, the Talmud then describes a case which closely parallels the contemporary question of senility:⁶⁰

57. שו"ת שבות יעקב חלק א' סימן ע"ה, ערוך השולחן, יורה דעה ר"מ סעיף ב'.

58. קידושין ל"ב, עמוד א'.

59. יורה דעה ר"מ, סעיף ט'.

60. קידושין ל"א, עמוד ב'.

רב אסי הוה ליה ההיא אמא זקינה אמרה ליה בעינא תכשיטין, עבד לה, בעינא גברא נייעין לך, בעינא גברא דשפיר כוותך שבקה ואול לארעא דישראל.

Rav Asi had an aged mother. She said to him "I want jewelry." He gave it to her. When she said "Get me a husband," he said, "I will look for one". When she said "I want a husband as handsome as you," he arose and left her and went to the land of Israel.

Based on this incident, the Rambam decides that if one's parents become senile he should try to deal with them as long as possible. If, however, he is no longer able to do this because they have deteriorated too far, then he may leave them and appoint others to care for them.⁶¹ Rambam obviously understands Rav Asi's leaving his mother as due to her increasing senility. Ravad disagrees with Rambam and asks, if the child is not willing to care for mentally incompetent parents—who will? However, the later commentaries to the *Mishneh Torah* of Rambam point out that it is not he who originated this leniency, but a clear statement in the Talmud. Furthermore, it is logical to give senile parents into the care of others, since they often have to be forcibly restrained. This is something which the children might be forbidden to do, while others are permitted to do.⁶² The *Shulchan Aruch* and later authorities agree with the decision of the Rambam.⁶³ This provides us with some guidance as to when institutionalization of senile parents is permissible. When senility has reached a point where the child cannot personally deal with parents any longer, he is allowed by halacha to choose an alternative method of caring for them.

The points discussed in this article are not meant for practical halachic guidance in day to day questions. Hopefully the airing of these issues will increase our awareness that the requirements of honoring one's father and mother impact on modern social mores. As the Talmud says:⁶⁴

61. משנה תורה, הלכות ממרים פרק ו', הלכה י'.

62. בסף משנה שם, רדב"ז שם, צוץ אליעזר יד:נט.

63. יורה דעה ר"מ, סעיף י'.

64. קידושין ל' עמוד ב'.

בזמן שאדם מכבד אביו ואמו אמר הקב"ה מעלה אני עליהם
כאילו דרתי ביניהם וכבדוני.

When a person honors his father and mother, G-d
says "I consider it as if I dwelt among them and they
honored Me."