

# WHAT WE OWE

*by Rabbi Label Lam*

Honor your father and your mother, in order that your days be lengthened on the land that HASHEM, your G-d, is giving you. (Shemos 20:12)

In His introductory statement to the world why was it necessary for HASHEM to command us to honor our parents? Isn't it too obvious already? My experience is that people naturally and automatically feel a great deal of respect for their father and mother. Back in the days when we were rough and tumble kids the worst fight that could happen was almost always triggered by somebody saying something insulting about another guy's mother or father. It was tantamount to a declaration of war. So why does the Torah need to push us to do what is natural and instinctive?

I can already detect resistance to the premise of the question. If people are automatically tuned in to the honor of their parents then why the all the big fuss when parents make simple requests like, "Take out the garbage!"? Even the best parents might expect replies such as, "It's not my turn!" or "When I'm done with my game in 18 minutes!" So where is the "disconnect" between the inherent reflex to defend our mothers' and fathers' honor and the big struggle to jump into action and fulfill their will? Let us consider two approaches that may help unravel this riddle of the human condition.

1) I can recall with prefect clarity the feelings I experienced when spending a glorious Shabbos in the presence of my Rebbe. Here was a man of enormous stature, someone who knows the Talmud forwards and backwards, a Rosh HaYeshiva, and a devoted father of a large family. One of those sibling disputes erupted right there at the table when one boy was told to sit someplace and the brother felt he was entitled to that spot. "He sat there last time! I never get to sit next to ...!" Feisty and bright as anything they argued their case and I was mortified. I quietly tried to broker peace with a subtle comment, "SHHHH! You can't argue like that with the Rosh HaYeshiva!" I remember the answer came back quick and sharp, "He may be the Rosh HaYeshiva to you but he's our father!"

It was then I realized this important psychological point. You can always tell when someone is a tourist in Manhattan. Their head is tilted back as they gaze up in awe at the spectacle of the enormous skyscrapers. To people from Kansas those edifices are wonders of human ingenuity and they really are. Native New Yorkers never look up! Tall buildings are like wall paper. We live with them all the time and we have become dulled to the appreciation of their enormity. So too with parents! We are meant to examine their virtues and to see them as truly great people. Let us say they really are! We would still need a thunderous reminder from Mt. Sinai to awaken us from our slumber and bring us back to our senses.

2) It happened that the Chasam Sofer had just returned to the city where he was a Rav and he was visited with the ugly news that a certain person in town was saying terrible things about him while he was gone. His immediate reaction was that he adopted a contemplative pose for a good while and sat there thinking. His students asked him what it was he was trying to figure out. He answered, "I am trying to recall what favor I ever did for this person that now he hates me so!"

It's an odd fact of life that we tend to find more faults with the ones to whom we owe the most. Years of experience in making hotel programs and running a school has taught me that the ones who pay the least complain the most! Why? We don't like to feel indebted! It's a pressure! It's a burden! The best way, psychologically, to unbridle our conscience from that load is to become a fulltime student of the faults of the creditor. Since we owe our parents everything, literally everything, then the debt ceiling is limitless. What do we owe to those who gave us life and love and support and more!?

Now the lawyerly voices begin to chime in, "Well they did it in a very imperfect way and they had selfish motives. Other people have better parents who took them places and gave them fancier stuff!" All that may be true but it does not begin to erase **what we owe!**