Honoring Parents as Heroes, a Biblical revolution

We all know the importance of the Mitsva of honoring and respecting our parents. What is perhaps less known is the historical context in which this commandment was established. Learning more about it will help us appreciate more how extraordinary this commandment is.

At first, sight, honoring our parents seems to be something obvious and natural today.

Especially because, as with many other values, Jewish biblical ideas have been integrated over the centuries into the mental and social heritage of a large part of humanity. We live in a civilization that the Bible has transformed, and as such, we take the duty to honor our parents for granted. However, this obligation is a Biblical Jewish innovation.

Let’s see.

WHAT IS A HERO?
Family and family hierarchies were not always as we know them today. To the point that parricide and incest, as can be seen from the stories and myths of the Hittites, the Sumerians, and many other peoples of ancient Mesopotamia, were not uncommon.In our specific case, the duty of honoring parents in the Tora goes far beyond mere respect for the authority of our parents. Honoring them means giving them a special category of respect. Consider, for example, the obligation of a son or daughter to stand up in honor of the mere presence of their parents. In modern society, this is reserved for individuals with certain positions associated with power, for example, the president, a judge, a governor, etc. Also, in ancient times, in societies contemporary to the time of the giving of the Tora, this type of honor was reserved not for the progenitors

but almost exclusively for the warriors and the “heroes” of the battlefield. For men (never for women!), powerful and physically strong, distinguished by their military prowess or by defeating monsters with multiple heads.

The call to honor “parents” is a radical innovation of the Tora, a profound disengagement with other cultures and with the human tendency to elevate to the level of heroes those who obtained the glory in the battle. The Biblical revolution solidifies the image of parents by demanding to honor them as if they were our heroes, and reinforcing thus the child-parent bond, facilitating the process of education and transmission.

WHAT IS A WOMAN?

Another element that perhaps is not valued enough is that societies of antiquity were strictly patriarchal, and in many civilizations, women were considered as possessions, and they enjoyed practically no rights. As explained by the Sages, the Biblical text establishes that a child should honor his father and mother equally. The mother is not seen as a paternal appendix but as an equal partner in the family society. This is a cultural revolution with long-term effects. Because by raising the position of both parents equally, a Jewish child is trained from a tender age to appreciate women. Among other things, this will influence, in the future, the way a man will see his own wife since there is a direct relationship between the respect that a son has for his mother as a boy and the respect he will have for his wife when he gets married. A Jewish daughter also grows up with an enhanced self-esteem as a woman, seeing the unconditional honor and deference given to her mom by her male siblings.