

Fear No Evil: Must a Child Revere and Respect a Wicked Parent?

Adapted from the writings of Dayan Yitzhak Grossman

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Our previous article on the subject of parental alienation discussed the rule that the mitzvah to honor one's parents is generally limited to *mishel av* (from the father's assets), i.e., the child is not obligated to spend his own money. We considered the implications of this for the case where maintaining a relationship with a parent would entail significant psychological distress to the child. In this article, we consider the question of whether the mitzvah applies if the parents are sinners.

The Rambam rules:

Even when his father was a wicked person (*rasha*) who violated many transgressions, he must honor him and revere him.[1]

Other *Rishonim* disagree and maintain that one is not obligated to honor a wicked parent unless he has done *teshuvah*. [2] The Shulchan Aruch rules like the Rambam, while the Rama cites the dissenting opinion as a *yeish omrim* ("some say"). [3] The Kitzur Shulchan Aruch rules that one should act stringently, [4] while the Aruch Hashulchan apparently inclines to the lenient view. [5]

Both the Taz and the Shach qualify that even according to the view that one is not obligated to honor a wicked parent, he still may not cause him humiliation and distress. [6] Additionally, the Atzei Levonah limits the exemption to one who violates a Biblical prohibition rather than a Rabbinic one. [7]

Further, the P'nei Yehoshua assumes that even according to the **lenient** view, one who sins occasionally (*be'akra'i*) is not considered a *rasha* in this context, and the exemption from the mitzvah applies only with respect to one who sins regularly. [8] On the other hand, R' Chaim ibn Atar rules that even according to the **stringent** view, the obligation to honor a parent who is a *rasha* extends only to one who violates some (*ketzas*) prohibitions due to temptation (*leteiavon*), *be'akra'i*, and not to a *mumar* (one who rejects the Torah). Even if the parent is not a *mumar* with regard to the entire Torah, as long as he is considered a *mumar* (by which he apparently means a *mumar ledavar echad*, one who completely rejects a single mitzvah), he has left Klal Yisrael and is an absolute *rasha*, and there is no obligation to honor him. [9] But the Chida and R' Shlomo Yosef Alfandari (the Saba Kadisha) challenge this position. [10]

R' Ovadia Yosef has a characteristically comprehensive responsum on the question of the obligation of *ba'alei teshuvah* to honor their nonobservant parents, in which he cites most of the above sources. He concludes with the important point that in addition to the Chida's argument that a child is indeed obligated to honor even a parent who is a *mumar* (particularly according to the view of the Rambam and the Shulchan Aruch, which R' Yosef considers normative, particularly for Sephardim), "many of those who are called *chilonim* are like the child who was captured (and raised) among gentiles (*tinok shenishbah bein hagoyim*)." He proceeds to cite various

sources for the principle that we do not generally treat contemporary nonreligious Jews as *resha'im*, and he accordingly concludes:

Therefore, even if the parents continue to desecrate the Shabbos and commit other sins, the children must act respectfully toward them, so that the Name of Heaven shall become beloved through them, and perhaps the parents will listen and do *teshuvah*. For the Torah's ways are ways of pleasantness, and all its pathways are peace.[11]

But all this applies to parents who do not bother their children who have merited to recognize the truth and to return to the Rock from which they were hewn,[12] and respect them for the courage of their heart and the heroism of their spirit (or at least are indifferent toward them), but if they are hostile toward them over their having become *ba'alei teshuvah*, and oppress them due to their hatred of religion, then they are in the category of *minim* and *apikorsim*, who are certainly not to be honored...[13]

The Aruch Hashulchan recommends that if the parent is not actually a *rasha*, but merely exhibits poor character traits (*midos ra'os*) and is hated by people, or is a drunkard, then "it is good for the child to distance himself from him." [14] R' Chaim Palagi, however, strongly rejects as "folly and emptiness" the argument that the mitzvah does not apply to parents who are very needy, troublesome, and quarrelsome, and even curse their children. On the contrary, this is precisely the point of the Torah's mitzvah, since with regard to ordinary parents, the moral obligation to honor them is self-evident, but the Torah is commanding us that

Even if the father or mother have difficult *midos* and attitudes...and they cause him distress...it is nevertheless incumbent upon him to honor them, for the Torah did not place limits on its precepts, and one is obligated to honor and revere every father and mother....[15]

[1] *Hilchos Mamrim* 6:11.

[2] Tur Y.D. *siman* 240; Smag *esin* #112, cited in Hagahos Maimoniyos *ibid.* os 7. Cf. Radvaz *ibid.*; Kessef Mishneh *ibid.* and Bais Yosef *ibid.*; Lechem Mishneh *ibid.*; R' Itamar Warhaftig, *Mitzvas Kibud Av B'av Rasha*.

[3] Shulchan Aruch *ibid.* *se'if* 18.

[4] Kitzur Shulchan Aruch *siman* 143 *se'if* 9.

[5] Aruch Hashulchan *ibid.* *se'if* 33.

[6] Taz *ibid.* s.k. 17; Shach *ibid.* s.k. 20. Cf. Chayei Adam *klal* 67 *se'if* 18.

[7] Atzei Levonah *ibid.*

[8] P'nei Yehoshua Bava Kama 94b to Tosafos s.v. Bimei, cited in Pis'chei Teshuvah *ibid.* s.k. 15.

[9] Rishon LeTzion *ibid.*; Or Hachaim Vayikra 3:19 s.v. V'es Shabsosai tishmoru. Cf. here.

[10] Birkei Yosef *ibid.* *siman* 241 os 4; Shu"t Hasaba Kadisha *cheilek* 2 Y.D. *siman* 10 (cited in Yabia Omer, below).

[11] Mishlei 3:17.

[12]From Yeshayah 51:1.

[13]Shu"t Yabia Omer *cheilek* 8 Y.D. *siman* 21 *os* 9, and cf. *cheilek* 2 Y.D. *siman* 15 *os* 9. Cf. here.

[14]Aruch Hashulchan *ibid*.

[15]Tochachas Chaim Toldos pp. 43b-44a, cited by R' Eliezer Melamed, *Kibud Horim Uchvod Shamayim*.