

## **Obligations of Children and Parents**

### **Rabbi Elliot Dorff**

#### **A) Obligations of Children**

- 1) Exodus 20:12:  
Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long upon the land which the Lord your God is giving you.
- 2) Leviticus 19:3:  
You shall fear every man his mother and his father, and you shall keep My sabbaths: I am the Lord your God.
- 3) Babylonian Talmud, Yevamot 5b:  
It was taught: One might think that the honor of father and mother supersedes the Sabbath, [but that is not so:] The Torah says, "You shall fear every man his mother and his father, and you shall keep My sabbaths; I am the Lord your God," [meaning] that all of you are obligated to honor Me.
- 4) Babylonian Talmud, Niddah 31a:  
There are three partners in the production of the human being: the Holy One, blessed be He, the father, and the mother. The father provides the white matter from which are formed the bones, sinews, nails, brain, and the white part of the eye. The mother provides the red matter from which are formed the skin, flesh, hair, and the pupil of the eye. The Holy One, blessed be He, infuses into him/her breath, soul, features, vision, hearing, speech, power of motion, understanding, and intelligence.
- 5) Babylonian Talmud, Kiddushin 30b:  
The Rabbis say: Three combine in the making of each person: God, the father, and the mother. If people honor their father and mother, God says, "I ascribe merit to them as if I dwelled among them and as if they honored Me."
- 6) Philo (first century, Alexandria), Treatise on the Decalogue:  
After dealing with the seventh day [the Fourth of the Ten Commandments], He gives the Fifth Commandment on the honor due to parents. This commandment He placed on the borderline between the two sets of five: it is the last of the first set, in which the most sacred injunctions, those dealing with God, are given, and it adjoins the second set of

five, which contain the duties of human beings to each other. The reason, I think, is this: we see that parents by their nature stand on the borderline between the mortal and the immortal sides of existence -- the mortal, because of their kinship with people and with other animals through the perishableness of the body; the immortal, because the act of generation assimilates them to God, the progenitor of everything...

Some bolder spirits, glorifying the name of parenthood, say that a father and mother are in fact gods revealed to sight, who copy the Uncreated in His work as the Framer of life....How can reverence be rendered to the invisible God by those who show irreverence to the gods who are near at hand and seen by the eye?

7) Deuteronomy Rabbah, Devarim 1:15 (cf. B. Kiddushin 31a and J. Peah 15c):

Rabbi Eliezer the Great's disciples asked him, "How far does honor of father and mother extend?" He replied, "Go and see what Dama B. Netina [a non-Jew] did. He was president of the city council. One time she came and slapped him in the presence of the whole assembly, and all he said was, 'May that be enough for you, my mother.' Our rabbis say that some of our wise men came to him to buy a precious stone in the place of one which had fallen out, and been lost, from the breastplate of the High Priest....They agreed to give him a thousand gold pieces for the stone. He went in, and he found his father asleep with his leg stretched out upon the box which contained the jewel. He would not disturb him and came back without it. When the wise men perceived this, they thought that he wanted more money, and they offered ten thousand gold pieces. When his father woke up, he went in and brought out the jewel. The wise men offered him the ten thousand pieces, but he replied, 'Far be it from me to make a profit from honoring my father; I will take only the thousand which we had agreed on.' And what reward did God give him? Our Rabbis say that in that very year his cow bore a red calf [which is extremely rare and whose ashes are necessary for a number of the Temple rites], which he sold for more than ten thousand gold pieces.

8) Babylonian Talmud, Kiddushin 31b-32a:

Our Rabbis taught: What is "fear" and what is "honor"? "Fear" means that he (the son) must neither stand in his (the father's) place nor sit in his place, nor contradict his words, nor tip the scales against him. "Honor" means that he must give him food and drink, clothe and cover him, lead him in and out. The Scholars propounded: At whose expense? Rab Judah said: The son's. R. Nahman b. Oshaia said: The father's. The Rabbis gave a ruling to R. Jeremiah -- others state to R. Jeremiah's son -- in accordance with the view that it must be at the father's expense. An objection is raised: The Bible says, "Honor your father and your mother," and it also says, "Honor the Lord with your substance": just as the latter means at personal cost, so the former too. But if you say [that the son provides goods and services to his father] at the father's (expense), how does it affect

him? -- Through loss of time.

9) Babylonian Talmud, Kiddushin 31a-31b:

A man may feed his father on fattened chickens and inherit Hell as his reward, and another may put his father to work in a mill and inherit Paradise.

How is it possible that a man might feed his father fattened chickens and inherit Hell? It once happened that a man used to feed his father fattened chickens. Once his father said to him: "My son, where did you get these?" He answered: "Old man, old man, eat and be silent, just as dogs eat and are silent." In such an instance, he feeds his father fattened chickens, but he inherits Hell.

How is it possible that a man might put his father to work in a mill and inherit Paradise? It once happened that a man was working in a mill. The king decreed millers should be brought to work for him. the son said to his father: "Father, go and work in the mill in my place, (and I will go to work for the king). For it may be (that the workers will be) ill-treated, in which case let me be ill-treated instead of you. And it may be (that the workers will be) beaten, in which case let me be beaten instead of you." In such an instance, he puts his father to work in a mill, but he inherits Paradise.

10) Maimonides, Responsa, #448:

Know that the Torah has placed us under a heavy obligation in regard to the proselyte. For we were commanded to honor and revere our parents, and to obey the prophets, and it is possible for a person to honor and revere and obey those whom s/he does not love. But with regard to the proselyte, there is a command to love him/her with a great, heartfelt love ... much as we are commanded to love God.

11) Exodus Rabbah 34:3:

You are My children, and I am your Father....It is an honor for children to dwell with their father, and it an honor for the father to dwell with his children....Therefore make a house for the Father in which He can dwell with His children.

12) Babylonian Talmud, Kiddushin 31b:

R. Assi had an aged mother. She said to him, "I want ornaments." So he made them for her. "I want a husband." -- "I will look out for you." "I want a husband as handsome as you." Thereupon he left her and went to Palestine. On hearing that she was following him, he went to R. Johanan and asked him. "May I leave Palestine for abroad?" "It is

forbidden," he replied. "But what if it is to meet my mother?" "I do not know," said he. He waited a short time and went before him again. "Assi," said he, "you have determined to go. May the Omnipresent bring you back in peace." Then he went before R. Eleazar and said to him, "Perhaps, God forbid, he was angry?" "What (then) did he say to you?" he asked. "May the Omnipresent bring you back in peace," was the answer. "Had he been angry," he rejoined, "he would not have blessed you." In the meanwhile he learned that her coffin was coming. "Had I known," he exclaimed, "I would not have left [Babylonia]."

13) Maimonides, Laws of Rebels 6:10; Shulhan Arukh, Yoreh De'ah 240:10:

If one's father or mother becomes mentally disturbed, he should try to treat them as their mental state demands, until they are pitied by God. But if he finds that he cannot endure the situation because of their extreme madness, he may leave and go away, appointing others to care for them properly.

14) Rabbi Eliezer Pappo [a nineteenth century moralist] Pele Yo'etz, Part I, Kaph, pp. 170-172:

If a man cannot honor his parents as they should be honored, then ... it is best that he no longer share his father's board, provided his father agrees to this. It is also best that a man [who gets angry] -- if he can -- send his children from his table, lest he be guilty of placing a stumbling block before them [by provoking them to speak dishonorably to him and thus violating Leviticus 19:14]...and thus there shall be peace in your home.

## **B) Obligations of Parents**

1) Babylonian Talmud, Kiddushin 29a:

Our Rabbis taught: A man is responsible to circumcise his son, to redeem him [if he is the first born from Temple service, "pidyon ha-ben"], to teach him Torah, to marry him off to a woman, and to teach him a trade, and there are those who say that he must also teach him to swim. Rabbi Judah says: Anyone who fails to teach his son a trade teaches him to steal.

2) Deuteronomy 6:4-9:

Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone [or, is one]. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. Take to heart these instructions with which I charge you this day. Impress them [teach them diligently] upon your children. Recite them when you stay at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you get up. Bind them as a sign on your hand and let them serve as a symbol on your forehead; inscribe them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

3) Deuteronomy 4:9:

Take utmost care and watch yourselves scrupulously, so that you do not forget the things that you saw with your own eyes and so that they do not fade from your mind as long as you live. And make them known to your children and to your children's children.

4) Babylonian Talmud, Kiddushin 30a:

Are grandparents responsible for teaching their grandchildren?  
... "And you shall teach your children" (Deuteronomy 11:19), from that I only know that I must teach my children; how do I know that I must also teach my grandchildren? Because the Torah says, "and make them known to your children and to your children's children" (Deuteronomy 4:9).

5) Babylonian Talmud, Bava Batra 21a:

Rabbi Judah said in the name of Rav: Rabbi Joshua ben Gamla should be remembered for good, for had it not been for him the Torah would have been forgotten in Israel. For at first, the boy who had a father was taught Torah by him, while the boy who had no father did not learn. Later, they appointed teachers of boys in Jerusalem, and the boys who had fathers were brought by them [to the teachers] and were taught; those who had no fathers were still not brought. So then they ordered that teachers should be appointed in every district, and they brought to them lads of the age of sixteen or seventeen. And when the teacher was cross with any of the lads, the lad would kick at him and run away. So then Rabbi Joshua ben Gamla ordered that teachers should be appointed in every district and in every city and that the boys should be sent to them at the age of six or seven years.

6) Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 91b:

He who denies a child religious knowledge robs him of his heritage.

7) Babylonian Talmud, Bava Batra 21a:

If you must strike a child, strike him/her with the string of a shoe.

8) Mishnah, Ethics of the Fathers 5:23 (5:24 in some editions):

He [Yehudah ben Tema] used to say: At five years of age -- the study of Bible; at ten -- the study of Mishnah; at thirteen -- responsibility for the commandments; at fifteen -- the study of Talmud; at eighteen -- marriage; at twenty -- pursuit of a livelihood; at thirty -- the peak of one's powers; at forty -- the age of understanding; at fifty -- the age of giving counsel; at sixty -- old age; at seventy -- the hoary head [or, white old age]; at eighty -- the age of strength [or, rare old age]; at ninety -- the bent back; at one hundred -- as one dead and out of this world.

9) Song of Songs Rabbah, on verse 1:4:

Rabbi Meir said: When the Israelites came to receive the Torah, God said to them: "Bring to Me good sureties that you will observe it." They answered: "Our ancestors will be our sureties." God answered: "Your sureties need sureties themselves, for I have found fault with them." They answered: "Our Prophets will be our sureties." God replied: "I have found fault with them also." Then the Israelites said: "Our children will be our sureties." They proved acceptable, and God gave the Torah to Israel.

10) Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 119b:

The world itself rests upon the breath of the children in the schoolhouse.