

EXCEPTIONS TO THE 5TH COMMANDMENT:

Do I always need to honor my parents?

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Introduction

“Honor your father and mother.” (Exodus 20:12) To most Jewish people these are familiar words: words that are learned as a child and words that form the 5th of the Ten Commandments (or 5th Commandment). What exactly are the *Ten Commandments*? Most Jews could rattle off a few easily, others could list all ten, and some could list all ten in the proper order. People may wonder: why are the Ten Commandments so important? Why do people devote their lives to studying these commandments? How can ten seemingly straightforward laws summarize the behavior that G-d expects the Jews to follow? Even though these are important questions, there is another question that I would like to answer specifically with regard to the 5th commandment: in modern society are there any exceptions when it is not necessary to honor your parents?

This question arose October 16, 2010. I was extremely excited for my first home Dartmouth club hockey game of the season! This year I am a co-captain of the Dartmouth club hockey team so I spend time outside of practice scheduling games, ordering jerseys, organizing transportation for away games, etc. Even though practicing is fun, nothing beats playing in a game. It is difficult to describe the sense of exhilaration and adrenaline felt before a hockey game.

I can recall being in my dormitory room at 5:30 pm – an hour before game time. Right before I was about to head to the ice rink, my father called me. He was very calm, but clearly upset. My brother had told him that I had a hockey game tonight against University of New Hampshire and my father was worried. Even though the Dartmouth club hockey team is co-ed, all of the teams that we play are men’s teams.

As a result, “checking” (otherwise known as hitting) is allowed during the games. My father expressed his concern of injury, especially because I am a woman. Obviously, I knew that there is chance of injury if I decided to play in the game. Though there is a chance of injury for anybody – regardless of gender or size. It is true that I might be more prone to injury than a 6 foot, 180 lb man. However, I am a junior and I have been playing against men ever since I came to Dartmouth. Subsequently, this was not my first game against a men’s team although for some reason, my father decided right before this game that he did not think it would be a good idea if I played, even though he had thought it was okay before. My phone conversation did not end well with him. I was extremely upset. I had been looking forward to the game all week, and five minutes before I was going to leave for the game he decides to me that he did not want me to play. I had a decision to make: to play or not to play.

As I was trying to come to a decision, I wondered...what is the Jewish answer to this question? Would I be dishonoring my father if I did not listen to him? In this situation, is it OK to not listen to him? In order to answer this question, I need to first answer the broader question: are there any exceptions to the 5th commandment? If so, was I allowed to not listen to my father?

"Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you" (Exodus 20:12)

Let’s start with the basics. Honor your father and your mother. This seemingly simple statement is more complicated than it appears. The critical word is *honor*. What constitutes honor? The encyclopedia of Jewish Religion describes honor as “high respect, as for worth, merit, or rank.”¹

¹ Holt, Rinehard, and Winston, Inc

How does *honor* differ from *reverence*? The Torah specifically instructs us to *honor* (Exodus 20:12) and *revere* (Leviticus 19:3) our parents in two separate commandments.

Reverence, as defined in the Talmud means that the son “must neither stand in his father’s place nor sit in his place, nor contradict his works nor [even] support his words [when he is arguing with another sage].” (Kiddushin 31b) To honor his father, the son “must give him food and drink, clothe and cover him, lead him in and out.” (Kiddushin 31b)

In summary, honor “includes those things one must do in order to express filial respect” while reverence “includes those areas where one must refrain from specific types of behavior in deference to parents.”²

Does this mean that we must simply respect our parents? In order to expand our understanding of honor, let’s look at the Hebrew word for honor: *Kabad*. *Kabad* actually has many meanings, and is a fairly complex word.

Kabad means, “to be heavy, be weighty, be grievous, be hard, be rich, be honourable, be glorious, be burdensome, be honoured.”³ The two words that I find to be the most powerful are *heavy* and *weighty*. To me, this seems to illustrate that the concept of honor is of great importance and value.

Thus, in a Hebrew sense “honor” implies giving “weight” to words. G-d is instructing Jews to give “weight” or thought to the words spoken by the people that we honor. It is important that we listen to what these people have to say and hear them out rather than “run over” them.

² Lieber, pg. 57

³ NEED SOURCE

Now that we have a more general concept of the word honor, let's focus on what it specifically means for children to honor their parents. To put it simply, it means giving "weight" to their words.

In today's culture, parents can sometimes get in the way of their children growing up. All children have thought this about their parents at some point: "I need to grow and figure out things by myself, don't always tell me what to do." Is this enough to not listen to a parent if I feel this results in an obstruction of growth? Could I argue, as a junior in college, I should be able to make my own decisions and decide whether or not it would be fine for me to play in a club hockey game? In order to answer this question, let's look at exceptions to the 5th commandment.

There are many of exceptions to the 5th commandment:

Non-Jewish Parents

A child with a non-Jewish father is not obligated to honor his non-Jewish father.⁴

Adoptive Children

Adopted children are also not required to honor their parents.⁵

Transgress a Torah Law

A child does not need to comply to a parent's request if it forces the child to transgress a rabbinical law.⁶ Furthermore, if a parent "commands a child to do something which will cause the other parent distress or anguish" then the child should not listen. This is equivalent to transgressing a Torah law because "a child may not cause pain to a parent."⁷

Unhealthy Behavior

⁴ Lieber, pg.115

⁵ Lieber, pg. 116

⁶ Lieber, pg. 121

⁷ Lieber, pg. 122

There are a few exceptions concerning sick parents. First of all, a child should never give a sick parent something to eat or drink, which doctors have said to be unhealthy for the parent. If the parent is alcoholic, the child should always deny the request for alcohol. In addition, there is an exception regarding a terminally ill parent:

“A child should not make the parent aware of the nature and extent of the illness. Even if the parent insists on knowing, the child should not reveal this, since the knowledge may effect the parent emotionally, causing the parent’s physical condition to be adversely affected by the news.”⁸

Obedience Without Pleasure

If a parent asks a child to wear a jacket on an extremely warm day and it will only cause discomfort, the child does not need to honor the request. Furthermore, a child “need not comply if a parent asks him to act foolishly or in a childish and debasing fashion.”⁹

Torah Study

The Talmud (Megillah 16b) also teaches us “Torah study is greater than the mitzvah of honoring parents.”¹⁰ For example, when Jacob spent 22 years in Laban’s house he was punished for not honoring his parents. However, he was NOT punished when he studied Torah for 14 years.¹¹ Along the lines of Torah study there is an additional exception:

“If a child is confident that his success at Torah study will be enhanced by changing to a yeshivah located in another community, he may do so, even if his parents object due to their fear for the child’s safety in the new location.”¹²

⁸ Lieber, pg. 124

⁹ Lieber, pg. 127

¹⁰ Lieber, pg. 128

¹¹ Lieber, pg. 128

¹² Lieber, pg. 129

However, there are only certain reasons that allow this transfer to another yeshivah. Thus, usually a Rabbi who knows the child should help make this important decision and assess the situation.¹³

Mitzvahs

Moreover, in the event that a son has a *mitzvah* to perform, his father requests a service from his son. If there happens to be another person who can perform the mitzvah, then the son can attend to his father. However, if there is not anybody who can perform the mitzvah then he must not attend his father. Furthermore, if a mitzvah cannot be completed by another individual, then it has priority over honoring parents. For example, the mitzvah to live in Eretz Yisrael is a mitzvah that cannot be performed by an individual on behalf of another individual. Thus, if a child moves to Eretz Israel it overrides the child's obligation to honor parents.¹⁴

Marriage

There are a few exceptions that result from the topic of marriage. Even though children are supposed to consult parents when choosing a partner, parents "do not automatically have the power to veto a child's choice."¹⁵ This depends on the individual's morality and religious upbringing. If the child's "character or religious level will suffer" due to the marriage, then the child must listen to the parents' opinions.¹⁶ Additionally, a child can forgo honoring parents if the parents are against the marriage because that will require the child to move faraway from the parents' home. The child does not need to comply because "the mitzvah to procreate is one that can be fulfilled only by oneself" and, therefore, overrides the 5th commandment.

¹³ Lieber, pg. 130

¹⁴ Lieber, pg. 131

¹⁵ Lieber, pg. 132

¹⁶ Lieber, pg. 133

Lastly, once a woman marries, she must show complete devotion to her husband. Thus, she is “exempt from the precept of honoring her parents.”¹⁷ However, she is obligated to do as much as is permitted by her husband for her parents.

Summary

Honor your father and mother. This is a seemingly simple statement. What could be complicated about this commandment? After briefly discussing this law, it is clear that there is complexity to this five-word sentence. In this brief paper, we broke down this sentence, focusing in on the word honor, specifically the Hebrew word: *Kabad*. Even though there are clearly many exceptions to the 5th commandment, I do not believe that my dilemma fit into one of the exceptions. Although it is important for children to “grow” as individuals, in this situation I felt it was necessary to give “weight” to my father’s words. I decided to listen to my father, honoring his wish to not play in my club hockey game...

...Would you have done the same?

¹⁷ Kitzur Shulchan Aruch 143:17

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Kitzur Shulchan Aruch 143:17