Parents, G-d and Gratitude

Midway through the Aseret HaDibrot, we are commanded to honor our father and mother. The traditional breakdown of the Ten Commandments is five and five – the first five define our relationship with G-d, and the second set of five gives boundaries for our relationship with our fellow man. Kibud Horim would fit well in the second five but strangely is found among the first.

In Masechet Kiddushin, the Rabbis explain there are three partners in the creation of every child – father, mother, and G-d. When one honors their parents, G-d considers it as if He too is honored. Similarly, when a child says Kaddish for a deceased parent, bestowing posthumous filial honor, one does not mention the loss at all. Instead, by publicly praising G-d, the child affirms the teachings and legacy of the parent.

The Ten Commandments were given to the Jewish people at the moment of our birth as a nation. Our continued existence is dependent on the unbroken transmission of that moment – in other words, mesorah. Chasdei Crescas (Spanish Philosopher, 14th century) explains that this mitzvah’s importance is linked to the fact that parental authority is the primary basis for mesorah. The successful transmission is dependent on each child’s respect for the human links of the chain of tradition.

The first two decades of the 21st-century have been a time of rapid and intense advancement. Leaders are characterized by their ability to be ‘forward thinkers’ and to embrace innovation. Recently, the global quarantine due to the Covid-19 pandemic has forced certain types of progress and innovation to come to a halt as unemployment rates soar and businesses shut. Those who several months ago looked to their future with great excitement are now putting plans on hold and have more questions than answers. In Judaism, when we seek answers to these looming questions, we look to the Torah and we look to mesorah, specifically, our parents and grandparents. We look backward in order to move forward. Though chidush or thoughtful innovation is a hallmark of Torah life, it is always with an eye, and more than just a nod to tradition.

For many, this time at home has brought an opportunity for deep introspection. Social media posts, blogs and even YouTube videos encourage people who are stuck at home to ‘take stock of what’s really important.’ Gratitude is suddenly trending, and people are realizing how much they have to be grateful for. The Sefer HaChinuch explains that the reason we must honor our parents is the tremendous debt of gratitude we owe them. Typically, we fulfill this commandment through physical acts. We rise when our parents enter the room, we run to pour them a glass of water. With social distancing, these aspects of Kibud Av VaEm are unlikely. However, phones and video conferencing allow us to continue to show gratitude and respect by frequently calling and being present, even if not physically close. As an added benefit, showing gratitude to others is a proven way to increase happiness, feelings of connection and even fostering optimism, all of which are important during this uneasy time.

However, for some, the crisis has presented a tremendous challenge in the fulfillment of kibud horim. The time-honored tradition of reciting mourner’s kaddish with a minyan has been shuttered along with our synagogues. It is a painful proposition for children in the year of mourning to consider a lapse of months without saying kaddish. Additionally, many are missing yahrzeit for their parents. Mourners have looked to poskim and communal leaders for innovative solutions. Though a minyan requires 10 men to be physically together, recent Rabbinic rulings allow for the recitation of kaddish in a virtual minyan. Many have ruled against it, but have offered alternative solutions for those who want to honor their parents with the recitation of kaddish.

In Judaism, innovation and tradition are not mutually exclusive. Perhaps the reason why Kibud Horim was included in the first five dibrot was to drive this point home. Respect for our parents (and grandparents) ensures that our advancement will always be rooted in tradition.

As the world cautiously looks towards reopening, we hope the lessons we are learning will not be lost. May we have deep gratitude for those who have paved our way and may this respect and admiration lead to a deeper appreciation of the Divine.

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