

# Gratitude from the Torah

By Rebbetzin Chana Bracha

## Parashat Mishpatim

How Does the Prohibition to Strike and Curse Parents Influence Our Lives?

### How Can I Make Up for my Chutzpah Toward my Parents?

I'm excited to visit my 88-year-old mother in Denmark this upcoming week. While it is more fun to visit Scandinavia during the summer, when I enjoy the temperate climate, swimming in the ocean and lakes while avoiding the scorching Middle Eastern sun, at that time my mother is inundated with visitors from Israel. This year, due to the war, my mother didn't visit Israel during Chanukah, and neither does she have plans to come for Pesach. Therefore, Hashem gave me the idea to pay a little visit at this time. While I was growing up, I may not have been the most respectful daughter to my parents. Now, I really want to do my best to make up for my prior impudence, while it's still possible. We live in "A generation that curses its father and does not bless its mother" (*Mishlei* 30:11). This is part of the signs of redemption as it states, "In the times of the approach of the Mashiach, chutzpah (impudence) will increase... The youth will shame the face of elders, elders will stand before minors. Normal family relations will be ruined: A son will disgrace a father; a daughter will rise up against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law" (*Babylonian Talmud, Sotah* 49b). After raising my own children, I realized the work, sacrifice, and dedication involved in parenthood. I understand how my parents must have felt when I did not get in touch. I feel honored if my children are thoughtful enough to thank me for anything I do for them.

### A Daughter's Confession About Being Negligent with the Mitzvah to Honor Parents

I thank G-d for my parents. I wish I had been able to honor them from a young age. My parents laid down their lives to raise me and give me a good start in life. Although they weren't Torah observant, they imbued me with important Jewish values, such as the importance of kindness, honesty, and continuous learning. I was not as respectful, loving, and thankful for their care as I wish I had been when I lived at home. As a teenager, many a night my parents must have been so worried when I arrived home after a party the following day around sunrise. I just thought of myself and the exploration of my own life. My friends were everything and my parents faded to the back. I deeply regret if I may even have made fun of my mother's anxiety about me to my friends. Now, being a mother myself, I have tasted some of my own medicine! Having difficulty falling asleep when I didn't know where my son was and waking up at night checking if the light – that we had left on for him – had been turned off or not. Being a parent is often a thankless task. Children don't realize how much sacrifice, how much giving, how much care parents exude for their children. When I was seventeen things got so entangled between my parents and me that I felt the need to leave home. I went about my life and spent minimum time with them, but they were always there for me especially if I needed money. As a nineteen-year-old, I went to travel around Europe on my thumb, to my parents' great dismay and worry. When I got in trouble, it was of course my parents who wired me a ticket to Israel which changed my life. B"H I soon met the love of my life and got married when I was twenty. I carried on with my life and did not thank or honor my parents enough. I was busy dealing with my own situation. Even after having learned about the important mitzvah of honoring my parents, I still drove them crazy on my yearly visits with my zealous demands for the highest standards of kosher. I deeply regret making them feel like they were inferior to me and the people in the Yeshiva who had found "the light."

### Why is 'Respecting Parents' Included in the Mitzvot Between Man and G-d?

Last week in *Parashat Yitro* we read the Ten Commandments which includes the mitzvah to honor parents. Since the Ten Commandments are divided into two tablets with five commandments between Man and G-d and five between man and his fellow, we would expect that respecting parents would belong to the latter category. Yet despite it being an interpersonal obligation, it is included in the first set of five. This is because honoring parents is due to the gratitude that we owe to our parents. This includes gratitude for everything that they have done, from bringing us into the world to the everyday care and attention that they showered upon us from birth. Hashem obligated us in this mitzvah so that it would instill within us the central trait of gratitude which is a fundamentally important character trait. We must feel and express gratitude for everything in life and therefore we must start at the very beginning, with those who brought us into the world. This explains the natural connection between the mitzvah of honoring parents and the mitzvot between Man and G-d. Through our gratitude for our parents, we will come to a greater appreciation of Hashem (*Sefer HaChinuch, Mitzvah 33 and 212*). Moreover, there are three partners in the forming of a person: The father and his mother and the Holy One, Blessed be He, who provides the soul. When a person honors his parents, the Holy One, Blessed be He, says: I ascribe credit to them as if I dwelt between them and they honor Me as well (*Babylonian Talmud, Kiddushin 30b*). Yet, if we are ungrateful for the good that they [our parents] did for us, we will, in the end, G-d forbid deny Hashem.

### Why is the Prohibition to Strike and Curse Repeated Regarding Parents?

From *Parashat Mishpatim* we continue to learn about the vital importance of respecting parents and how this mitzvah is not just another interpersonal mitzvah such as loving one's neighbor or doing chesed for the stranger. Although it is prohibited to curse anyone, as our sages learn from another verse in *Parashat Mishpatim*: "You shall not curse a judge, neither shall you curse a prince among your people" (*Shemot 22:27*). From where do I know that this [prohibition] includes [cursing] any person? Scripture says, "You shall not curse...among your people." (Rashi, *Vayikra 19:14*). We are forbidden both to curse the great and mighty (*Shemot 22:27*), as well as from cursing the lowly and downtrodden (*Vayikra 19:14*). Our parents are in there somewhere between those two extremes! So why does the Torah emphasize and single out the prohibition against cursing parents?

**ספר שמות פרק טו ומכה אביו ואמו מות יומת: (ז) ומקלל אביו ואמו מות יומת:**

"He who strikes his father, or his mother shall surely be put to death. He who curses his father or his mother shall surely be put to death" (*Shemot 21:15,17*).

The negative mitzvah not to strike is counted as a separate mitzvah since striking a parent has a very different penalty from striking just anyone. The same applies to the prohibition against cursing our parents. The reason why the punishment for hitting or 'merely' insulting one's parents is so severe is that whatever their flaws may be, we would not be here if not for them and we should show our respect and gratitude for that. Raising a hand to a parent or cursing them is the ultimate disrespect.

### A Mystical Approach to How Children Can Rectify Their Parents

How can anyone strike his parents, when his father raised him in his arms, dressed him, sustained him, and fed him, and his mother went through the pain of his birth, breastfed him, weaned him, washed him, anointed him, and dressed him? How can this person be so ungrateful to strike or

curse his parents? Moreover, why is the prohibition against striking one's parents juxtaposed to the prohibition of stealing a person and selling him? On a mystical level, when parents engage in unholy 'stolen' intercourse without intending for the sake of Hashem, the soul that they conceive is considered stolen, but Hashem allows them to keep it, as if He sold it to them, according to the principle "he who wants to become impure is helped." This is the meaning of "he is found in his hand." According to the simple meaning, since he sold the person, he stole, how would it be possible to find that person with the kidnapper? He is no longer with the thief but with the one who bought him. On a metaphorical level, although there are three partners in bringing down a soul, in this case, Hashem was not part of the team that consisted only of his father and his mother. Therefore, it states, "he is found in his possession" without Hashem's agreement. Although the parents were at fault for bringing this lowly soul into the world, he can still rectify himself and them by learning Torah, doing good deeds, and praying to Hashem to return him to good. Rather than cursing his parents, the child has the ability to repent for both himself and for them by being involved in the Torah - compared to fire (*Yirmeyahu* 23:29) - which will rectify the lustful fire during the time of his conception. The reason it states that the soul of "A person who curses his father or mother must surely die" is that although you may think he is justified to curse them - as they caused his lowliness - since he has a chance to rectify them, he is prohibited from cursing them (Siftei Kohen, *Shemot* 21:15). Although this commentary is quite cryptic my take-away is the immense responsibility children have in honoring our parents, and the tremendous rectification both for ourselves and for them we may merit through this most vital mitzvah.

**Gratitude Focus for the Week of Parashat Mishpatim -  
Some Tips for How to Show Gratitude to Your Parent(s)**

- **Honor Parents on Their Birthday** - Nothing gives parents more pleasure than when their children remember their birthdays and honor them in meaningful ways. If you live within driving distance, you can pay a surprise visit (with the kids if applicable) and a homemade birthday cake with a card showing your appreciation for everything they have done and still do for you. If you live out of town, you can order flowers to be sent on your parent's birthday and include a meaningful card. It is a work of love to make a movie in their honor, with pictures and movie clips of them to be shown at special birthday milestones. You can also write a song, a poem, and a thoughtful speech. Create a Family Album or Scrapbook - Nothing says thank you like spending hours hand-making the perfect personalized gift. Pictures hold tons of memories - use your family's history as inspiration and put your creative skills to good use. Phones and social media accounts may be great for storing large numbers of photos, but nothing beats a physical family photo album. Find as many meaningful pictures as you can to fill the pages. If your mom or dad is crafty, consider getting a scrapbook and not filling it completely. You and your family can then make a few pages together or you can let them add to the scrapbook as they see fit.
- **Create a Family Album or Scrapbook** - Nothing says *thank you* like spending hours hand-making the perfect personalized gift. Pictures hold tons of memories - use your family's history as inspiration and put your creative skills to good use. Phones and social media accounts may be great for storing large numbers of photos, but nothing beats a physical family photo album. Find as many meaningful pictures as you can to fill the pages. If your mom or dad is

crafty, consider getting a scrapbook and not filling it completely. You and your family can then make a few pages together or you can let them add to the scrapbook as they see fit.

- **Write a Poem** – Writing a poem can be a great way to honor your parents in a truly meaningful way. While you can rhyme, some of the most well-written poems don't follow a rhythm or formula. Once you create your poem, you can write it on beautiful stationery or frame it with some artwork.
- **Cook Your Parents' Favorite Meal** – One easy way to express your gratitude is to help your parents with daily housework so they can rest. Cooking takes a lot of energy and skill. For your special dinner, try cooking their favorite meal or an old family recipe.
- **Send a Handwritten Letter or Card** – Use crafting paper to create the perfect letter or card to brighten their day. Add dried flowers, ribbons, or stickers to make your letter unique. If you don't have time to decorate, you can always use a blank card or premade stationery.
- **Surprise them with a gift** – If you can't visit in person, sending a gift in the mail can be a great way to show your appreciation and gratitude. If your parents are hard to shop for, go for the classics – fancy bath soaps, a bouquet of flowers and chocolate, or perhaps an edible arrangement.
- **Ask Your Parents if There is Anything They Want** – One of the best ways to show someone you care is through meaningful conversation. If you're out of ideas, why not ask your parents if there's anything they would like to do or see? You may be surprised by their answers!