

ACHAREI MOS (LEVITICUS 16:1-20:27)

Honor Thy Father's General

2010 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplovitz

Last week (“Dueling *Brisses*”) we discussed the dilemma of conflicting religious obligations. The Bris/Covenant of Circumcision tells us to cut skin on the eighth day of a baby boy’s life. The Bris/Covenant of Shabbos tells us not to cut skin on the Sabbath. When the eighth day corresponds with the Sabbath, these two commandments are in conflict. The Torah’s ruling in Sabbath vs. Circumcision is that Circumcision wins.

This week we are faced with another conflict. Consider the following.

We are living in times of unprecedented renewal of devotion to religious observance. Jews from totally assimilated backgrounds are joining Yeshivas in droves. Earlier generations saw religious parents who looked with dismay at their children’s abandonment of commitment to Torah. Today we see children from non-kosher homes accepting the Torah lifestyle that their parents may vaguely recall from THEIR grandparents’ homes.

Many parents are thrilled. Many parents are not.

Understandably, it is difficult for some parents to accept this rejection of their lifestyles. “This is the twenty-first century!” they cry. “Why are my children adopting an archaic belief system?” (Often, the reaction is the result of the parents’ feelings of guilt for their own lack of commitment.)

Newly religious young people, called *Baalei Teshuvah*, (literally, “Returnees” or “Repentants”) are well-advised to handle their new-found religious observance with tact and diplomacy. After all, the family has been going to Grandma’s barbeque for years. All of a sudden you’re the odd man out who refuses to go because the food isn’t kosher.

It is very easy for the religious person to get defensive and belligerent. Refusing to compromise, he stands his ground, effectively turning his family off to his new values. Insults fly back and forth, and the religion of Abraham and Moses has sparked yet another holy war!

One does not endear the Jewish religion to the members of his family by fighting them and arguing with them. So what should one do?

What is the solution? What do we do when religious obligation stands in the way of getting along with others? After all, as it says in this week's Torah Reading, ...*You must love your neighbor as yourself...* (Leviticus,19:18) The Torah requires us to love and respect our fellow man. What should we do when there is a conflict between the Mitzvah of accommodating your fellow man and the Mitzvah of following the Torah? And what about the Fifth Commandment, that of honoring one's parents?

The Torah addresses this problem directly:

A person must revere his mother and father, and keep my Sabbaths; I am G-d... (Ibid. Verse 3)

The Talmud (Yevamos, 5b) explains that the Torah is telling us what to do when someone's parents tell him to violate the Sabbath:

"One might think that the Mitzvah of honoring one's parents outweighs the prohibition against violating the Sabbath. (In other words, listen to your parents when they tell you to ignore Jewish Law). Therefore the Torah tells us, '*A person must revere his mother and father, and keep my Sabbaths...*' -- You are all required to honor Me."

The logic is quite simple -- If a sergeant orders a private to ignore the general's order, whose order should the private obey? The Torah requires both the father and son to observe the Sabbath. The father has no right to tell his son to desecrate the Sabbath. "...*keep my Sabbaths, I am G-d...* I'M the one who's giving the orders around here!"

This is easier said than done.

The Torah is telling the religious son that the Mitzvah of honoring one's parents is not absolute. Apparently, it's okay to "dis" your parents! They're wrong! You're right! The Torah says so!

Not really. It is true that the Torah commands us to defy our parents when they tell us not to obey the Torah. However, that doesn't remove our requirement to do so in the most respectful way possible.

How about something like, "I love you, Dad. I know how much you've done for me, and I would never want to do anything that would hurt you. Please try to understand that for religious reasons I can't make it to Grandma's pork barbeque this Saturday afternoon. I'll be in Shul. What do you say I pick you and Grandma up on Sunday and I'll treat you to a Glatt Kosher dinner at Dougie's?"

It doesn't always work. But that doesn't mean that the son shouldn't try.

I have many friends who are, religiously, late starters. Many of them discovered their Judaism in college or later. Some of them have parents who are shocked that they have made such a sharp turn away from their upbringing. Others are pleasantly surprised that they are seeing respect from their children for the

first time in years! It often depends upon whether the student takes to heart that the right to ignore his parents' wishes in one area does not mitigate his obligation to honor them in every other situation.

This concept is not politically correct.

I recently walked past two people having a conversation about this topic. They were discussing the daughter of one of the residents of the retirement home where I work. The daughter has recently become religious. As a result, she no longer eats in her mother's home because it's not kosher. (Our retirement home is Glatt Kosher, but the residents have their own kitchens in their apartments. The residents in the home range from uncompromisingly orthodox to totally secular.) I tried to walk past this conversation, but it was too late. "What do YOU think, Rabbi? Don't you think that the daughter should fulfill "Honor Thy father and Thy mother?"

I tried to explain it the way I just explained it to you. I pointed out that the sergeant also has to listen to the "General."

She was not impressed. "That is terrible!" she said. "If religion prevents people from honoring their parents, of what value is it?"

In one respect, she is right. The problem really stems from how we view the Torah. If one believes, as this woman did, that Judaism is a system of quaint customs and ceremonies that are of little real value, then it follows that honoring one's parents should cancel out these practices. If, however, we believe that the Torah is our Handbook from G-d on how to live our lives, it is absolutely essential to follow those guidelines.

The G-d Who told us to honor our parents is the same G-d who gave us the other Nine Commandments.

Now, how's THIS for a dilemma?:

Mark and Leslie (not their real names) split up. They had both been rather secular when they met, but Leslie became quite religious. Their marriage produced a lot of anger and a little boy named Michael. Michael was eight when his parents divorced.

Michael embraced the religious values of his mother. However, the court had granted ample visitation with his Dad, who was antagonistic toward his ex-wife's Judaism. Leslie argued that Mark's hostility toward religion was detrimental to Michael's well being, but the court would not get involved.

Mark insisted that Michael come with him in the car on Saturday. Leslie could not prevent Michael from visiting his father on weekends. She could not shield him from this conflict.

What advice should Leslie give to Michael? After all, Michael was just a little boy! It is one thing to tell a college graduate to respectfully inform his father that for religious reasons, he cannot comply. To place this burden on an eight-year-old is another thing entirely.

Leslie was in a quandary. Should she tell Michael to fight his father? If Michael refuses to ride on Saturday, his father will drag him, kicking and screaming, into the car. Should she tell him to ride in the car with his father? If she would tell Michael to ride on Saturday in his father's car, she would undermine the very Judaism that she was trying to teach him! What should she do?

What she did was turn to Rabbi Shimon Schwab, of Blessed Memory. Rabbi Schwab was a great scholar, a man of wisdom and sensitivity.

Rabbi Schwab agreed that Leslie could not tell Michael that he is allowed to ride in a car on the Sabbath. One is not permitted to tell one's children things that are not true. Saying that one may listen to his father and violate the Sabbath is not true.

However, Rabbi Schwab had a bigger concern. Bottom line reality was that one way or the other, Michael was going to ride on Saturday. His father was going to force him. "If you tell Michael to refuse, he will end up in the car anyway. He won't fight his father. He's only eight years old! He'll ride with his father on Shabbos. He'll go to the movies on Shabbos. He will violate these holy commandments and he will be overwhelmed with guilt for ignoring his mother's Torah. How can we burden him so? He may come to deal with his guilt by rejecting Judaism entirely."

Rabbi Schwab came up with an insightful solution to this problem. (DISCLAIMER: This is a suggestion that a Torah scholar gave for a specific question in a specific case. One should not assume that the same advice would be applicable in other situations.)

"Tell Michael the truth," said the rabbi. "Tell him that the Torah does not permit him to ride on the Sabbath. But then you must tell him that G-d understands that this is a situation beyond his control. Tell him that G-d knows that he wouldn't ride if he could help it. Tell him that G-d will forgive him. This way, you will tell him unequivocally what the Law is without the burden of guilt. In this way, with G-d's help, you will succeed in raising a well-adjusted, Torah observant Jew."

Today, at the age of twenty-two, Michael continues to excel in his Yeshiva studies. Thank G-d for His Torah and for the wisdom of the Sages of Israel.

Have a great Shabbos.

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