



## The Awareness Center, Inc.

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### Honoring Parents Who Are Abusive

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As a clinical psychologist in the *frum* community I have frequently been asked by patients to address the question of the obligation to honor abusive parents. As a result, I have researched the issue and have discussed it with some prominent *Rabbonim*. I would like to share some of what I have learned with other clinicians and anyone else who needs to address this issue.

It goes without saying that *kibbud av va'eim* is a very important and complex *mitzvah*. Any particular situation will involve specific clinical and *halachic* issues that have to be evaluated by a knowledgeable *Rov* for specific guidance. It does help, however, if the questioner is as knowledgeable as possible about the issues involved. It is for that reason that I would like to share with the readers some interesting and not so well known dimensions of this issue.

#### Talmud Kiddushin 31a

A frequently quoted Talmudic passage regarding the extent to which one is obligated to honor even an abusive parent is the story in *Kiddushin* (31a) where a Roman officer is praised for maintaining his composure even after his mother tore his clothes off and spit in his face in public. Unfortunately, the comment of the *Tosafos* there that, according to the *Midrash*, the mother in the story was *meturefes b'daata* (e.g., insane or suffering from Alzheimer's disease) is usually not cited. This fact certainly puts the story in a very different light. Certainly, an Alzheimer's patient cannot be held responsible for such behavior. (Yet, it was terribly embarrassing to the son and therefore he is commended for remaining passive. Anyone who has cared for such a patient will testify as to how difficult it is not to respond harshly). It is unfortunate that this *Gemara* is cited as evidence that a child is required to passively submit to chronic abuse by a parent (who is not *meturefes b'daata*) in the name of *kibbud av va'eim*!

The well-known commentary on the Talmud, the *Yam Shel Shlomo* (R' Shlomo Luria, the *Maharshal*), cites the *Tosafos* and adds (free translation):

I agree that this mother must have been *meturefes b'daata* since this story is cited in order to teach us the laws of *kibbud av va'eim* and if she wasn't *meturefes b'daata* the son would be permitted to protest in order to prevent his mother from causing him financial harm and certainly he can prevent her from causing him bodily harm. And even if she had already harmed him he can sue for damages in *bais din*..... So we must say that she was *meturefes b'daata* and that's why he couldn't protest and that's why he didn't rebuke ["*go'ar*"] her [the implication is that if she wasn't *meturefes b'daata* the son would be permitted to protest and rebuke her in order to prevent her attack].

The *Yam Shel Shlomo* then comments on the *Tur* who also cites this *Gemara* (without the qualification that the parent was *meturefes b'daata*):

This ruling of the *Tur* [that one should remain passive in response to such a parental attack] must be referring to a situation where he is unable to protest because it is already after the fact, and therefore he shouldn't insult [*kelimah*] or rebuke his parent.

We see that this widely quoted event that supposedly mandates that children need to passively submit to chronic abuse, is in fact limited to where the parent is insane or where it's after the fact.<sup>1</sup>

The *sefer Kibbud Av Va'eim* (Rabbi Hillel Litwack, p. 32) asks how a child can permit his parent to violate a Torah law by submitting to being hit and embarrassed in public by his parent. He also suggests that the child is not even permitted to be *mochel* [to allow, to forgive] the parent since a person is not permitted to harm himself. Likewise it's possible that one is not permitted to allow a parent to embarrass him in public since it is comparable to murder. He also concludes that it must be after the fact. Rabbi Litwack also asks why the *Mechaber* doesn't discuss the issue if the child is permitted to try to stop the parent before the fact as he does in a different case involving monetary loss. He cites one authority who suggested that it may be too obvious to mention that the child is not obligated to allow the parent to hit him for no good reason.

#### Wicked parents

The *Yam Shel Shlomo*, suggests that perhaps it would be a meritorious act (*midas chasidus* – i.e., beyond the letter of the law) not to protest even before the fact, providing the parent truly (and erroneously) believed that this was an appropriate educational intervention,<sup>2</sup> for if the parent simply acted in a fit of anger then he is a *rosha* [wicked person]. In the *Chidushei Rabbeinu Yaakov me'Lublin ve'Rabbeinu Heshel me'Krakaw* (in the *Tur Hachodosh*) it states that if the father is acting like a *rosha* then the son is permitted to insult him [*lehachlimo*]. While the *Rambam* and the *Mechaber* rule that there is an obligation to honor a

<sup>1</sup> I have purposefully avoided defining the term "abuse" which can run the gamut from mild verbal abuse to sexual molestation. The point here is to establish the fact that at some point parental abuse may impact on the child's obligation to honor his/her abusing parent.

<sup>2</sup> And presumably, providing it doesn't make the child emotionally "ill," as discussed below.

wicked parent, the *Ramo* and the majority of *poskim* disagree. The *Oruch Hashulchan* rules like the *Ramo*. A very prominent *posaik* told me that the normative *Halacha* is like the *Ramo*.

The *Yam Shel Shlomo* then relates a dispute between the *Rambam* and *Ravad* regarding the obligation to personally care for a parent who acts inappropriately. He distinguishes between such behavior when it is due to *tiruf ha'daas* (e.g., suffering from Alzheimer's disease) where according to the *Ravad* there is such an obligation, and where the parent is acting out of *ro'ah lev* (a wicked heart) where there is no such obligation.

While we do not hesitate to describe acting out teens as having a *lev rah* (wicked heart),<sup>3</sup> we resist thinking of abusive parents as acting out of *ro'ah lev*. However, the *Yam Shel Shlomo* and others recognize this possibility and make it clear that there is no obligation for a child to honor such a parent. Where possible, it is best for the child to move away. However when not possible, according to these *poskim* a child is permitted to take steps to protect himself from abuse and can seek recourse in a *beis din* after the fact. It is very unfortunate that some teachers may (inadvertently) imply to children that the *Torah* obligates children to passively tolerate chronic abuse by parents when this is not the case.

I heard that someone wanted to prove that there is an obligation to honor abusive parents from the fact that the commandment to honor parents was given to the generation of the Exodus in spite of the fact that their parents brought on them great pain and suffering. The parent's sinned with the Golden Calf and with the spies and so the children had to wander in the desert for 40 years. I, however, don't see how one can compare parents who indirectly cause their children suffering to parents who directly abuse their children.

#### The *petur* of *choleh*

Harav Dovid Cohen *shlit"a* has stated that if interacting with an abusive parent makes a person emotionally ill then the child is exempt from this obligation. Since one is not required to spend more than a fifth of his assets for a *mitzvas aseh* then certainly one is not required to make himself sick. Obligating abused children to honor their abusing parents unconditionally will almost certainly exacerbate their emotional distress and/or disability. When presenting a particular abusive parent question to a *Rov* it is imperative to be completely open regarding the extent of the abuse and the degree to which the abuse is causing the child emotional distress and disability. Often children find it very difficult to be fully open even with themselves in this regard and it then becomes the clinician's duty to help the patient to formulate his/her question fully and accurately.

#### Defending oneself

Many children feel that defending oneself from a false accusation is a violation of *kibbud av va'eim*. This is not so. In the *Sefer Ben Yechabed Av* (p. 91) he states that a child is permitted to respectfully state that the accusation is false.

#### The obligation to admonish [*hochocha*]

Rabbi Litwack (p.34, and p. 47 in the name of the *sefer Chadrei Daiiah*) suggests that just like a child is obligated to admonish his parent if he is violating a *Torah* commandment here too if the parent is speaking to the child abusively – clearly a violation of *halacha* – the child is obligated to

<sup>3</sup> This is often expressed – even by parents – with comments such as, “He’s manipulative, lazy, self-centered, he has a character flaw,” etc.

rebuke the parent [as respectfully as possible under the circumstance].<sup>4</sup>

#### Clinical consideration

I have elsewhere discussed at length the clinical challenges of treating Orthodox adolescents with abusive parents.<sup>5</sup> One area of conflict is the *kibbud av va'eim* obligation. I explain why children are so resistant to acknowledging the abusive nature of their parent's behavior (even when it is blatant) and why it is important to help the child to overcome this resistance. I also elaborate on why it is imperative that abused youngsters be told clearly that what their parents are doing is abusive, against the *Torah* and inexcusable. Likewise, they need to be told that the parental abuse does mitigate their *kibbud av va'eim* obligations (the degree and nature of mitigation needs to be determined by a knowledgeable *Rov*).

The *Maharik* on the limits of the *kibbud av va'eim* obligation The popular perception (often reinforced by self-serving parents) is that the *mitzvah* of *kibbud av va'eim* is all-encompassing and without limits or qualifications. It is important to realize that there are clear parameters to this obligation. For example, the *Maharik* states that a father does not have the authority to forbid his son to marry the women he desires and the *Ramo* rules like the *Maharik*.

The *Maharik* gives three reasons for his ruling and I believe these reasons are clearly applicable to a child contending with an abusive parent.

- I. The *halacha* is that the parent has to bear the financial burden of the son's fulfillment of the *mitzvah* of *kibbud av va'eim* (e.g., the son has to prepare and serve the food for his father but the father pays for the food). If the child is not required to undergo a financial loss then he certainly does not have to endure personal suffering by not marrying the women of his choice.
- II. We see in many places in the Talmud that the Rabbis are concerned that a wife find favor in her husband's eyes so that they have a good marriage. By trying to force his son to forgo his choice in a wife it is as if the father is ordering his son to go against the *Torah* since he is not likely to have a good relationship with a choice forced upon him. [One can perhaps likewise argue that abused children frequently rebel against their parent's religious beliefs, or develop serious emotional disorders, neither of which is desired by our Rabbis].
- III. The *Maharik* rules [and this is the normative *halacha*] that the obligation to honor parents applies only when the parent asks for something that benefits the parent directly. The obligation does not require obeying commands that do not directly benefit the parents, for example, whom the child marries.

<sup>4</sup> See *Tanah Debei Eliyahu Rabah* (19:1), regarding the obligation to rebuke a parent who is speaking inappropriately, which would certainly seem to apply to a parent speaking abusively

<sup>5</sup> Sorotzkin, B. (2002). “The denial of history: Clinical implications of denying child abuse.” *The Journal of Psychohistory*, 30, 29-53 [Also at: <http://primal-page.com/sorotzki.htm>]. Sorotzkin, B. (2001). “The role of parents in the current crises of rebellious adolescents: Dare we discuss it? Can we afford not to?” Unpublished manuscript.

behavior.

When the community starts putting more pressure on parents not to be abusive than on children to honor abusive parents, we may begin to make a dent in the ever increasing tide of youngsters with serious emotional and behavioral disorders.

### Addendum

*Excerpts from a speech by Harav Dovid Cohen shlit"a.*  
**"Counseling the contemporary Orthodox Jewish family."**

Young Israel Council of Rabbis Annual Conference,  
February, 2000.

### **Defending the strong at the expense of the weak**

It is sad that, as a society, our religious sensitivities causes us to be more concerned with the obligation of abused children to honor their parents than with the serious violations of *halacha* being committed by abusive parents! We are very comfortable saying to an abused boy, "Sure, it's unfortunate that your father is abusive, but that's how he is and he isn't going to change. You are obligated by the Torah to honor him so just get over it." What's more, abused children are often told that they are obligated to forgive their abusive parents even when their parents never acknowledged the abuse and have certainly never apologized for it. What's more, they are often compelled to apologize for getting angry over the abuse.

In contrast, we seem to be too intimidated to say to the abusive father, "It's unfortunate that you are having difficulties with your boy, but every time you speak to him abusively you are violating numerous Torah commandments (e.g., *V'ahavta l'rayacha komocha*), and these violations are especially egregious because the victim is a family member.<sup>6</sup>

As Harav Dovid Cohen pointed out in his address to the Young Israel Council of Rabbis, when a prominent person is arrested for molesting children there is often more concern in the community for the fate of the molester than for the wellbeing of the child victims.

### **The abused become abusers**

A substantial body of research has shown that, while far from inevitable, children who are emotionally abused tend to develop a variety of emotional and behavioral problems including drug abuse, addictions and "revictimization". They also are more likely to be emotionally abusive of their own children later in life as compared to children who are not abused.

Research by Briggs<sup>7</sup> on sexually abused children found that those victims who minimized the depravity and negative consequences of their abuser's actions were substantially more likely to become abusers themselves in adulthood. It is as if they say to themselves, "If what was done to me wasn't such a terrible act, then it won't be so terrible if I do it to someone else."

Children have a natural tendency to deny and/or minimize the harmful nature of parental abuse. It would seem likely that compelling children to honor their abusive parents would reinforce this tendency by indicating that abusing children does not diminish a person's honor. This would likely increase the likelihood of perpetuating this type of

<sup>6</sup> See *Sefer Kibbud Av Va'eim* (Rabbi Hillel Litwack) p. 65, citing *Sefer Habris*. Rabbi Yechiel Jacobson, a well-known educator in Israel, relates a story. A father told the Steipler Gaon that he is concerned that his son was violating Torah commandments by not listening to him. The Steipler got upset at the father. "If you tell him things you know he won't listen to then **you** are in violation of *Lefnei eivar lo setain michshol* and how will you find atonement? As for your son, there is a simple solution, you can forgive him, and if you don't you are foolish because you will be held responsible for that also."

<sup>7</sup> Briggs, F. & Hawkins, R. (1996). "A comparison of the childhood experiences of convicted male child molesters and men who were sexually abused in childhood and claimed to be nonoffenders." *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 20, 221-233.

.....It happened in our community [that] the person who was [sexually] abused was made to suffer by the community. [They were not so concerned] about the person that was being abused, [rather they were] worrying about the abuser that he not *Chas V'Shalom* go to jail.....

To address some of the questions [presented by] Dr. Sorotzkin [regarding the obligation of *Kibbud Av Va'Eim* when parents are abusive]..... In a case where children were abused by their parents. Now I maintain there is a difference as far as the type of abuse concerned. *Kibbud Av Va'Eim* comes with *Nisyonos*, as the *Gemara* in *Kedushin* tells us, *Ad Heychan Kibbud Av Va'Eim* the *Gemara* tells us where the mother of the *Melech* came and took off this *chashuva* beged and spat at him, so the *Tosfos* brings that she was a *meturefes*, she was insane. So, of course, that has a lot to say why the son, the *Melech*, did not really feel that his mother was embarrassing him, maybe he felt a tinge of embarrassment, but everyone understood because they saw she was a *Meturefes*. But, in a situation where a child was [sexually] abused by a parent.... we know it is worse than being a *choleh* [ill person]. A child who has to deal with a parent, who sexually abused that child, it's almost to say that that child will never become *meshuchrar* [freed], it's very difficult to get the damage out, and if the person has to deal with the parent, there are very few people that can possibly do so. So certainly when it comes to sexual abuse, I feel that it is not worse that a *Mitzvah* where most *Poskim* will tell you that a *choleh* is *potur* [exempt], we are talking about *Mitzvos Aseh* now, just as there is a *shiur* of *mitzvos ad chomesh* [one is only obligated to spend one fifth of his assets for a positive commandment]...., so the *Poskim* say when it is a question of being a *choleh* that it is the same thing, that being a *choleh* is like *ad chomesh*, so that there is really no *chiyuv* [to make one's self ill for the sake of *Kibbud Av*].....

There is another *snif* to be *matir* [reason for leniency], because when a parent is a *Rosha* [wicked person], in sexual abuse the parent has a *Din* of a *Rosha*.... So in the case of a *Rosha*, even though there are two *daos* [opinions] in the *Shulchan Aruch*, which is a little strange, because *rov Rishonim* disagree with the *Rambam*, and they hold like the *pashtus* of the *Gemora*, that there is no *Chiyuv Kibud Av* by *Eino Oseh Maaseh Amcha* [i.e., a *roscha*]. The *Rambam* says there is a *chiyuv*. But there are many, and the *Bach* is clear on this that the *Rambam* only meant this that it is a *D'Rabanon*. So again we have an extra *kula* [leniency], we have a *machlokes Rishonim* [most *Rishonim* rule that there is no obligation of *Kibbud Av* by a wicked parent], and we also have the *kula* that it is only *M'Darabonin*, so we can be *meikil*, as far as that is concerned.

[Regarding the question if it is permissible for a child to speak negatively about his or her parents in therapy]. In a situation of speaking to a therapist concerning these things, I'm not speaking [only] of sexual abuse necessarily, but all

[issues] where the therapist feels that by discussing these things they can turn the patient around, [for example] where the patient could acquire affection from the parent, even though the patient has various *tainus* [complaints] on the parent, I believe the *mekor* [source to permit this] is the *Gemora* in *Sanhedrin* (84b), where the *Gemora* speaks about a child taking a splinter from a parent, where it can cause a *chabura* [wound] and the *Gemora* says a very interesting *heter* [reason for leniency] - *V'Ahavta L'Rayacha Komocha* [love your neighbor like yourself]. The way *Rashi* explains it to mean [that one is only prohibited to do to others that that he would not want done to himself – this excludes being “wounded” in the process of having a splinter removed]. This to my mind [is similar to when] the *Poskim* speak about *Lashon Harah L'Toeles* [for a helpful purpose], which is not

limited to *Loshon Harah*. Any [transgression of] *Bein Adam L'Chaveiro* [when it is] *L'Toeles* is *Mutar*..... Indeed, the *heter* of a parent to hit a child is because it is *L'Toeles* for the *hadracha* [guidance] of the child. All [transgressions of] *Bein Adam L'Chaveiro* is *Mutar* [permissible] when it's *L'Toeles*. That's why a parent [is only permitted] to hit a child [if it's] *L'Shem Shamayim*. And from that *Gemora* you see, and it's a *Safek*, that *Kibbud Av Va'Em* has a *Din* of *Bein Adam L'Chaveiro*. So this of course, there are many other *sevaros* [reasons] to be *Matir* [be permissible], but I feel it is certainly *Mutar Be Che'hai Gavna*.

Response from Michael J. Salamon, Ph.D., FICPP

Please note: Dr. Salamon is a member of The Awareness Center's Executive Board

#### **The abused become abusers:**

Dr. Sorotzkin presents some interesting points regarding the limits of the Commandment's directive to Honor One's Father and Mother. It should be noted that the focus of his paper remains on the issue of children who were abused becoming abusive parents. While there is of course a likelihood of that occurring it is not the most frequent outcome. Observational findings reported through the early 1970's implied that this was an inevitable outcome. More recent research (cf. US Dept. of HHS, Administration for Children & Families; Kaufman & Zigler, 1986; Gershaw, 1992; Hunt, 2000; Bavolek, 2000) indicate that in the general population five percent of the population become abusive parents, whereas children who are abused are about 20% likely to become abusive parents. A significantly larger number, of course, but other outcomes are even more likely. These other outcomes of childhood abuse include higher rates of substance abuse, sexual acting-out and other self destructive behaviors.

I would suggest that Dr. Sorotzkin's work be viewed from a broader perspective. Children who are abused should be protected for a multitude of reasons. All of these reasons are perhaps sufficient to warrant a changed perspective on the commandment to honor parents.