

Respecting our Father

An individual who played a leading role in a major crime spree which involved huge amounts of money was about to be sentenced to ten years in prison. He sent a letter to Rav Zilberstein stating that he had the opportunity to diminish his sentence if he could use the abuse he had sustained in the hands of his father as part of his defense. His lawyers felt that after the judge heard about the traumatic effect that this had on his childhood, he would reduce his sentence by five years. Rav Zilberstein responded that Torah law does not permit this. Even if it meant being incarcerated for an additional five years, he was not permitted to publicly humiliate his father. Word would get out, and the media would have a field day with the scandalous news.

A few hours went by, and Rav Zilberstein received another request from the defendant. He cited the Talmud Yerushalmi, which rationalizes Kibbud Av v'Eim as part of one's obligation to be makir tov, to acknowledge the benefits and favor one receives and to offer gratitude to his benefactor. Parents raise their children and provide them with sustenance, an education and love. Does this apply, however, to a parent who has clearly reneged on his responsibility? Indeed, in his case, it was not hakoras ha'tov, good; rather, it was hakoras ha'ra, acknowledging the evil, that his father wrought against him. Does he still owe him respect under such circumstances?

Rav Zilberstein responded in a number of ways, each answer affirming his earlier p'sak that prohibited him from saying anything negative about his father, regardless of the consequences. Among them was the following explanation. In the Talmud Kiddushin 31a, Chazal relate the story of Dama ben Nesina, a gentile in Ashkelon, who possessed jewels which were a perfect match for what was needed for the Eiphod, vestment worn by the Kohen Gadol. The Chachamim, Sages of Yerushalayim, came to Dama requesting to purchase the jewels. They were prepared to offer an exorbitant amount of money to procure these jewels. Alas, the key to Dama's safe deposit box was beneath the pillow upon which his father was sleeping. He was not prepared to wake his father, regardless of how much money he risked losing. The sages left reluctantly to search for another source for these jewels.

One year later, Dama ben Nesina was rewarded for the respect he accorded his father, with the birth of a Parah Adumah, Red Heifer, in his herd of cattle. Indeed, Dama understood that this was a reward, for the time when the sages approached him to purchase the jewels. He said, "I know that if I would charge you an exorbitant price, you would agree to pay it. All I ask is the amount of money I lost last year when I had to forego the sale of the jewels out of respect for my father."

The commentators wonder why Hashem rewarded him with a Parah Adumah? Certainly, there must have been other ways to enrich this gentile who was so meticulous in observance of Kibbud Av v'Eim. They explain that Hashem sought to impart to us a critical lesson concerning the mitzvah of honoring one's parents. Just as Parah Adumah is one of those mitzvos that are under the scope of chukim, Divine decrees, mitzvos that seemingly have no human rationale; so, too, is Kibbud Av such a mitzvah. While it may seem to have its roots in the middah of hakoras hatov, it does not. We are to observe it for the same reason that we observe Parah Adumah - Divine imperative.

Rav Zilberstein concluded that the man was not permitted to disgrace his father, even if the result would be a reduction in his jail sentence. There is no negotiating with regard to mitzvos.