

# Honoring Parents Who Are Abusive

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## Part 1\*

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 (Dommah Ben Nesinah) 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*!<sup>1</sup>

The well-known commentary on the Talmud, the *Yam Shel Shlomo* (R' Shlomo Luria, the *Maharshah*), 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>2</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 chasiddus* - i.e., beyond the letter of the law) not to protest even before the fact, providing the parent truly (albeit erroneously) believed that this was an appropriate educational intervention,<sup>3</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 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>4</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.

### **The petur of choleh**

Harav Dovid Cohen shlit"א has stated [see addendum] 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 asch* then certainly one is not required to make himself sick. Obligating abused children to unconditionally honor their abusing parents will almost certainly exacerbate their emotional distress and/or disability and they are therefore, not obliged to do this.

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 themselves from false parental accusations 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 [*tochocha*]

Rabbi Litwack (sefer *Kibbud Av Va'eim*, p. 34, and p. 47 in the name of the *sefer Chadrei Daiah*) suggests that since children are obligated to admonish their parents if they are violating a *halacha* therefore, if parents speak to their children abusively - clearly a violation of *halacha* - the children are obligated to rebuke their parents [as respectfully as possible under the circumstance].<sup>5</sup>

## Clinical consideration

I have elsewhere discussed at length the clinical challenges of treating Orthodox adolescents with abusive parents.<sup>6</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.

1. 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* ("*mesheh av*," 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.
2. We see in many places in the Talmud that the *chachomim* are concerned that a wife should 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 parents' religious beliefs, or develop serious emotional disorders, neither of which is desired by our *chachomim*].
3. 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, e.g., bringing him food. The obligation does not require obeying commands that do not directly benefit the parents, for example, whom the child marries.<sup>7</sup>

## Defending the strong at the expense of the weak

It is sad that, as a community, 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." 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 and are still continuing to abuse them currently. 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 committing numerous *aveiros* (e.g., *V'ahavta*

*l'rayacha komocha*), and these violations are especially egregious because your victim is a family member.<sup>8</sup>

As Harav Dovid Cohen relates [see addendum], 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 and other addictions. 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>9</sup> and others on sexually abused children has 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 behavior.

When the community starts putting more pressure on parents not to be abusive rather than pressuring children to honor abusive parents, we may then 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.**

...It has 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* 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 *Kidushin* tells us, ad heychan *kibbud av va'eim* the *Gemara* tells us where the mother of the Roman officer 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... 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 *meshuחרar* [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 mitzvas asech 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 *rosha*]. 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 presented by Dr. Sorotzkin 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 *loshan 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. Any [transgression 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 *sofek* - that *kibbud av va'em* has a *din* of *bein adam l'chaveiro*. There are many other *sevaros* [reasons] to be *matir* [to be permissive], but I feel it is certainly *mutar be'chei hai gavna* [permissible in this type of situation].

## Part 2\*\*

I recently came across an article by Rabbi Yitzchok Zilberstein, the *Rov* of Ramat Elchonon, Bnei Brak (and the son-in-law of Harav Y. S. Elyashev shlit"a) in the Torah journal, *Kol Torah* (Nissan 5763). The article contains four *teshuvos* on the permissibility of offending the honor of parents for therapeutic purposes. I would like to focus on the fourth *teshuvah*, as it reinforces the point that a patient's psychological state and/or emotional needs can sometimes diminish his or her *kibbud av va'eim* obligations.

Rabbi Zilberstein was asked the following by a mental health professional (free translation):

*Much of children's (and adults) emotional pathologies result from unhealthy and inappropriate parental behaviors and attitudes.. [During therapy] there is a focus on the pathological family relationships that contributed to the patient's emotional difficulties (e.g., double messages, parentified children, unrealistic parental expectations and demands, inappropriate parental behaviors, etc.). In the course of treatment therapists bring to the consciousness of their patients, directly or indirectly, the role of their parents in their difficulties and encourage them to externalize and direct their anger to the appropriate people rather than to repress the anger, since repression causes excessive guilt feelings, self punishment and other psychological symptoms.. The question is: Does this type of therapeutic intervention, where the therapists encourages the awareness and expression of angry feelings toward parents, possibly causing patients to not properly respect their parents, conflict with halacha?*

The inquiring clinician added a brief illustrative case example.

*An 18 year old female student requested therapy for depression, social anxiety, and difficulties concentrating. She applied without the knowledge of her parents because she feared that they would object and she would be punished. In the third session the patient related with great difficulty and hesitation that her father had been cruelly molesting ["mitalel"] her since the age of 10. She related this to her mother, but she had a weak character and always stood by her husband. The patient believed that she was responsible for her father's behavior, because she must have unwittingly provoked his desire. She tried to correct this by becoming anorectic and losing a great deal of weight. She saw herself as a bad person deserving of punishment. At times she would cause herself pain and injury in an attempt to attain atonement for her sins. She also experienced suicidal ideations.. The goal of therapy was to help the patient see herself as the victim and not as an accomplice to a sin, to affirm her right to privacy and her right to decide how people should relate to her so that she could deal with her father's inappropriate and pathological behavior in an effective and consistent manner and to direct her anger and punitive behavior externally rather than against herself. With significant encouragement on the part of the therapist, this was successfully accomplished. The patient became more assertive, was able to reject the father's advances and she spent less time at home. Rather than directing anger inward by hurting herself physically and emotionally she began expressing more openly her repressed rage and hate toward her father, both within and outside the therapy setting.*

*The question is: Was the treating psychologist performing a mitzvah [of healing, etc.] or an aveira. by causing the patient to disrespect and even despise her father..?*

Rabbi Zilberstein responded with the following. If the father hasn't done *teshuvah* (repentance) then he is a *rosha* (wicked person) and there is no obligation to honor him. While the *Shach* rules that although one isn't obligated to honor a wicked father it remains forbidden to cause him pain and if the father would be aware that his daughter was receiving this type of therapy it would cause him pain, Rabbi Zilberstein suggests that perhaps it would still be permissible because;

*In this situation the father damaged her and acted immorally. The prohibition against disrespecting and despising a parent applies only when the child's goal is to disrespect for the sake of humiliating the parent but not when it is done for the sake of treatment and for the sake of [the health of] the daughter. After all, it is also to the father's benefit that he have a healthy daughter, able to marry.. The therapy is not a disgrace for the father; rather it is a healing for the daughter.. After all, it was the father who damaged his daughter by acting inappropriately and he caused her to be emotionally ill and therefore it is his obligation to make her well.*

Rabbi Zilberstein cites evidence from *Pesachim* 56 that one is permitted to disgrace parents for a constructive purpose [to'eless], such as achieving a *kaparah* for them. "Likewise here, the father destroyed his daughter's world and he is therefore obligated to suffer in order to heal her."

Rabbi Zilberstein then proceeds to discuss the *halacha* if the patient's father **had** done *teshuvah*<sup>10</sup> (repentance) in which case;

*One can assume that he would consent that his daughter disrespect him in her heart so that she should [be healed and] be able to marry, and so that he should achieve a kaparah for what he did to her.*<sup>[11](#)</sup>

Rabbi Zilberstein concludes that the therapist, in this case, acted according to *halachah* and fulfilled many *mitzvot* including that of healing the sick.<sup>[12](#)</sup>

### **Part 3**<sup>\*\*\*</sup>

I would also like to share with the *Nefesh News* readers a responsa from *Dayan* Y. Y. Fisher in *Shu"t Even Yisroel* (Vol. 9, p. 146). *Dayan* Fisher was asked regarding the obligation to obey parents when they request something that does not directly affect them. Although the *Rashba* rules that the obligation to respect parents (*kovod*) only applies to something that they get physical enjoyment from (e.g., bringing them food) the *Makneh* (*Kidushin*, 32) asserts that one would violate the requirement of *morah* (fear) if he disobeys a parent regarding any type of command. So what would be the practical application of the *Rashba's* ruling? *Dayan* Fisher responded that one violates the commandment of *morah* (fear) only if one tells the parent openly "I'm not going to listen," but if the child doesn't answer "he can then do what he wants, since it doesn't directly affect the parents." *Dayan* Fisher also ruled that when parents demand obedience from a child in regard to a *mitzvah* (e.g., who to marry, where to learn), the child can openly tell the parent that he won't listen.

In part 2, I cited a responsa from Rabbi Yitzchok Zilberstein. I have since corresponded with him in order to clarify a few issues. I would like to share with the readers some of his comments.

1. In his responsa Rabbi Zilberstein stated that one may speak disparagingly to one's parent in order to prevent him from sinning. I asked him if one could extend this reasoning to a situation where a parent is reprimanding a child in an abusive manner. Perhaps the child should be permitted (or even obligated) to object in order to prevent his parent from sinning in this manner. Rabbi Zilberstein concurred.
2. Rabbi Zilberstein cited a ruling from Rav Moshe Feinstein (Y"D, part 2, 103) that a teacher is not permitted to ask a child to tattle ("snitch") on another child. I related to Rabbi Zilberstein that, in fact, this is common practice (often accompanied by threats) in almost all the *frum* schools in the United States (even after they are shown Rav Moshe's *teshuva*). I asked Rabbi Zilberstein if there is any place for leniency in this matter which would perhaps justify this common practice. He responded that "since in the U.S. they accepted Rav Moshe's halachic authority there is no *heiter* (leniency) to disregard his ruling."
3. I related to Rabbi Zilberstein a situation where a young lady was molested by her stepfather for many years until she left home. Her stepfather never acknowledged his misdeeds and certainly never apologized. She avoided speaking to him or to her mother who did nothing to protect her. Her relatives - who knew what happened to her - criticized her for her lack of *kibbud av va'eim* because she distanced herself from them. Rabbi Zilberstein remarked; "Her relatives are total fools (*shotim gemurim*)."
4. I related a common situation where parents are overly critical and harsh to their children. As a result their children are afraid to be open with their parents and they certainly don't confide in them when they have problems. Is a child permitted to tell his parents that he would like to be open with them but he can't because they are too critical? Rabbi Zilberstein responded; "It is permitted for a child *lidrosh* (to request [or demand?]) this if he speaks in a respectful manner."

I also corresponded with Seymour Hoffman, Ph.D. an Israeli *Nefesh* member who was the clinician that presented the original questions to Rabbi Zilberstein. He informed me that the responsa was also cited in an article published by Dr. Hoffman in the *Israel Journal of Psychiatry & Related Sciences*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (2001), 123-126. Dr. Hoffman also quotes a responsa from Rabbi Nachum Rabinovich from Maaleh Adumim in an article he published in *Assia - Jewish Medical Ethics*, Vol. VI, no. 2, (2004), 36-38. Dr. Hoffman asked:

*Since most parents would not be considered reshaim [in the halachic sense] even though they may have caused, unwittingly, emotional turmoil and damage to their offspring.. may [the therapist] encourage the child to speak freely about his negative feelings toward his parents, if this is necessary for the therapy.?*

Rabbi Rabinovich responded:

*In my previous reply I cited an example of a wicked parent as an extreme case. [However, even if the parent is not considered a rosha in halacha] whenever a wrong is committed there is an element of wickedness, even if unintentional, which requires kaparah.. If the expression of negative feelings is intended to bring about a therapeutic result, it is certainly justified.*

I again reiterate what I previously emphasized, that *kibbud av va'eim* is a very important and complex *mitzvah* and any particular situation has to be evaluated by a knowledgeable *Rov* for specific guidance.

[This final segment was **not** published in the *NEFESH News*].

I have decried the tendency to present the *mitzvah* of *kibbud av va'eim* to children with the implication that they are required to submit passively to abusive parents. Lest someone think that I am overstating the problem, allow me to quote from a recent issue of a newsletter put out by a very popular program run in many frum schools that promotes the observance of the *mitzvah* of respecting parents and teachers. The newsletter first relates the incident with *Dommah Ben Nesinah* that I cited in Part 1 (without the qualification of *Tosafos* or the *Yam Shel Shlomo* that his mother was *meturefes b'daata*) and then continues:

*The key to such awesome self-control [i.e., not responding angrily to an abusive parent] is developing the proper attitude. We are instructed: "One should not respond negatively to his parents, but should remain silent and fear the Melech Malchei HaMelachim who has instructed him so" (Yoreh Deah 240:30). For, were a mortal king to instruct us to fulfill a difficult request, would we question his instructions? (e.g., "If Saddam Hussein told you the sky is purple, would you dare to argue?) [emphasis added].*

This is the message our children are getting! Even if your parents tell you something that is obviously wrong pretend that it is right because an evil and powerful bully (*Hashem* as Saddam Hussein r"l!) will torture you if you dare show any sign of disbelief or displeasure. Is this the understanding of *kibbud av va'eim* we want our children to have? And is this the image of *Hashem* we want them to have?

The well-known mechanech, Rabbi Dov Brezak, relates that he once asked the revered sage, Rav Leib Steinman Shlit"a, how a parent should react to a child who is obstinate and uncooperative. Rav Steinman responded: "Do the parents do everything they are supposed to do right away? Are they such righteous people that they constantly fulfill their obligations perfectly? Parents are to understand that it is normal for a child to be lax in his duty of listening to the parent and rather than getting upset we must search for alternative means to elicit cooperation. High ranking among them is discussion." [13](#)

I would like to end with a story that happened with the Steipler Gaon that illustrates some of the points made in this article. Once The Steipler wasn't feeling when he went to sleep. His daughter asked that he wake her if his situation worsened during the night. The next morning she found out that her father's situation had indeed worsened but he didn't wake her. "Why didn't you wake me? You deprived me of the mitzvah of kibud av!" She exclaimed. "You indeed have a mitzvah of kibud av," the Steipler responded, "but I have a mitzvah not to burden you!" [14](#)

**\*)** From the *Nefesh News*, Jan. 2004, pp. 17-20.

**1)** The Midrash Rabbah (Devarim 1:15) also states that Dommah Ben Nesinah's mother was *chasras daas* (mentally deficient) and that he told her "*dayaich imi*" (enough Mother) i.e., he didn't remain silent.

**2)** 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.

**3)** And presumably, providing it doesn't make the child emotionally "ill," as discussed below.

**4)** This is often expressed - even by parents - with comments such as, "He's manipulative, lazy, self-centered, he has a character flaw," etc.

**5)** See *Tanah Debei Eliyahu Rabah* (19:1), regarding the obligation to rebuke a parent who is speaking inappropriately, which would seem to apply also to a parent speaking abusively. [See also part 3, item 1].

**6)** Sorotzkin, B. (2002). "The denial of history: Clinical implications of denying child abuse." *The Journal of Psychohistory*, 30, 29-53. 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.

**7)** See more on this issue in part 3.

**8)** See *Sefer Kibbud Av Va'eim* (Rabbi Hillel Litwack) p. 65, citing *Sefer Habris*. Rabbi Yechiel Jacobson, a well-known *mechanech* in *Eretz Yisroel*, relates a story. A father told the Steipler Gaon that he is concerned that his son is violating the *mitzvah* of *kibbud av va'eim* 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 *lefeiv eiveir lo setain michshol*. As for your son, there is a simple solution, you can be *mochel* him, and if you don't you are foolish because you will be held responsible for that also."

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

**\*\*) From the Nefesh News, April, 2004, pp. 30-31.**

**10)** When I discussed this issue with Rav Dovid Cohen Shlit"a, on Feb. 14, 2004, he made the following point. A person who behaved in a manner that made him a *rosha* cannot simply say to *bais din* "I did *teshuvah* so now you are obliged to accept me as a witness." Similarly, a parent who was deemed a *rosha* cannot merely say to his child "I did *teshuvah* so now you are obligated to treat me with respect." In both cases the person has to demonstrate, to the *bais din* or to the child, over time and in a consistent and convincing manner that he has sincerely repented.

**11)** Rabbi Zilberstein suggests that if the father did *teshuvah* it might be proper to involve the father in the treatment in order to avoid embarrassing him as much as possible. Likewise, after the patient heals, marries, and her trauma subsides she should be encouraged to return to honoring her father (if he did *teshuvah*).

**12)** Rabbi Zilberstein concludes his article by recounting a story from the *Sefer Chut HaMeshulosh*. When the *Chasam Sofer* was only 10 years old he was already an accomplished scholar studying together with older students under the great *Gaon*, Rav Noson Adler. The *Chasam Sofer* was once asked to take a turn at giving a *chabura* (seminar) to the other students and visiting scholars. In the course of his comments he cited a profound Talmudic question posed by his illustrative grandfather. He then remarked that, with all due respect, he feels that his grandfather erred and that there really is no difficulty. When the *Chasam Sofer's* father heard his son state that his grandfather erred, he got furious and slapped him across his face. The young boy was very embarrassed and he ran to hide in shame. When Rav Adler heard about the incident, he told his student to never speak to his father again because he feared that the father's critical attitude may dampen his son's enthusiasm for learning. The *Chasam Sofer's* father accepted this decree and in fact never spoke to his son again. Rav Adler raised the *Chasam Sofer* in his home as one of his own children.

**\*\*) From the Nefesh News, March, 2005, pp. 18-19.**

**13)** "The Principal's Principles," *Community Magazine*, April, 2007, pp. 30-32.

**14)** *Hagodas HaKhillos Yaakov, Bnai Brak*, 2005, p. 41.

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