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Dvar Torah: Va'etchanan
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Honoring our Parents

There's a story in the Talmud about how a famous rabbi named Rabbi Tarfon treated his mother. One Shabbat day, Tarfon's mother was walking in the courtyard when her shoe broke, exposing her foot to the ground. So he placed his hands under her feet step by step until she reached her couch. You might think that Tarfon was thanked for his care and concern. Clearly he was a doting son. But his mother complained to the other rabbis that her son had shown her too much honor. They all disagreed with her. They told her that even if Tarfon had repeated this act thousands of times, he still would not have shown her even half the honor the Torah requires a child to give to his or her parents. I love my mom, but I'm not going to do what Tarfon did.

In this week's parasha, Va'etchanan, we come across the Ten Commandments a second time around and right at the heart of this famous list is the commandment to honor one's father and mother. This is arguably the most difficult mitzvah to follow—at least that's what the rabbis in the Talmud imply with their response to Tarfon's mother. The Torah doesn't exactly say how to honor one's parents—it just says to do it. After peeling some layers away and looking deeper, I found some suggestions from our sacred texts. In one place it teaches us: to honor means to supply our parents with food and drink, provide them with clothing and footwear and assist their coming in and going out of the house (BT Kiddushin 31b). Basically, taking care of our parents when they can no longer take care of themselves. We are also instructed to do whatever we can so our parents don't get upset. I'm sure that's a challenge for some of us. And finally, I found a story that teaches us how we should never wake our parents up from sleep even if waking them up could bring riches to the family. This makes me think of Ed McMahon ringing the door bell and a child turning him away since her parents are sleeping.

There are clearly many ways to honor our parents, whether they are living or not. If not, we can visit the cemetery, hang pictures of them on our walls, share anecdotes about them, name someone after them, cook something they used to cook, and so on.

Now we all have or had different relationships with our parents. I am sure some of us love our parents as much as Rabbi Tarfon loved his mom. I'm also sure some of us had the opposite kind of affection and some of us fall somewhere in-between. Regardless of one's relationship, the Torah instructs us to honor the two people who brought us in this world.

Why is this? Why is it so important to honor them? Perhaps practicing this mitzvah is like praising God, something that we can never fully do, yet something we ought to do. In our

siddur we read, "Even if my mouth is filled with praise as much as the sea is full of water, still I could never fully express my love and thanks to you, oh God."

There are times in our lives when we feel God has cheated us, taken someone away from us or has inflicted something terrible upon us and yet, as Jews, we are still encouraged to honor God with how we treat others and ourselves and by reciting age-old prayers such as the kaddish which only expresses our love for God. So too, the honor due to our parents approaches this level. Just like we can never realistically expect to fully honor God, we will only fulfill a shadow of the mitzvah of honoring a parent. Whether both have hurt us, still, we practice this mitzvah as hard as it may be. After all, our parents gave us our lives. One can never be repaid for that. Now, are parents like God? I'm sure some parents think so and there is a bit of truth in this analogy. Like God, a parent has created, thus our relationship with them can impact our relationship with God.

Judaism teaches that we should view serving our parents as a vehicle towards serving God. However, how many of us feel a sense of spirituality when honoring our parents? Probably not many of us. But I think being conscious of honoring our parents might make us more aware of the one who created everything and thus lead us to a more spiritual life.

As I mentioned earlier, there are surely some of us who place this mitzvah on the bottom of the to-do list. I recall visiting a family prior to the elder mother's funeral and the 60 year old son told me to not even think of referring to his mother as a "loving or kind woman because she wasn't." In fact, she was abusive. So what does our tradition advise to these children? Surely they can't be required to honor their parents. Well, our texts say that it's forbidden for a parent to make the burden too heavy on the child. While the mitzvah to honor our parents is pretty enormous and almost impossible to fulfill, it's also true that parents have an obligation to help their children perform this mitzvah. (Help me honor you.) Their actions should warrant respect and honor.

I have come to understand why this commandment is number five and that it directly follows four commandments dealing with our relationship to God. Judaism values the parent child relationship and understands the colossal job of parenting. It ain't easy. Now I don't know if calling my mom more often will bring me closer to God, but it will bring me closer to her and that's all right with me.