

The Land of Israel in the Parsha & Our Lives

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Parashat Yitro

What is the connection between Honoring Our Parents and Eretz Yisrael?

Does Honoring Parents Override Keeping the Mitzvah of Living in Israel?

When I became a Ba'alat Teshuva (returnee to the Torah) in 1980, the question of whether moving to Israel would infringe upon the mitzvah to honor my parents did not cross my mind. First of all, the concept of honoring parents was quite novel to me, and secondly, my new Torah observance was so intertwined with living in the Torah community I was part of in Jerusalem, that even entertaining the thought of leaving Israel would be tantamount to leaving the Torah and thus cutting myself off from true life as it states: "For that is your life and the length of your days, to dwell on the land which Hashem swore to your forefathers to Avraham, to Yitzchak, and to Ya'acov to give to them" (*Devarim* 30:20). My husband-to-be had joined the Yeshiva community in between completing medical school and carrying out his internship. His parents, who had pinned great hopes upon their only son's medical career, insisted that he return to the States to fulfill his internship and his conditional scholarship to work in a physician shortage area. His dilemma elicited a heated discussion in the Yeshiva, regarding whether the mitzvot to live in Israel and learn Torah override the mitzvah of honoring parents. Our Rabbi ruled that the former overrides the latter. As support for his ruling, the Rabbi quoted Rashi's commentary on: "Every man shall fear his mother and his father, but you shall observe My Shabbats. I am Hashem, your G-d" (*Vayikra* 19:3). This verse implies that although we must fear our parents, we must nevertheless keep Shabbat; thus, should a parent ask the child to violate Shabbat, the laws of Shabbat override the parents' wishes as the Talmud states, "Although I have admonished you regarding the fear of your father, nevertheless, if he tells you to desecrate the Shabbat, do not listen to him. This is also the case with all the [other] mitzvot. (*Babylonian Talmud, Baba Metzia* 32a). Our Rabbi taught us that based on the above, even if our parents request that we leave Israel, the mitzvot of living in Israel and learning Torah supersede their request. Due to following this ruling, to this day, we still - 45 years later - live on our homestead in Gush Etzion. We, our two sons and four granddaughters, who grew up here in Israel, have no intentions to leave our homeland. Had we heeded my in-laws' demand to return to the US who knows whether we would be keeping the Torah today?

By Honoring our Parents, we Acknowledge and Honor Hashem – Our Ultimate Parent

A classical question is why the fifth commandment to honor our parents is placed on the first tablet describing the five mitzvot between man and G-d when it seems to belong to the category of the mitzvot on the second tablet dealing with the five commandments between man and man. The well-known answer is that although honoring our parents is essentially an obligation between people, it is also related to G-d since there are three partners in the team bringing about the birth of a child. "There are three partners in the creation of a person: The Holy One, Blessed be He, his father, and his mother. His father emits the white seed... His mother emits red seed... And the Holy One, Blessed be He, inserts into him a spirit, a soul, astral energy field (countenance), eyesight, hearing of the ear, the capability of speech of the mouth, the capability of walking with the legs, understanding, and wisdom... (*Babylonian Talmud, Niddah* 31a). If I respect my father and mother who are the ones who created my physical body - which will eventually wither and die - how much more must I honor my Father in Heaven, who granted me with the superior component, my eternal soul! (*Kli Yakar, Shemot* 20:12). Our parents are merely junior partners with G-d in the creation of life. They did not actually bring us into the world, they only planted a seed in the ground. Yet the Divine power alone is capable of transforming the seed into a living and breathing being. Thus, when we honor our parents, we all the more so honor G-d, the true Creator, Who provides our life and

soul (Based on Ramban, *Shemot* 20:12). By commanding us to honor our parents, G-d informs us that each and every individual exists due to His specific will. If we, as individuals, were created by chance, there would be no reason to honor parents. Therefore, when we honor our parents, it is considered as honoring G-d Himself, for by honoring them we demonstrate our awareness of G-d's involvement in our own creation (Maharal, *Tiferet Yisrael*, Chapter 41). Thus, respecting our parents enables us to acknowledge and appreciate that it is ultimately G-d who brought us into existence, and sustains and guides the world.

Why is the Reward for Honoring Parents Specifically a Long Life in the Land of Israel?

ספר שמות פרק כ פסוק יב כִּבְדוּ אֶת אֲבִיךָ וְאֶת אִמְךָ לְמַעַן יַאֲרֹכְךָ יְיָ אֱלֹהֶיךָ וְאָמְרָה לְךָ: "Honor your father and your mother, so that your days be lengthened on the land that Hashem, your G-d, is giving you" (*Shemot* 20:12).

The reward of a long life is promised specifically "on the land that Hashem, your G-d, is giving you." Not only is the reward for honoring parents to live a long life, the reward also includes the privilege of living in the promised land. This second lesser-known reward for honoring parents is surely no less valuable than the first. But what is the connection between honoring parents and being fortunate to live in the land of Israel? By honoring our parents, we demonstrate the humility to understand that the world did not originate with us, rather, we acknowledge that Hashem runs every detail of this world. Being a Divine mitzvah it is appropriate that its reward be realized in Hashem's Land together with His chosen people in Eretz Yisrael. G-d created the world, and when it suited Him, He allowed temporary control of the Land to the Canaanites until the Jewish people fulfilled the divine mitzvah of conquering the Promised Land, which He had granted us eternally (Rashi, *Bereishit* 1:1). Since then – a period of approximately 3300 years – the Land has never been devoid of Jews. "If it were possible that the Children of Israel would be completely absent from the Land of Israel, G-d forbid, that Hashem would do this, for He has already promised that He will never completely wipe out or uproot the Jewish nation, then there would be no possibility of calculating the months or declaring leap years" (Rambam, *Sefer HaMitzvot, Positive Mitzvah* 153). Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch explains the connection between honoring parents and the reward of long life specifically in the land of Israel by adding the national element. Honoring our parents is a necessary condition for Am Yisrael to be able to remain within Eretz Yisrael. This is so because recognizing our personal roots will lead to recognizing our national roots, which are cast deep within the Land of Israel. This connects the reward for honoring our parents with a long life specifically in Eretz Yisrael; for it is not simply a matter of our individual length of days, but that of our entire nation. Honoring parents stems from recognizing that we are part of the Jewish people who have been planted deeply within the Land since time immemorial. Our nation's yearning for the Land has not changed and will never change throughout the generations. Thus, the Torah teaches that the reward for honoring parents is longevity specifically in the Land of Israel (Based on Nir Shaul, presented by Yedidya Solomon, *Honoring Parents and Eretz Yisrael*).

Honoring Parents Confirms the Transmission of the Torah Fully Applicable in Israel

Honoring parents highlights the importance of each previous generation's role in transmitting the Jewish tradition. It makes us aware of our place in the world, understanding that we are merely like dwarves standing on the shoulders of giants, with the previous generations having built towers of Torah and of faith and imbued Am Yisrael with sanctity. This outlook brings us to recognize the true historical connection between the Nation and the Land of Israel. Since our faith is based on the transmission of our ancestors; disrespect for parents would be disrespect for the tradition they bequeath to us, G-d forbid. In my weekly *Kuzari* class, we just discussed the importance of proving the truth of the Torah. The Jewish people knew about the Exodus, Hashem's miracles during the desert wandering, the giving of the Torah, and leading the

Israelites to the promised land, originally from personal experience, and afterward through uninterrupted tradition, (from parents to children) which is equal to the former (Rabbi Yehuda Halevi, *The Kuzari* 1:31). The prerequisite to accepting traditions from our ancestors is honoring our parents, the bearers of those traditions. The mitzvah of honoring parents is the fact that the very basis of our faith is what has been transmitted to us by our parents and ancestors, as it is written “Recall the days of old, ponder the years of each generation. Ask your father and he will tell you, your elders and they will speak to you” (*Devarim* 32:7). We can only accept the traditions that we receive from our ancestors if we have an attitude of respect toward them (Based on Abarbanel, *Shemot* 20:12). Likewise, the more contemporary Torah scholar Rabbi David Elimelech Yoles conveys a similar outlook. We received our faith from our parents and ancestors who transmitted to us the miracles and wonders that G-d performed for us during the Exodus from Egypt, in the desert, and at the revelation at Sinai. Therefore, showing disregard toward our parents and ancestors undermines the strength of the tradition we receive, for how can we know that our faith is true if we disrespect those who have transmitted it? (*Sefer Keren le'David, Yitro*). The ultimate purpose and destination of our uninterrupted tradition is its complete fulfillment in the Divinely imbued Holy Land: The mitzvot are primarily for those who dwell in the Land of Hashem. “We were commanded to take possession of the Land that G-d, may He be blessed, gave to our forefathers, Avraham, Yitzchak, and Ya'acov; and we must not leave it in the hands of any other nation or let it remain desolate” (Addendum to *Rambam's Sefer HaMitzvot, Positive Commandment 4*).

Honoring our Ancestors Entitles us to Our Ancestral Promise of Inheriting the Land

Although the mitzvah of honoring our parents is a rational, humanistic mitzvah, it is still connected – like all other mitzvot – specifically to Eretz Yisrael. Therefore, through promising the reward “that your days will be lengthened upon the land that Hashem, your G-d is giving you,” the Torah emphasizes that even mitzvot such as honoring our parents apply especially to Eretz Yisrael. When we observe the early tradition (of honoring our parents), we will be worthy of the rightful privilege of the early ones, which Hashem communicated to Avraham initially, “Go forth from your land ... to the land that I will show you ... To your offspring I will give this land” (*Bereishit* 12:1-7); “For all the land that you see, to you I will give it, and to your descendants forever” (*Ibid.* 13:15). This commitment was repeated to all the patriarchs. If Israel will honor the heritage of the patriarchs, the Divine promise regarding their connection to Eretz Yisrael will be fulfilled, and they will live long lives, “upon the land that Hashem, your G-d is giving you” (Rav Mordechai Greenberg, *The Reward for Honoring Parents and Eretz Yisrael*). As a reward for honoring our parents, we become honored to live an upright life in our homeland also called our Motherland and Fatherland. In a certain sense, the land of Israel is our parent, as all human souls are created at the Temple Mount. The Temple below is connected to the Temple above. From this place, the souls descend and ascend on the ladder (Kli Yakar, *Bereishit* 12:1). Perhaps we can explain that had the reward for honoring parents been merely longevity without the promise to live in the Land of Israel, it would have been a merely quantitative rather than qualitative promise, for a life lived in exile cannot be compared to the goodness of living in the Promised Land, as no life is as worthy as that lived in Eretz Yisrael. Rather than bowing our heads with a hunched over back through the effect of millennia of exile antisemitism, here in Israel we live to see the fulfillment of the prayer, “May the Merciful One break the yoke of exile from our neck, and may He lead us upright to our land” (Grace after Meals).