YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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***Bein Adam Le-chavero:* Ethics of Interpersonal Conduct**

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**Shiur #03: Where *Kavod* Meets *Mora***

In last week's lesson, we discussed the general structure of *Parashat* *Kedoshim*’s first chapter (*Vayikra* 19*).* As we have seen, the introductory verse to the commandments of holiness mentions two *mitzvot*: revering one's parents and safeguarding Shabbat.

Every one of you shall revere his mother and his father, and you shall keep my sabbaths; I am Lord your God. (v. 3)

While classifying revering one's parents as an interpersonal obligation, a *mitzva bein adam le-chavero*, is quite logical, there is a clear difficulty involved in this assumption. In the previous lesson we noted that the first section of this chapter details *mitzvot bein adam la-Makom*, ritual commands, so why would *mora* (reverence) for one’s parents be here?

In fact, this chapter of *kedusha* seems to place a great deal of emphasis upon the concept of reverence, as it details the requirements of *mora* of one's parents, *mora* of the Sanctuary, and according to the Yere'im, *mora* of Shabbat as well. What does *mora* add, and why is it specifically found here in the chapter of *kedusha,* holiness?

**Honoring One's Parents**

The mitzva of honoring one's parents is given center stage in the Ten Commandments, of which it is the fifth.

Honor your father and your mother; so that your days may be lengthened upon the ground that Lord, your God, gives you. (*Shemot* 20:11)

When the Ten Commandments are repeated in *Devarim*, the description is somewhat more elaborate:

Honor your father and your mother, as Lord, your God, has commanded you; so that your days may be lengthened and so that it shall be good for you upon the ground that Lord, your God, gives you. (*Devarim* 5:15)

While *kavod* is well-known, *mora* has been accorded much less discussion. In the Oral Torah, the Talmud in *Kiddushin* records at great length the many facets of the mitzva of honoring one's parents, but *mora* gets only a short mention. Nevertheless, it does seem to reflect a certain degree of novelty and importance.

Since our primary focus is uncovering the elements of *kedusha* latent in the interpersonal *mitzvot* in *Parashat* *Kedoshim* and there is already a wealth of material written regarding the obligation to honor one's parents, we will limit our discussion of this mitzva, focusing on that which will help us understand, by comparison and contrast, the nature of *mora*.

**Distinguishing between *Kavod* and *Mora***

The Talmud (*Kiddushin* 31b) states:

The Rabbis taught: “What is meant by honoring parents? Honor means serving food and drink, helping them get dressed, welcoming them when they enter and escorting them when they leave the home.”

Essentially, honoring is tending to one's parents physical needs. *Mora* is defined there differently:

The Rabbis taught: “What is meant by revering parents? Reverence means neither standing in his customary place, nor sitting in his seat, nor contradicting his words, nor passing judgment over his father’s opinion.”

At first glance, the difference would seem to be that *kavod* requires tending to the physical needs of one's parents, while *mora* requires one to give added respect to one's parents, treating them differently than one would treat anyone else, even the best of friends.

The first law forbids sitting in a parent's seat. The simple understanding is that doing so would indicate viewing oneself as on par with the parent. Therefore, the halakhic authorities ban all similar acts.

Along the same lines, one must not contradict one's parents, or even validate their opinions, as that would seem to be equating one’s own opinion to that of the parent. Similarly, one should not refer to parents by name.

These laws emphasize the care and caution one must employ when dealing with one's parents.

Still, the following question remains: how do the obligations of *mora* relate to the obligations of *kavod*? Let us consider the scope of each mitzva.

**The Scope of the Obligation of Kavod**

The Talmud tells us that *kavod* includes the aforementioned actions of tending to one's parents physical needs. While the mitzva of *kavod* clearly includes other similar actions and requires that one fulfill parental requests that will benefit them and provide them with direct physical pleasure, it is not clear whether obeying their wishes under any and all circumstances, such as fulfilling a general request or demand of theirs, is included. A number of authorities do include this in the mitzva of *kavod*, while others do not.

An interesting understanding is presented (*ad loc.*) by the Sefer Ha-mikna. He explains that *kavod* requires taking care of one's parent's needs when one has not been asked to do so. However, whenever a parent makes any request of a child, even of physical need, it automatically is subsumed under the category of *mora,* not *kavod*. This requires a child to heed all parental requests, and it is treated with greater severity than *kavod*. (See also Sefer Ha-charedim 5, 2 and Mahari Bei Rav, Responsa of Rabbi Akiva Eger 1:68)

In fact, we will see that a number of sources seem to indicate that the obligation of *mora* is more expansive than that of *kavod*.

Thus, the Seforno writes (*Vayikra* 19:3):

This verse teaches us that honoring one's parents should not be done in an arrogant manner, even though one honors them by supplying them with food, drink, and clothing. Indeed, our Sages say: "One can give his father pheasant to eat and yet be driven out of the world" (*Kiddushin* 31a). Rather, one must honor them as one would honor superior people who are due reverence.

**Obligation of the Heart**

This Talmudic statement cited by the Seforno indicates that these *mitzvot* may require not only action, but a proper attitude as well. Though one may serve the finest delicacies to one’s parents, he may forfeit his right to exist! Rashi explains that one who shows resentment while serving a parent will be punished. Tosafot cite the Jerusalem Talmud (*Peia* 15c).

The story is told of one who regularly served his father pheasant. One time his father inquired, “How are you able to obtain this delicacy on a regular basis?” The son responded, “What do you care, old man? Just keep grinding and eat,” as if to say: just keep chewing and keep quiet.

While the Talmud denounces resentment and disrespectful speech while tending to the needs of a parent, a number of sources seem to require an emotional connection as well. For instance, the Sefer Charedim states that one must have feelings of love and affection as well:

“Honor your father and your mother” — this honor applies to one’s feelings and emotions as well as actions. If one displays honor for parents only in speech and deed, he shows that in reality he considers them to be lowly people and honors them only because God says so. Rather, he must develop an attitude wherein he sees them as truly great and honorable people, and this is the main aspect of honoring parents. Once one has developed this attitude, it will be easy for him to honor them sincerely in his speech and action as well. (1:35)

The Zohar praises “the son who looks after his father and mother and who loves them more than his own self, to the point that he would be willing to give up everything he had if only to do the will of his parents and to serve them.” This depiction teaches us that our Sages understand that the obligation to honor one’s parents includes loving them. And this follows logically, for doesn’t the Midrash teach that honoring one’s parents is a debt that one owes them for all that they have done for him? If so, part of that debt is the obligation to love one’s parents intensely, as they love him, instead of feeling that they are a heavy burden or a bother. (9:37)

Although the Talmudic descriptions of *kavod* and *mora* detail the actions required of a child, this does not seem to encompass the entirety of the obligation.

In fact, the emotional component of *mora* may help us understand the dispute as to whether these requirements apply even in private. The Taz (*YD* 240:2) and Arukh Ha-shulchan rule that even in total privacy one may not occupy the parent’s seat, even if no one else, including the parent, will see.

The Ein Yaakov (*Kiddushin* 31a) further explains that refraining from sitting in a parent's seat is viewed as *mora* rather than *kavod* because an onlooker may have no way of knowing the significance of avoiding a given chair; therefore, it is God alone who knows the true intent in one's heart.

The Rav, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, makes note of the inner dimensions of these *mitzvot* as well, explaining that *kavod* and *mora* consists of two components, outward action and inward experience. Although one might fulfill the dictates of proper conduct without acting out of a spirit of good will, the mitzva requires more. There is an additional aspect, the motivation behind one's deeds; this raises one's act from a technical discipline to an experience, rendering it sincere and meaningful action.

At the level of honoring, action becomes the agency through which the inner commitment of child to parent speaks, and the formal relationship turns into ultimate relatedness, mechanical distance into spiritual closeness, and the separateness of two personae is supplanted by an existential union. (*Family Redeemed*, p. 128)

Thus, the Rav explains, a wealthy child who provides all the parents’ needs without feeling attached to them will only fulfill the outward component; conversely, a child who lacks material means but is committed to his parents in every way possible may only fulfill the inward experience. One may love his parents yet act out in ways showing them disrespect, failing to fulfill the outward obligations of *mora* but holding true to the inward experience. On the other hand, one may show them tremendous honor and reverence, while missing all aspects of feeling, thereby fulfilling only the outward component. Obviously the goal is to merge one's outward action with the inner experience*.*

The Rav also notes that the Torah uses *kavod* to describe taking care of the needs of one’s parents, even though taking care of others is subsumed under the category of *tzedaka*; this proves that *kavod* involves a deeper connection. For that reason, the Talmud (*Kiddushin* 30b) notes that the term *kavod* is used in describing one’s relationship with God, Who certainly requires no assistance: "Thus the Torah compares the honor due to parents to that due to the Omnipresent."

In order to understand the nature of these *mitzvot*, we must identify the underlying rationale of these *mitzvot*, concerning which there is a wide range of opinion among Jewish thinkers.

**The Rationale for Special Treatment of One's Parents**

The question must be asked: why are parents accorded such special treatment? After all, regarding all people there is a mitzva of loving one's fellow. If so, everyone should be treated with the utmost respect. Yet this mitzva goes far beyond the general requirements of love. Why?

The most basic understanding for the special honor that must be accorded to one's parents isthe principle of *hakarat ha-tov,* gratitude, which is a major foundation of the Torah. This concept of gratitude is not to be taken lightly. In *Chovot Ha-levavot* (3, introduction), R. Bachya ibn Pakuda traces all religious and ethical feeling to the experience of gratitude. Awareness of grateful indebtedness is a core of our religious and moral thinking.

Most parents (though there are notable exceptions to the contrary) provide endlessly for the needs of their children. Parents open up their wallets and their hearts to their children, staying up to all hours of the night and thinking constantly about what they can do to better their children's lot. While this is often forgotten in the hustle and bustle of everyday interactions, a parent's job is one of the hardest, and it is deserving of a significant degree of gratitude.

This idea is expressed by a number of commentaries, among them the Chinnukh (33):

At the root of this mitzva lies the thought that it is fitting for a man to acknowledge and treat with loving-kindness the person who has treated him with goodness. He must not be a scoundrel, an ingrate who turns a cold shoulder — for this is an evil quality, utterly vile before God and mankind. It is incumbent upon a person to realize that his father and mother are the cause of his being in the world; hence, in the truest sense, it is proper for him to give them every honor and benefit that he can, since they brought him into the world and then, too, labored through many troubles over him while raising him.

The Chinnukh seems to clearly state that what lies at the base of this mitzva is gratitude. What is interesting about this reasoning is that the concept of gratitude is a very logical concept, seemingly applicable to all of humanity. Indeed, the Talmud (*loc. cit.*) uses the story of a non-Jew to illustrate this mitzva.

They asked of Rabbi Eliezer: “How far does the mitzva of honoring one’s father and mother extend?”

He answered them: “Go and see what one idolater in Ashkelon did for his father! His name was Dama son of Netina, and it once happened that the sages wanted to stones for the Ephod from him, for a profit of six hundred thousand [gold dinars] — Rav Kahana says: eight hundred thousand — but the key was under his father’s head, and he did not disturb his father.

While it is pleasant to see how someone was willing to forgo a fortune so as not to wake up his father, it seems a bit strange that the Talmud relates an anecdote about a non-Jew. A non-Jew may certainly excel in gratitude, but doesn’t the placement of honoring one’s parents in the Ten Commandments indicate that there is a unique element in this mitzva for Jews?

Furthermore, the commentators (*ad loc.)* point out that the way in which he honored his father might not be in line with Halakha at all. (See Year 1, Lesson 10 for an in-depth discussion of this passage).

Indeed, according to some sources, the mitzva of honoring one's parents was given at Mara (see Daat Zekenim and Ramban, *Shemot* 15:25), prior to the giving of the Torah, serving as an introduction to the Jewish faith and its obligations. But what is uniquely Jewish about honoring one's parents?

Let us see what the Chinnukh goes on to write:

After an individual has successfully integrated these feelings of gratitude and appreciation for his parents, he will be able to ascend to a higher level: that of appreciating what God has done for him. God, after all, is the ultimate Source of each man and all of his forefathers, all the way back to Adam. God brought him out of the womb and into this world, provided his needs throughout his life, gave him a working body and gave him an intellectual, knowledgeable and insightful soul. Without this intelligent soul, he would be like a horse or a donkey, with no understanding. One should contemplate how indebted he is to God and how great is his obligation to make sure to serve Him properly.

Thus, honoring one’s parents is intimately connected with one’s relationship to the Divine; it can be classified as a true *mitzva bein adam la-Makom*.

**Difficulty of this Mitzva**

Nevertheless, a number of sources stress the difficulty of fulfilling this mitzva properly. For instance, the Jerusalem Talmud (*loc. cit.*) records:

Rabbi Tarfon's mother went to her courtyard to take a walk on Shabbat, so Rabbi Tarfon went and placed his two hands under her feet, and she walked on them until she reached her bed. One time Rabbi Tarfon became ill, and the sages came to visit him. His mother said to them, “Pray on behalf of my son, for he conducts himself with exceptional honor towards me.” They said to her, “What does he do for you?” and she relayed this occurrence to them. They said to her, “Even if he were to do this act thousands upon thousands of times, he would not approach one half of the honor that is stipulated in the Torah."

Why is this mitzva so demanding? On a simple level, the difficulty stems from the essential obligation which is very expansive, as one can never finish with the mitzva; there will always be needs that arise and remain unmet.

Moreover, due to the tremendous gratitude one must have towards one's parents, the obligation is almost endless. In fact, in Judaism, as the Rav writes, *hakarat ha-tov* "signifies not only the duty of repaying a favor received but an act of recognition and axiological appraisal, a value judgment, a feeling of being indebted and a sense of obligation as well… Gratitude means going out of ourselves toward the thou, placing ourselves in a unique relation to our benefactor, and letting him share with us our most precious possession — ourselves." (*Family Redeemed,* pp. 140-141)

The extent of gratitude is so expansive that one can never fully feel that he or she has done all that is necessary. However, there would seem to be some other deeply-seated psychological rationales for why the mitzva is so difficult. People often find it very challenging to admit their limitations and vulnerabilities. Coming to terms with the fact that one’s life is owed to someone else may be exponentially more problematic.

Ours is a generation that takes a step back before acknowledging any sense of indebtedness, especially when it might be viewed as entitling another to express an opinion on one’s way of life. Properly acknowledging the role of parents in one’s life might be viewed as license for them to make decisions on one’s behalf. After all, they gave birth, they changed the diapers and they spent the money on clothes and education.

Essentially, we may say that the difficulty of *hakarat ha-tov* in general is magnified when one considers the overwhelming debt owed one’s parents.

**Something Deeper**

While these reasons may explain why the mitzva is so difficult for the child, they don't necessarily explain why the obligation is so expansive. Why was Rabbi Tarfon's behavior insufficient?

Furthermore, the placement of the mitzva among the Ten Commandments and of the mitzva of *mora* at the beginning of *Kedoshim,* when considered along with the expansive obligations that each requires, may point to another element in this mitzva.

We have certainly come a long way in our understanding of this mitzva, but to really plumb the depths of this obligation, we will have to wait for the next lesson.