



Why Must I Honor My Mother-in-Law?

Are there any Restrictions for a Married Woman in Honoring her Parents?

The mitzvah of honoring parents is not always an easy mitzvah to keep, especially as a *ba'al teshuva* (returnee to Judaism), since we do not share many of our parents' values. Kosher dietary restrictions, the laws of modesty, Shabbat etc. can easily cause friction. Yet, we need to make up for all the years of our youth, when we didn't know better than to act chutzpadik to our parents. I recall my early days as a zealous newly Torah-observant young woman. I would drive my parents crazy with all my extra kosher *chumrot* (stringencies). It later dawned on me, that the Torah mitzvah of honoring parents, which is from the Ten Commandments, clearly overrides any rabbinic *chumra* regarding kosher food, Shabbat observance and more. Therefore, although I'm still struggling with this, I realize the need to lower my stringency standards at times when keeping them, would cause excessive trouble to my parents. The reason for the mitzvah of honoring parents is not as we might think- because of everything they did for us, from changing our diapers to putting us through college. The Israelites who received the Ten Commandments didn't need to do any of that, as Hashem provided for all our needs in the desert. Honoring our parents is like honoring Hashem, because, these three partners brought us into this world and gave us life. Wouldn't we honor anyone who saved our lives? ([Rabbi Shraga Simmons, Honoring Parents](#)). Thus, not even children of abusive parents are exempt from the mitzvah, "Honor your father and mother" (*Shemot* 20:12). What about a married woman? Her obligations to her husband- to maintain the household- overrides her obligation to honor her parents. Therefore, she is exempt from this mitzvah, as she has a higher code of honor to her husband, which may at times affect her ability to honor her parents. Yet, when it doesn't clash with honoring her husband and he isn't meticulous, she is obligated to honor her parents as much as possible (*Babylonian Talmud, Kiddushin* 30b; *Shulchan Aruch*, YD 240:17). For example, if I want to honor my mother with my presence at her 85-year birthday this summer, and leave my home for a week, it is only a mitzvah for me, as long as my husband doesn't oppose. If he would insist that he needs me at home, for whatever reason, it would be my Torah obligation to honor my husband rather than my parent. Baruch Hashem, I have a super husband who not only doesn't oppose my attempts to keep the mitzvah of honoring my parents, rather, he encourages me and does everything in his own power to honor his in-laws as well.

Biblical Role models for Honoring In-Laws

The mitzvah of honoring in-laws is modeled by Moshe, when Yitro, Moshe *Rabbeinu's* father-in-law, joined the Israelites in the desert prior to receiving the Torah:

ספר שמות פרק יח פסוק ז וַיֵּצֵא מֹשֶׁה לִקְרַאת חֹתְנוֹ וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוֶה וַיִּשָּׁק לוֹ וַיִּשְׁאַל אִישׁ לְרֵעֵהוּ לְשָׁלוֹם וַיָּבֹאוּ הָאֵלֶּה:

"So, Moshe went out toward Yitro, prostrated himself and kissed him, and they greeted one another with Shalom, then they entered the tent" (*Shemot* 18:70).

It is not clear from the verse who bowed down and kissed who, yet when the verse mentions **אִישׁ/ish** – "a man greeted the other," we know it was only Moshe who bowed down and kissed his father-in-law. This is because Moshe is called an '*ish*' as it states, "Now this **אִישׁ/ish** – 'man' Moshe was exceedingly humble..." (*Bamidbar* 12:3). From here we learn the importance of honoring in-laws (*Mechilta, Yitro, Parasha* 1).

Likewise, David, showed the greatest honor to Shaul, not only because he was the king but specifically because he was his father-in-law. Despite, Shaul being the worst father-in-law anyone could wish for, in his jealous pursuit of David, attempting to kill him numerous times, David showed him the outmost respect. When David had the opportunity to kill Shaul first, he presented the piece of cloth he had cut off Shaul's robe as evidence that he could have killed him but refrained from doing so and said, "See, my father, see again..." (I *Shmuel* 24:11). From here, we learn the obligation to honor in-laws (*Shulchan Aruch*, YD 240:24 with *Bach to Tur ad loc*; *Midrash Tehillim*, Mizmor 7).

Do we Have to Honor In-Laws like Parents?

There is a dispute regarding whether a man must honor his in-laws the same way that he honors his parents. Our Sages derived from the fact that David called his father-in-law, "My father" that one is obligated to honor one's father-in-law, the same way as one is obligated honor one's father, for the verse equates one's father-in-law to one's father. Since husband and wife are considered one, just as the wife is obligated to honor her father, her husband is obligated to honor her father as well. Yet, if the honor due to both parents and in-laws are equal, why would a married woman be exempt from honoring her parents when it conflicts with honoring her husband? If a man is equally obligated to honor his in-laws, then his wife should not be exempt from also honoring her parents., Regardless of the dispute, we still have an obligation to show the greatest respect to in-laws. This includes not calling our father-in-law or mother-in-law by their first names. Rather, we should call them "Abba" and "Ima" respectively, as some customarily do, or we could add a respectful title to their names such as "Rabbi" and the like. Alternatively, we may avoid addressing them directly altogether (*Halacha Yomit*, Maran Rabbeinu Ovadia Yosef zt"l). I personally do not feel it's very respectful to avoid calling in-laws anything, as this seems to me almost like ignoring them. Therefore, I call my father-in-law, 'Dad' and my mother-in-law, 'Mom.' In the beginning they thought it was awkward, since that's not the norm in secular circles, but over the years they got used to it and I believe they even came to appreciate this honorable title.

A Greater Mitzvah for a Woman to Honor her Mother-in-Law?

According to the view, that the honor due to in-laws is not to the same degree as the honor becoming parents, it seems to me that a married woman must honor her in-laws even more than her own parents. This is because her ability to honor her own parents depends on her husband's consent, whereas, there are no restrictions for her to honor her in-laws, since her husband must honor them, too. It has always been challenging for a woman to honor her mother-in-law. Both these women may have an underlying tendency to compete for the devotion of the man who links them ([Rebbetzin Chana Bracha Siegelbaum, *Ruth Gleaning the Fallen Sparks*](#)). They are enumerated among the five women who are known to be antagonistic toward each other (Rambam, *Mishna Torah, Laws of Divorce* 12:16). A mother-in-law may be prying or critical of her daughter-in-law, being dissatisfied with the way she cares for her son. The daughter-in-law may speak disrespectfully to her mother-in-law. In our times, the relationship between daughter-in-law and mother-in-law can be even more problematic, because one of the signs of the period immediately prior to the arrival of the Mashiach is that daughters-in-law will rise up against their mothers-in-law (BT, *Masechet Sotah* 49b). Nowadays, when it is common for brazen words to be exchanged between daughter-in-law and mother-in-law, this is a sign that the redemption is indeed near. Yet, "according to the difficulty is the reward" (*Pirkei Avot* 5:22) and specifically during this pre-messianic period, with the tendency to behave with chutzpah.

Honoring Our Mother-in-Law Grants Longevity and Brings the Mashiach

The righteous convert, Ruth, is an example, par excellence, of honoring our mother-in-law, through the exceptional *chesed* (loving-kindness) that she showed Naomi. This Moabite princess lowered herself to become a beggar in Israel, in order to provide sustenance for her mother-in-law and preserve her honor. Ruth's *chesed* toward Naomi was so extraordinary that it became the subject of amazement among the people of Beit-Lechem, (*Megillat Ruth* 2:11; [Ruth Gleaning the Fallen Sparks](#) p. 33). It is from Ruth that we learn that honoring your in-laws begets the same reward as honoring parents. By honoring her mother-in-law, Naomi, Ruth merited a very long life – the reward of honoring our parents, as it states: "Honor your father and mother, in order that your days be lengthened on the land that Hashem, your G-d, is giving you" (*Shemot* 20:12). Thus, Ruth merited to live in the times of her great, great grandchild, King Shlomo as the Midrash testifies, "He [Shlomo] placed a chair for the mother of the king" (*I Melachim* 2:19). Who was the mother of King Solomon? Ruth, the mother of Royalty (*Yalkut Shimoni, Ruth* 1:596; *Zohar Ruth* 1:5096; *Midrash Ruth Rabbah* 2:2). Through the mitzvah of honoring her mother-in-law, Ruth merited not only to live to see four generations of her offspring, but moreover to build the messianic dynasty and bring about the final redemption. Through the effort of rectifying one of the most challenging relationships, especially in our time, we too, may merit longevity and help speed up the coming of Mashiach!