

HEAVEN AND EARTH

by Rabbi Naftali Reich

Honoring parents is considered one the most exalted commandments in the Torah. It occupies a position of primacy among the first five commandments on the Tablets of the Ten Commandments, along with the commandments safeguarding the honor of God.

One would expect that the ultimate practitioners of this commandment would be found among the most righteous people in the world. Paradoxically, however, the Talmud identifies Isaac's evil son Esau as the greatest exemplar of a person who honors his father. The Talmud tells us that Esau had a set of special garments that he wore when he entered his father's presence. Not even the great Sages of the Talmud penetrated so deeply into the essence of this commandment.

But a different profile of Esau emerges from the Biblical account. The Torah tells us that Esau married two women steeped in idolatry and that this caused great heartache and anguish to Isaac and Rebecca, his parents. It was not until he lost his father's blessings that Esau married the more suitable daughter of his uncle Ishmael. How do we reconcile Esau, the supremely obedient son who enters his father's presence in absolute awe, with Esau, the rebellious son who marries women that are the antithesis of everything his parents represent? And why didn't the righteous Jacob, Esau's younger brother, rise to a similar level of honoring his parents?

The commentators explain that Esau held his father in the highest regard, viewing him as a veritable angel from Heaven. When he entered his father's room, Esau felt as if he were stepping into another world, leaving his earthly existence behind and entering the celestial domain. He thought it appropriate to wear special garments, and he stood before his father trembling in submission and awe.

But what about his own life? Esau looked upon his father as an angel and respected him for it, but he himself was not yet prepared for the angelic existence. He was a down-to-earth man, and his lifestyle reflected it. When it came to marriage, he chose women that suited his own inclination.

Jacob, on the other hand, related to his father as a human being rather than some celestial creature. He saw his father as the symbol of how a man should live in this world. Therefore, he lived by his father's values and ideals. He many have treated his father with the transcendent awe of unbridgeable distance, but by following in his footsteps, he gave his father the only honor that is truly meaningful. A man traveled a great distance to ask a sage's advice on a complicated business matter. After explaining the situation and filling in all the details, he presented his problem.

The sage thought over the matter for a long while, then he gave the man his answer. The advice was brilliant, and the man was very please. "Now let us talk about something else, my son," said the sage. "Let us discuss your spiritual condition. Perhaps I can give you some good advice on that as well."

"No, thank you," said the man. "I got what I came for. I do not think you can give me any other advice that I need."

"Really?" said the sage. "You traveled all this way for my advice on a business matter, which is not really my specialty, and you are happy with my advice. Don't you think I could give you good and useful advice on issues of spirituality, which is my specialty?"

"You don't understand," said the man. "Money is money. It doesn't matter if I am talking about it or you are. But spirituality? Hey, I'm not ready for that stuff yet. When I'm ready, I'll come ask your advice."

"If that is your attitude," said the sage, "I expect you'll never come."

In our own lives, we look up to our great leaders and spiritual sage. We respect and admire them. We even revere them, but do we relate to them on a personal level? Do we pattern our lives after the lessons we learn from them? The ultimate reverence is to recognize that their lives are meaningful to us, that each of us on his own level and in his own way can enrich his life immeasurably by applying the teachings of the sages to everyday life. Text Copyright © 2006 by Rabbi Naftali Reich and **Torah.org**.

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