FIFTH COMMANDMENT: Honoring our parents, in special circumstances

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The rabbis of the Talmud addressed the question of honoring one's parents in special circumstances. We will see today two examples.

SENILE PARENTS

The Rabbis examined the case of Rab Asi, who lived with his elderly senile mother. He took very good care of her and did whatever he could to please her, honor her and not contradicting her. The Talmud illustrates his mother's erratic behavior and Rab Asi's reaction: one day she asked him to buy for her jewelry, and he brought her some. Another day she ask him to look for a husband for her. Trying to appease her, he told her, he will look for one… The situation got to a point where her requests were increasingly eccentric and her behavior turned more violent. Rab Asi then decided to leave her. The Rabbis explained that Rab Asi did not abandon her on her own, but left her with a kind person whom he hired to take care of his mother. The rabbis explained that Rab Asi believed that otherwise, in those circumstances, he will be forced to disrespect his mother and perhaps be coerced to physically restrain her. The Sages also explained that, for some reason, in this case Rab Asi's mother's behavior would turn more aggressive in his presence, but with somebody else she will be calmer. Based on this precedent the rabbis conclude that in certain circumstances the son or daughter might leave his elder parents under the care of another individual.

Obviously, each case is completely different from the other and must be addressed specifically.

I would recommend that in no circumstances children will make this kind of decisions based just on intuition. Rather, one should consult with a social worker and with a Rabbi to determine what is the best thing one can do for his or her parents.

DISOBEYING PARENTS FOR THEIR OWN BENEFIT

Honoring our parents includes obeying them and pleasing their wishes, especially when dealing with something they wish for their own benefit. But, what if the parents ask their son or daughter something which will be detrimental for them? For example: What should a son do if his father asks him to bring for him liquor, and the son knows the father will become intoxicated. Does the son still need to obey his dad and bring the liquor, following blindly his father's order, or should he refuse to attend his father wishes? The Rabbis agree that in this case the son should refuse to buy or get the liquor for his father, but he should do so with utmost respect, trying to dissuade his father reasoning with him. The son is not allowed to fight, yell at or disrespect his father in any way, even when the son is right. Modern rabbis bring a few other common cases. If the parent is diabetic and asks his son to bring him a sweet food, or when a father ask his son or daughter to bring cigarettes or anything that would cause a 'significant' damage to the father's or mother's health, i.e. anything the physician will forbid them to have. The rabbis agree that the son or daughter should refuse, but they insist that in all these cases, it is critical to maintain a respectful approach and avoid, God forbid, to offend or humiliate one's parents while trying to protect them from harm. (Yalqut Yosef, Kibbud Ab va-Em, Bet, 46-60)