



Mistreatment of Elders

Some sensibilities inform a Jewish consideration of the mistreatment of the elderly

- ❖ The Elderly deserve regard
- ❖ Parents deserve regard
- ❖ The Difficulty of Caring for Elderly Parents [or other Elderly Relatives] is no Excuse for Cruelty

Sensibility: The Elderly deserve regard

Our Tradition presents care and concern for the elderly as a central pillar of the life, not only of the Jewish people, but also of humanity as a whole. The claim of the elderly on such care and concern is categorical: it is not dependent on special virtue. It is, perhaps, simply a response to the fact that they have lived so long—their lengthy experience is sufficient grounds for special treatment.

ויקרא יט:לב מפני שיבה תקום, והדרת פני זקן ויראת מאלקיד, אני ה' :

Leviticus 19:32

You shall rise before the aged and **show deference to the old**; you shall fear your God; I am the Lord.

The phrasing of this verse implies that concern for the elderly is central to the religious vocation of Israel.

דברים כח:ג גוי, עז פנים, אֲשֶׁר לֹא-יִשָּׂא פְּנִים לְזָקֵן, וְנָעַר לֹא יָחוּ.

Deuteronomy 28:50

A ruthless nation that **will show the elderly no regard** and the young no mercy.

The “ruthless nation” spoken of here is imagined as attacking Israel. This nation’s disregard for the elderly warrants it the appellation ‘ruthless.’

אבות ה:כא
בְּן שִׁשִּׁים לְזָקֵנָה, בֶּן שִׁבְעִים לְשִׁיבָה,

Pirkei Avot 5:21

Sixty years for being old, seventy years for being aged.

How do we define “the elderly”?

Sensibility: Parents deserve regard

The principle of “honoring father and mother” is articulated in the Ten Commandments and is traditionally identified as the Fifth Commandment. As such, it serves as a nexus between the theological commands (1-4) and the interpersonal commands (6-10).

שמות כ: יא כבוד אֶת-אָבִיךָ, וְאֶת-אִמְךָ...

Exodus 20:11

Honor your father and mother...

Parents are sometimes seen as in loco Dei, placeholders for God:

Talmud Kiddushin 30b

There are three partners in the genesis of a person: the Holy One blessed be He, one's father, and one's mother.¹

Parents are sometimes seen as teachers and fonts of wisdom.

משלי א: ח שָׁמַע בְּנִי, מוֹסֵר אָבִיךָ; וְאַל-תִּטַּשׁ, תּוֹרַת אִמְךָ.

Proverbs 1:8

Heed, my son, the instruction of your father; and do not spurn the teaching (*Torah*) of your mother.

To show disrespect to parents is viewed in our Tradition as a dreadful thing. Second on the list of curses in Deuteronomy 27:15 and following, after idol-making, is a reference to the mistreatment of parents:

דברים כו: טז אָרוּר, מִקֵּלָה אָבִיו וְאִמּוֹ ...

Deuteronomy 26:16

Cursed is one who insults his father or mother...

Sensibility: The Difficulty of Caring for Elderly Parents [or other Elderly Relatives] is no excuse for Cruelty

Our Tradition appreciates that caring for elderly parents, for example, can be financially and emotionally draining. The author of the Shulchan Aruch (mid 16th century) was sensitive to the financial difficulties:

R. Joseph Caro, *Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah* 240:5 (Laws of Honoring Father and Mother)

The cost of providing food and drink to one's [elderly] parents comes from [the parents'] funds, if they suffice. If the parent does not have funds, and the child does, then the child is required to provide provisions for his parent to the extent that he can. If the child does not have funds, he is not required to go begging in order to feed his parent.

In any event, the child is expected to show honor with his person (presence, body)...²

¹ תנו רבנן: שלשה שותפין הן באדם: הקדוש ברוך הוא, ואביו, ואמו.

² זה שמאכילו ומשקהו, משל אב ואם, אם יש לו. ואם אין לאב, ויש לבן, כופין אותו וזן אביו כפי מה שהוא יחול. ואם אין לבן, אינו חייב לחזור על הפתחים להאכיל את אביו. ... אבל חייב לכבדו בגופו...

Concerning the emotional aspect, Maimonides (12 c.) writes:

Maimonides, Laws of Rebels 6:10

One whose father or mother has gone insane should make an effort to relate to them according to their mental state... If it is impossible for [the child] to bear on account of the severity of their madness, he may leave his parents and provide instructions to others to care for them as befits them.³

As difficult as caring for an elderly relative may be, our Tradition sees no excuse for cruelty.

Jerusalem Talmud Peah 1:1

A certain man would feed his father fatted chickens.

On one occasion, his father said to him, "Son, where do you get them?"

The son said, "Old man, Old man, eat and be silent as dogs eat and are silent."

Although he fed his father fatted chickens, he merited [to go to] Hell.⁴

³מי שנטרפה דעתו של אביו או של אמו משתדל לנהוג עמהם כפי דעתם ... ואם אי אפשר לו לעמוד מפני שנתטו ביותר, יניחם וילך לו ויצוה אחרים כראוי להם.

⁴ חד בר נש הוה מייכיל לאבוי תרנגולין פטימין. חד זמן, אמר ליה אבוי, 'ברי, אילין מנן לך?' אמר ליה, 'סבא, סבא, אכול ואדיש, דכלביא אכלין ומדשין.' נמצא, מאכיל את אביו פטומות ויורש גיהנום.