

HONORING OUR PARENTS PART 5

by Rabbi Yehonasan Gefen

Last week we discussed some of the laws behind the command to honor our parents and saw that we are obligated to provide for their needs. What is the law when our parents ask us to do something that does not fall into the category of serving them, rather it is relevant to our own lives? For example, if a parent tells his child that he should change his eating habits, is the child obligated to listen?

The answer is that he is not technically obligated to listen to his parent's request in such a situation. The reason is that the command to honor our parents is limited to providing for their needs. Any request that they make of their child with regard to his own lifestyle is not part of the command. Of course, it is commendable and often advisable to listen to one's parents requests because it pleases them to do so. However, if the child believes that the parent's request or instruction is not in his best interests then he is not obligated to listen.

This idea take on great significance when one's parents want him to live his life in a certain fashion, for example to choose a particular career. These issues are not within the realm of control that a parent has over his child. If the child does not want to conduct his life in the way that his parent desires, he has no obligation to do so. The child should, nonetheless, try to act as respectfully as possible in rejecting his parent's instructions.

This principle is explicitly stated in Jewish law with regard to whom the child chooses to marry. The parent does not have the right to instruct him who he should marry. It is important to note that, often, the parents do have a point of view that is worth taking into consideration given their life experience and deep knowledge of their child.

One may wonder why the command to honor our parents does NOT include requests that are not directly relevant to serving the parent. The answer is that honoring our parents does not mean living our lives in the way that they prescribe. Every individual has the right and ability to choose the life path that he follows and his parents do not have the right to take this right away from him. Thus we see that honoring our parents requires that we do our utmost to provide for their needs, but at the same time, it does not force us to live our life according to their vision.

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