

The Honor System: May a Therapist Lead a Client to Feel Negatively about His Parents?

Adapted from the writings of Dayan Yitzhak Grossman

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Our previous two articles on parental alienation discussed the questions of whether the mitzvah of honoring parents applies when its fulfillment would entail great psychological pain for the child, and whether it applies when the parents are sinners. In this final article in the series, we discuss the legitimacy of psychotherapy that involves the engendering and expression of feelings of contempt, disdain, or anger toward a parent.

The Sefer Chareidim and the Aruch Hashulchan

The Sefer Chareidim rules that the mitzvah to honor parents applies to internal feelings as well as outward action, and he goes so far as to assert that the former is the essence (*ikar*) of honor. One must consider his parents great people and honored individuals, and as a result he will certainly honor them in word and deed.[1] The Aruch Hashulchan agrees that we are commanded regarding internal feeling, although he maintains that the mitzvah of honor (*kibud*) concerns action, but the mitzvah of reverence (*yirah*) concerns feeling.[2]

R' Yitzchok Zilberstein

Accordingly, R' Yitzchok Zilberstein rules that

It is absolutely forbidden to bring parents' responsibility (for a child's problems) to the child's attention, for this involves the sin of

"Accursed is one who degrades his father and mother." [3][4]

Elsewhere, however, Rav Zilberstein, discussing an eighteen-year-old girl suffering from depression, social anxiety disorder, and difficulty concentrating on her studies, was willing to condone therapy that involved her "scorning" her father, who had severely abused her. If the father has not yet repented, then although—as discussed in the previous article—the daughter is still prohibited to cause him pain, this prohibition

only applies when the goal of the disparagement of the father is his degradation, but not when it is done for a therapeutic purpose, and for the benefit of the daughter—which is ultimately for the benefit of the father, so that he will have a healthy daughter...

If the father has repented,

We may assume that he is willing to allow his daughter to despise him in her heart, in order that she be healed and be able to marry, and in order that the father shall achieve atonement for having abused her.[5]

R' Naftali Bar-Ilan

R' Naftali Bar-Ilan objects to the former ruling of Rav Zilberstein cited above, arguing that it is impossible to understand the Sefer Chareidim and

the Aruch Hashulchan to mean that one must overlook every flaw in his parents; after all, “the Torah and the Prophets have already taught us that even the greatest of the great are susceptible to sin.” He cites two other approaches to the position of the Sefer Chareidim: R’ Zalman Nechemia Goldberg explains that one must honor his parents simply due to the fact that they are his parents, despite the knowledge that they may not be objectively superlative people, “for honor is not a true thing but a human feeling.” But R’ Chaim Shmuelevitz explains that “the son is obligated to find in his father certain qualities in which he excels beyond anyone else, in which he is the *gadol hador*.” Rav Bar-Ilan concludes that according to these alternate approaches to the Sefer Chareidim,

It is permitted for a psychologist, in the course of his therapy, to bring to the patient’s attention that his parents are the ones who have caused his problems, and to support him in expressing anger toward them. There is no concern that this involves the prohibition against *lashon hara*, since this is only for the sake of the treatment, and it is permitted for both the child and the therapist to discuss openly and in detail the conduct of the parents.[6]

R’ Shlomo Aviner

R’ Shlomo Aviner also permits the feeling and expression of anger toward parents in the context of therapy, although he only permits “disconnection” of the child from his parents when “objectively necessary for the healing of the child.”

There is no halachic prohibition against feelings of anger toward parents, and there is only a prohibition against expressing these to them in an insulting manner, in order to shame them. Accordingly, if the therapist believes that the opportunity for a child to verbally express his anger toward his parents in the presence of the therapist is what will heal him, there is basis to [allow] this...

But the disconnection of a child from his parents is certainly prohibited according to halacha, unless we arrive at the conclusion that this disconnection is objectively necessary for the healing of the child.[7]

R’ Eliezer Melamed

R’ Eliezer Melamed acknowledges that the Torah does not require children to believe in the perfection of their parents, but he nevertheless rules unequivocally that therapy that causes the patient to blame all his problems on his parents, “who pressured him, became angry at him, and even hit him—in other words, they ‘abused’ him,” causes the patient to flagrantly violate the mitzvah to honor parents, and is accordingly forbidden:

Even if such treatment would be effective from a psychological standpoint, it is prohibited to participate therein since it is contrary to the mitzvos of the Torah. Just as a person may not steal or murder in order to ameliorate his suffering, so, too, is it prohibited to violate the

mitzvos of the Torah in order to ameliorate his suffering...

Just as it is prohibited to eat foods that are not kosher, so, too, is it prohibited to go to a psychologist who does not accept upon himself the mitzvos of honoring parents.

Even a psychologist who wears a yarmulke is susceptible to sin in this area. There is a concern that he might distinguish between his religious obligation in his personal life and his profession, and when he comes to treat people, he sheds the mitzvos of the Torah and accepts upon himself the currently regnant psychological theory.

In the course of his discussion, he elaborates:

There is no mitzvah for children to think that everything that their parents do and think is perfect; on the contrary, children are supposed to think independently and to choose good....But the obligation of honor obligates [children] to see the good in [their parents], to understand them, and even if according to the child's opinion there are many flaws in their *midos*, it is incumbent upon him to seek out their good points, to emphasize them in his mind, and to judge his parents favorably, for otherwise, even if he honors them by act, he will not fulfill the mitzvah.[8]

R' Avigdor Nebenzahl

Rav Bar-Ilan is unhappy with Rav Melamed's stance as well, and he dismisses his concern about the treatments that may be utilized by a therapist who is not committed to the Torah.[9] In a response to Rav Bar-Ilan, R' Avigdor Nebenzahl explains that while there is a difference between physicians who fear Heaven and those who do not with respect to various mitzvos even in the case of ordinary physicians, this difference is much greater in the case of doctors who treat mental health, "who operate according to various theories," and accordingly,

In my opinion, it is not recommended to turn to doctors who treat mental health who do not fear Heaven, since their goals are different from our goals.[10]

[1]Sefer Chareidim *perek* 1 *os* 35.

[2]Aruch Hashulchan *ibid. se'if* 8.

[3]Devarim 27:16.

[4]Shiurei Torah Lerof'im, cited by R' Naftali Bar-Ilan, *Tipul Psikologi Vechibud Horim*, Choveres Assia 95-96, 5775.

[5]Shiurei Torah Lerof'im, cited by Dr. Benzion Sorotzkin, *Kibud Horim Mis'allelim, cheilek* 2. Cf. the rest of Dr. Sorotzkin's article for further discussion of our topic and related issues.

[6]Assia *ibid.*

[7]Iturei Kohanim #85 p. 8, cited by R' Uriel Banner, *Gidrei Mitvzas Kibud Horim Vehashlachoseihem al Tipul Psikologi*, Sefer Assia 12, 5769 (Assia

63-64). Cf. Rav Banner's discussion of this ruling, along with that of Rav Zilberstein and the comments of the Sefer Chareidim and the Aruch Hashulchan.

Cf. Kibud Horim Bemisgeres Tipul Psikhologi (Pis'chu She'arim).

[8]R' Eliezer Melamed, Kibud Horim Uchvod Shamayim.

[9]Assia (95-96) *ibid*.

[10]Assia *ibid*.