Showing Honor and Providing Care for Our Aging Parents

The rabbis of the Talmud examined the matter of honoring our parents in special circumstances. We will now explore one of these cases.

MENTAL HEALTH

The rabbis presented the case of Rab Ase, who lived with his elderly mother, who exhibited symptoms of senile dementia. Rab Ase took excellent care of her, doing whatever he could to please, honor, and avoid contradicting her. The Talmud illustrates the mother's erratic behavior and Rab Ase's reaction: first, she asked him to buy her jewelry, and he brought her some. Then she asked him to find her a husband. Trying to appease her, he told her he would look into it… Eventually, the situation reached a point where the elderly mother's orders became increasingly eccentric, and her behavior grew even more erratic. Rab Ase then decided not to care for his mother "personally." Firstly, for some reason, Rab Ase's mother's behavior was very dysfunctional in her son's presence, but with other people, she behaved more calmly. Secondly, Rab Ase understood that if this situation with his mother continued or worsened, he might be forced to restrict his mother physically, something he was unwilling to do because it would be disrespectful to her. Rab Ase then hired a capable helper to care for his mother. Based on this precedent, the rabbis concluded that, in certain circumstances, a son or daughter might have their elderly parents under the care of other people.

Obviously, these are very sensitive and complex issues, and each case is entirely different from the other. It is recommended in these circumstances to consult with a rabbinical authority and a mental health professional to find

the best and most effective solution for both parents and children.

It is worth noting that the fact that a son or daughter is not taking care of their parents in person does not exempt them from continuing to address their parents' needs, visiting them, speaking to them frequently over the phone, and using all modern means of communication to maintain a strong emotional relationship with their parents.

DISOBEYING PARENTS FOR THEIR OWN GOOD

Honoring our parents includes, as much as possible, pleasing them and fulfilling their wishes. But what should be done when parents ask their children to do something harmful to them? For example: What should a son or daughter do if their father asks them to bring him an alcoholic beverage, and the child knows that the father will end up drunk? Should a child obey their father and bring him liquor, following his "wishes," or should they refuse to please their father in this case?

The rabbis explain that in these types of circumstances, children must refuse to obey their parents for their own good. However, they must do so while maintaining the utmost respect, trying to dissuade their parents while keeping their dignity intact and maintaining a positive attitude without offending them.

Contemporary rabbis provide some other common examples. If a father or mother has diabetes and asks their child to bring them a very sweet food, or if a father asks his son or daughter to bring him cigarettes, in all cases where parents ask their children for something that may cause them significant harm to their health or well-being, children should not fulfill these requests. Once again, even in these cases where children disobey their parents for their parents' benefit, it is crucial to maintain a respectful attitude and avoid offending, yelling at, or humiliating the parents

(Yalqut Yosef, Kibbud Ab va-Em, 2, 46-60).