

My friends, tonight begins the final day of the Ten Days of Repentance, the time in which God asks us to reflect on what type of person we have been, and what type of person we ought to be. Judaism calls on us to make a better world, but I cannot make a better world until I have made a better me. The same is true for you. I assess who I am as a person tonight, and I set goals for the person I want to be by the next Yom Kippur. You are all doing the same. As your rabbi, I should be helping to facilitate this holy process, so tonight I will talk to you about a mitzvah, only one mitzvah. It is a major mitzvah, one of the Ten Commandments, and it is a mitzvah that carries different messages: one to young children, another to adult children, and yet another to parents and grandparents. By now you probably guessed what it is. I want not only to talk about this mitzvah, but suggest why it might be the most important of the Ten Commandments.

Traditionally, we say that the most important of the Ten Commandments is that we are forbidden to steal. All of the ethical commandments are comprised in “Do not steal.” To murder is to steal a life, to commit adultery is to steal a wife, to bear false witness is to steal justice, and to covet is to want to steal. Even a theological commandment, not worshipping other gods, is to steal God’s rightful place as the only God in the universe. Tonight, I will make the case for “Honor your father and your mother” as the most important of the Ten Commandments.

Let’s start with a little Hebrew lesson, followed by a little bit of Torah. The Hebrew word for honoring comes from the word *kabeid*, which means heavy. To honor is to make the parental role heavy, to take it seriously. Amazingly, the opposite, which is forbidden by the Torah, is to curse your parents. The Hebrew verb to curse is *kalel*, from the Hebrew meaning light, the opposite of heavy. To take the parental role seriously is to honor your parents; to take it lightly is to curse them.

Now a bit of Torah. Above me is a depiction of the two tablets of the Ten Commandments. On your right are four commandments about how to treat God. On your left are five commandments about how you treat people. The bridge between the two is the last commandment on the God side of the tablets, which is Honor your father and your mother. It is placed there to emphasize the importance of that commandment. Think about it—even though it is about people, Honor your father and your mother is on the God side of the tablets! As Dennis Prager points out, if the last one on the God side had been something like Do not murder, none of us would question it. No one would say, “How odd—what is Do not murder doing on the right tablet instead of the left. But that essential last place on the God side, the commandment that links how we treat God with how we treat others, is Honor your father and your mother.

Also, let's notice that the Ten Commandments largely tell us what not to do. There are only two of the ten that tell us to do something: keep the Sabbath, and honor your father and mother.

As I mentioned, this commandment has different messages for different age groups. Let's begin with little children. Assuming a normal and healthy family, children love their parents. That just happens. So the Torah comes along and says it's wonderful that you love your parents, but I am here to tell you that you must also honor them. Think about it—there is no commandment to love your parents. The Torah tells us to love the stranger, to love God, and to love your neighbor. Why? Because it is more important that the parental role be honored than it is that parents be loved.

Grown children who love their parents tend to honor them. Sadly, not every parent is lovable. At this point, I am not talking about parents who crossed the line into the evil realms of abuse in its many forms. But some people have non-violent, non-abusive parents whom they simply do not love for whatever reason. Some people are ambivalent about their parents, a fact that enabled my father and every other family therapist to make a living. I don't think my father was ever paid to listen to someone's complaints about his kindergarten teacher, although again I have to say that I am talking about essentially normal relationships, not ones that cross the abuse line. God only knows—no, as soon as I wrote those words I said no, leave them in but deny them—we know all too well, we know as well as God Himself knows, that there are adults in therapists' offices talking about their priests and their football coaches and other professionals, even sometimes their rabbis and cantors. That is a category of its own, and I want to acknowledge that. But there are parents who were nowhere close to that level of evil, but whose adult children do not love them for very legitimate reasons. If that is how you feel about your parents, that is your private business and your perfect right. What God cares about is how you treat them.

Let me tell you a powerful story that I witnessed as a radio listener. A man called the Dennis Prager show and told Dennis he wanted to talk to him about what a terrible son he was. He went on to explain to Dennis that he was his mother's sole source of emotional and financial support, that this had been this case for the more than ten years that his mother had lived in his home, and that there were times when he wished his mother would succumb to her illness. Dennis responded by saying that far from being a terrible son, he was a wonderful son. Do you know what the man said? He said, "Dennis, I just shared with you that I sometimes wish my mother dead, and I expected more from you than sarcasm." He could not hear

Dennis's point, but I think you can. And Dennis convinced him of his sincerity, that he was only human for feeling what he felt, and that it made him an even more terrific son because he had to battle against himself at times to do such good for his mother. At the end of the call, the man said, "Dennis, hearing this from you already feels like you changed my life." That's why the Torah calls on us for honor, not love, because the Torah is generally far more concerned with actions than feelings, and I believe the same is true of God, as Judaism teaches, "It is not the thought that is essential, but the deed."

To parents and grandparents, this commandment has another important message. You must know that even more than love you, your children must honor you. As a father, I know it is all too easy to fall into the trap of wanting to be a best friend to your children. As seductive as that is, it is not our role. We are here to be their parents, and referring back to the Hebrew I taught at the beginning of this talk, that is a very heavy role and we must treat it as such. When we say no to our children, they may not love us at that moment. When we make demands on them, they may not love us at that moment. If we primarily seek love more than honor from them, we will inevitably compromise our role as their parents. Not only is that bad for society, but especially tonight we must know it is not what God expects from us.

What has this to do with society? One of the first things that Nazism and Fascism sought to do is undermine the relationship between children and parents, to get children to honor not their father or mother, but the fatherland or the motherland. And here in America today, this commandment is the antidote for one of the greatest sicknesses pervading our society, and that is narcissism. Twenty-five years ago, Americans suffered primarily from guilt. Today, it is almost the polar opposite, and that is narcissism. Narcissism begins when a child believes he is the

center of the family, let alone the center of the world. Once it takes hold, narcissism is very difficult to undo—reread the story of Joseph in Genesis. One of the reasons I love Genesis so much is that no matter how dysfunctional your family is, you'll find one in Genesis that is worse. Honoring your parents teaches the opposite of narcissism—that there are certain things you have to do, even when you don't want to. In the Torah, our parents are second only to God. We are expected to honor that whether we like it or not.

When I was born, Dwight D. Eisenhower was President. Today, it is Barak Obama. Whether I liked or agreed with a given President or not, I would be thrilled to meet in person anyone who has held that office during my lifetime, with one notable exception. I know I do not have to identify him by name in synagogue. It is enough to note that he is the only one to use the words Israel and apartheid in the same breath. If he walked into the sanctuary at this moment, when I could be certain I was not being used as a prop for a photo opportunity, there are six words, and only six words, that I would say to this man for whom I feel nothing but revulsion—and by the way, he's the guy I cast my first Presidential vote for. How about that?—I have no respect for that man, but because he was President of the United States, I would say six and only six words to say to him: “Mr. President, welcome to Shaarey Tefilla.” My feelings are irrelevant. The office demands respect and honor, and so do the roles of father and mother.

Now, my friends, it is time to get personal. One of the reasons to honor your parents, and I'll leave it to you to rank its importance among the other reasons, but one of the reasons to honor your parents is because the day will come when it will bring you great peace and comfort. In all my years in the pulpit, never has anyone come to me to say they regretted the honor they showed their parents. But the other

way around? We live in a time in which something that was once unheard of is much less uncommon, adult children not speaking to a parent. When it is too late, I have seen it leave irreparable scars on the adult child.

And now, my friends, even more personal. One of the reasons I wanted to give this talk tonight is that it was just before Rosh Hashanah that we lost my mother-in-law, may she rest in peace. It is completely safe to say that although some might do as well, no one on the planet has done a better job of honoring parents than my wife. As we knew her mother was dying, we talked about the fact that once she passed on, Arlene would have no regrets that she had not done enough for her mother.

My mother-in-law was not a demonstrative woman. She was a wonderful woman. She loved her husband, children, grandchildren—she even loved me. She showed her love in different ways—by cooking special meals for her family, through her generosity, but saying it was not her style. When I got to the point that I could say to her, “I love you, Mom,” she would smile and say, “Thanks, Ben.” I knew it meant she loved me back.

As her life drew to a close, something happened. Arlene had pretty much moved into her parents home to care for her mother, and one day her mother said to her, “Arlene, you are such a good daughter. I love you, and I never told you.” Arlene treasures those words more than anything except our children.

So that, my friends, I why I chose to talk tonight about honoring your parents. It is Yom Kippur. It is a day of repentance forgiveness, and starting anew. This talk will mean something different to each individual who heard it. For some, it may apply to Yizkor tomorrow. Only you know how you can use it. I simply ask that you do,

for if you do, something will be a little better. A little bit society, a little bit your family, a little bit you, and maybe even a little bit God. Take this beautiful, essential Jewish commandment with you into the year 5773, and make that a little bit better too.