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The Shalom  
Hartman Institute  
for Advanced  
Judaic Studies

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**EDUCATION for INTER-DEPENDENCE  
In the JEWISH FAMILY**

**PART ONE: ARTICLE**

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Shalom Hartman Institute  
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Education for Inter-dependence  
in the Jewish Family

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Education for Inter-dependence in the Jewish Family

Part I:

- A. Essay: The Family as Mirroring  
Theological Commitment

Part II: (under separate cover)

- B. Guide for Self-study and Teaching
- C. Guided Text Study

### Foreword

This unit is divided into two major parts. Each part appears under a separate cover and binding.

Part I consists of an essay discussing the centrality of the parent-child relationship in the family for the building of the overall Jewish spiritual world view.

Part II consists of two units: a collection of original sources with questions for study and a guide for self-study and teaching. This educator's guide relates directly to the sources and questions and should be used in immediate reference to them.

The two parts supplement each other and occasionally refer to one another. Although they may be used separately, ideally they should be read in the order presented: first the essay (Part I) for an introduction into some of the central categories and problematics of the parent-child relationship in Judaism, and secondly the source material and guide (Part II) which provides a deeper scrutiny of texts as well as suggestions on teaching the material to others.



The Family  
as Mirroring Theological Commitment

Honoring Parents: Covenantal or Natural Obligation?

In the last book of the Mishneh Torah, the Book of Judges, Hilkhoth Mamerim, VI 1, Moses Maimonides declares, "Kibbud 'av v-'em mitzvah 'aseh gedolah;" the honor of father and mother (kibbud 'av v-'em) is a "mitzvah gedolah," a great command. This is noteworthy because the Rambam was consistently very careful in his choice of adjectives, and sparse in his descriptions. If he could say something in two words, he would not use three.

The concept of mitzvah or commandment indicates a covenantal category. It implies a contractual community. It points to a God who pronounces, and to a congregation of commanded ones.

If the framework of relationship to parents is mitzvah, it might seem strange that the talmudic model for honoring a mother and father was a certain pagan from Ashkelon. In considering how far respect for father and mother should extend, the Talmud (Kiddushin 31a) offers as an example a man not of the Hebrew covenantal community; one whose behavior towards his parents was not the result of a special Sinaitic command. The rabbis indicated the character of the mitzvah of honoring mother and father by extolling a heathen, Dama, the son of Nethinah. They tell of an incident in which Dama is prepared to endure great economic loss rather than disturb his father by awakening him in order to retrieve a key under his pillow. In another story they tell of a time when Dama was entertaining high Roman officials, when his mother entered, tore from him the silk garment he was wearing, struck him on the head, and spat in his face (she must have been deranged

in some way). He did not respond and was silent before his mother's abuse.

The Gemarah says that "yirah" (fear or respect) must go that far: to accept humiliation from the mother, or loss of fortune for the sake of the father.

One should reflect carefully on this model of parental respect because Abarbanel and many halakhic thinkers claim that the revelation that "I am the Lord" which introduces the Ten Commandments creates a sui generis category grounding Jewish behavior. Yeshayahu Leibowitz says that "'ani ha-Shem" (Ex. 20:2 and Deut. 5:6) is the basis for "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev. 19:18); and that the foundation is not necessarily some moral significance intrinsic in the command itself. In other words, everything rests on God's authority; religion has no relationship to ethics; devotion to God is an autonomous category; and the basis for correct behavior is the covenantal relationship with the Lord God.

Here arises an interesting and important question concerning the relationship between "natural ethics", an ethic motivated by occurrent sentiments of good will or sympathy, and covenantal commandment. Kiddushin seems to introduce the model of natural feeling and normal relationship to the parent, behavior towards mother and father because of some sort of spontaneous instinct. It is not accidental that the Talmud here offered the model of natural man, and not covenantal man. The Rabbis wanted to indicate that covenantal commandment is tied to a very natural experiential frame of reference. One relates to parents in a certain way because of being naturally drawn to act that way. Thus there is a sense that counters those who wish to build Jewish ethics on the absolute authority of God, claiming that revelatory behavior is a self-sufficient category unrelated to any intrinsic ethical

conduct; that the binding feature for a rule of conduct is the bare divine imperative, while the content of the norm is inessential. On the contrary, the mitzvah of kibud 'av v-'em suggests that revelatory demands and regular morality or natural law (behavior growing from normal human experiences) are not necessarily contradictory, but that each illuminates the other.

### Mitzvah and Experience

Therefore one might relate mitzvah to both that which is, and to that which should be. Consequently, members of the covenantal community can learn from those who function outside of a mitzvah world. The realm of divine commandment does not demand a private separate language, a solitary category which cannot incorporate or be incorporated.

Nevertheless, some who want to make revelation a self-sufficient, absolutely insulated category go so far as to claim that the reason God created parents is that children should be able to fulfill the commandment of honoring father and mother. First came the mitzvah, and then the parents; God created parents in order to enable people to fulfill the commandment.

While it is possible to understand the reasons for this inversion, one can claim just the opposite. God takes a living world and says of the very human experience, which is known also to the pagan, "I want Jews to experience it furthermore as a legal obligation." Maimonides reveals this perspective in his use of the category of mitzvah. Similarly, Kiddushin 31a deals with the question of whether a Gentile who was not commanded on Sinai to honor his parents, and does so, is more praiseworthy than a Jew who obeys the injunction to do so. The answer given is: "Greater is he who does something and was commanded to do it."



The first point then is to emphasize a relationship between mitzvah and experience. Does the quality of mitzvah add another dimension, unavailable to those who function outside of it? In other words, concerning the natural sentiment of good will (whatever that may be), is acting because of a command really different? This question merits careful consideration. In this presentation we shall point only to the Maimonidean concept of the mitzvah.

Maimonides: Parents and the Unconditional Imperative

The Rambam when pronouncing on the Halakhah, seems to decree like the Talmud. First, he describes how children should act, and then in the Book of Judges (Hilkhoth Mamerim VI, 6.7), he asks how far the duty of honoring parents should go. Even if parents should take a purse full of gold and cast it into the sea, a son must not shame them. (There is dispute whether this example in Kiddushin 32a refers to the child's or the parent's money. The Rambam learns that the gold-filled purse is the child's, and not the parent's). The issue then is: Are there limits to a parent's aggressive behavior? Can a father abuse his child's property at will? In the Tosefot we find a careful discussion concerning the point at which one must interfere with a parent's lawlessness. How long must there be silence? In what situation might a child take a mother or father to court? According to one opinion, a son or daughter can restrain a parent's aggression in order to prevent material harm; after he has caused damage, however, the child must keep quiet. In other words, a child can stand up to his father if this prevents him from destroying; but if the child's action is simply opposition to what has been done and a protest over past behavior, then it is forbidden. There is very subtle commentary on how far a child can inhibit a parent's aggressive behavior. These halakhic intricacies are, as usual, not just juridical; they reflect a broader universe important to discover.

The Rambam says that even when parents take a purse full of gold and cast it into the sea, the child must not shame them, must not manifest grief in their presence, and must not display anger. He must accept the divine decree without demur. "To what lengths should the duty of revering parents go? Even if a son is attired in costly garments, presiding over a convocation, and his mother or father come and rend his garments, strike him on the head, and spit in his face - he must not shame them."

This last illustration involves a symbolic description of something profound and important: A child's desire to face the world in his own dress and with his autonomous dignity; and the parent's saying, "You have none. All that you have is me, and seeking to have your own clothes in the world is unbearable."

The claim is that it behooves the child to remain silent, "to fear and revere the King of kings who has thus decreed. For if a mortal head of state were to issue against him an edict even more exasperating in character, he would be powerless to rebel. All the more so if the Author of the decree is He who spoke and the world came into being in accord with His will." (Hilchot Mamrim, VI, 7)

As already stated, the Rambam does not multiply words. He might have defined the Halakhah in a simple manner. Why does he mention all this about silence before the "Melekh ha-melakhim?" Why does he add the theological motif? He might have merely delimited this Halakhah. ("Even if his parent embarrasses him, the son remains silent.") Why this elaboration about God?

The claim is that when a child respects his parents, he is really submitting himself to the unconditional authority of God. To the Rambam, when parents act irrationally, respect towards them does not grow out of the natural experience; it emerges rather out of the covenantal contract. In other words, God as Commander (metzaveh) becomes a motif when a child encounters abnormal or distorted parental behavior. A reverential attitude towards mother or father is

motivated by the halakhic perspective in the face of deviant or irrational actions. In the case of submitting to their authority in the midst of their wanton deeds, a child is in fact acquiescing to the unconditional authority of God. He is silent before an irrational world. Stoically facing the absurd cosmos, he does not permit careening circumstance to destroy him.

In this instance, then, the theological motif in the Rambam becomes silent resignation before the irrational; the Genesis 22 Akedah experience; Isaac's speechlessness when seeing his father turning into a murderer; the son's accompanying his father and submitting to him - soundless submission before an uncomprehended world. The parent symbolizes a theological theme.

Nevertheless, even though the Rambam declares that this is what a child is supposed to do, at the same time the Halakhah decrees that parents who act in such a way violate basic divine law. "Do not put a stumbling block before the blind," (Lev. 19:14). They deserve excommunication by the community. (Mishneh Torah Mamrim VI, 9). When behaving this way, the parent is committing a sin because he is creating conditions which incite the son or daughter to disobedience to divine law. How many could be Job? What percentage can be silent before an insane world? At least in Albert Camus' sense, men scream, and rage. Supporting this behavior is wrenching. Men cannot endorse this sort of universe.

Thus while demanding that man be prepared to offer the ultimate sacrifice, the Rambam does not see its actual performance as an ideal. Sacrifices of this kind are an heroic response to deviant behavior which reflects serious flaws in human reality. The goal of Jewish society, which is enjoined to punish the parent who abuses his children's dignity, is to eliminate the necessity for such heroics. Halakhic norms, therefore, are based not on the personality of the spiritual giant, but on that of ordinary man with his limitations. The Halakhah attempts to develop



a world in which such a person can live with dignity and love.

### The Family as the Source of Theological Commitment

One of the most important factors in understanding a Jewish discussion of honor for mother and father is recognizing the fact that the family and family law constitute a symbolic mirror of the dynamics of Judaism's mentality and religious experience. If one wants to understand Judaism or grasp what it may be about, we believe the handle is the halakhic and aggadic treatment of the family structure and the relationship of son and daughter to mother and father. Theological experience is mirrored in the relationship between child and parents. The best way to approach Jewish conceptions of God is to view the dynamics of the family in Halakhah, and to examine what the law expects of a Jew's relationship to his progenitors.

The question of the Jewish household, or the issue of the family in the modern world, is not just a sociological topic of dispute. What is at stake is all of what Judaism is about. As the family goes, so goes the nation. Unless people understand the depth of what the family could be, they miss the whole meaning of Judaism.

Contemporary Jewish interest in the family should not be simply anthropological or demographic; it should be covenantal. We are concerned about what is happening in America or in Israel, about the disintegration of a very powerful, important, human institution. A major trend reflecting such disintegration is the decision of many young couples not to bear children.

A child is a symbol of a people yearning for the Messiah; an infant is a sign of a couple refusing to say that the past determines all that will be. A son or a daughter is the commitment in the present to hope in the future. A child is the seal of a community's capacity to transcend. Not just a genetic, biological phenomenon, parenthood is an internal drive to keep history going. Bertrand Russell said, "History must go on!" In a deep sense the pregnant woman in the streets of Jerusalem is saying, "History is going on; we are not stopping; we are not getting out of the picture." Conversely, couples who refuse to have children are an abomination. They are a signal of historical suicide.

Relationship as Core Concept

In Kiddushin 30b, the Halakhah compares respect for God with respect for parents; yirath- 'elohim to yirath-horim. Relationship to parents is paradigmatic of response to God. The manner of interaction with father and mother is central to how a man relates to the whole universe. In other words, orientation to the cosmos is mirrored in the way a person reacts to his own immediate parents. Speaking halakhically, the key to putting oneself together in respect to the whole creation hangs on regard for one's own parents. The Halakhah (Kiddushin 30b) speaks in terms of three pillars: God and the two parents are partners in the source of the life of the child. The parent mirrors the creation of the universe; he reflects a concept of life in which man recognizes that to be is to be related to that which is other than self, and to discover existence outside of one's ego. To be is to find transcendence. In other words, to be is to know that I am who I am because others enter into my "I" ness.

Rene Descartes wanted to discover a certainty that begins in the self. The Cartesian point of departure was the ego, the lonely self. I can doubt only if I am. The Archimedean fulcrum, the center of gravity, the ground reality was the "I". In contrast the central moment of reality, the focus of consciousness in Judaism is not "I", but relationship. Awareness is relational. The Hebrew word for knowledge is the word for intercourse. It is not the case that consciousness is self-centered and individualistic, and that then the individual reaches out to others - rather, the primary category of being is relational; it is existing with.

Those who mediate the revelation that to be is to be see the self in relationship to others are the family members. In other words, the fundamental category of reality, the primary unit of existence is the family, not the solitary individual. Men begin within a family. A mortal starts out in the womb of someone else. His



origin hung on two other people deciding to mate. His being is because a couple decided to do something; and this suggests by the way why any "immaculate conception" is so alien to Judaism.

If others define human consciousness, is it possible that this holds true also of divine consciousness? What does it mean to take Maimonides seriously concerning the unique unity of God? Jews destroyed the mythology of gods giving birth to each other. Does the monotheistic principle of only one God indicate that man is relational, but God is Self-sufficient and ultimately autonomous? The Master of the creation reigns before there is the world and He can be without it. The Maimonidean first principle proposes the utter Self-sufficiency of God, and claims that unlike Him, man is a dependent being.

In our exegesis (and perhaps in a deeper spirit of Maimonides), the family reveals human dependency not only as an anthropomorphic category, but also as a kind of divine reliance on man. The family reflects a God who in order to have this universe requires man; the family reveals the Creator God who in order to maintain the world implores human help. He ordained three partners, shelosha shutafim, in order to maintain the universe: the father's dependency on his child mirrors God's reliance on man.

#### Covenant and Autonomy

At this point, there arises an interesting struggle in the Talmud and in the Aggadah: In some way parents are countervailing forces to God; there is a tendency to make parents into gods.

And why not? In a sense parents originate vitality; and if they are fountains of life, then in some way they are divine. They bring forth infants, they produce human beings. Consider the experience of a woman when she bears: "This is my creation. You can write all the books you want, but this is my baby." This sense

of becoming a creator is a marvelous experience. "Because of me the child lives." The post-partum depression reminds one of God's despondency when man rebelled against Him (Gen. 6:6). The creator brings forth life which suddenly stands in separation. The all-enveloping maker has to cut the cord and say, "Not only I sustain life, but the creature I gave birth to has an autonomous power within itself." This profound difficulty of being a parent is the wrenching experience of God as well. God becomes covenantal, meaning He learns to allow the child to grow and enter into an autonomous relationship with Him. The parent has to learn to establish a covenantal relationship with the child and to enable this offspring to experience his own selfhood.

The whole covenantal drama of God becoming a partner with man, the theological saga that goes from creation to Sinai, is really the script in every family in which parents begin as creators, then become teachers, and finally as mother and father have to step back in some way and allow the child to emerge.

This is the kernel idea of the brith. What does the child know? Why is he circumcised when he is so young? Because it is less painful? It is rather to tell parents that the difficult part of the parental task is to build a covenantal relationship with the child, that starting now, mother and father have to be careful not to envelop their child, and not to view him as a projection of themselves. The very act of brith milah (circumcision of the covenant) is the beginning of a separation anxiety. The task is already to bring the son to the mitzvah. The father's words to the son at the service of circumcision tell the parents to start preparing even now for the chupah, for his marriage. "As you brought the son to the brith, so shall you bring him to commandments, and to the wedding, and to good deeds."

### Limiting Parental Authority

The Halakhah also considers the limits of parental authority. Can the father or mother tell the son or daughter to do something when the child has some other conflicting commandment to do? Can the parent insist upon his own respect and inhibit the child's self-development? Can one demand a child's absolute allegiance at the expense of his own moral responsibility?

The Rosh examines a case where a father leaves a last will and testament making the following demands: "Don't speak to Chaim for the rest of your life because he wronged me. I want you to remember what he did. If you are a good Jew, you will never forget, because Jews have long memories." The son later came to this great rabbi of the Middle Ages and asked if he could forgive Chaim or if he was obligated to continue the family feud permanently. The Rosh ruled that to hate one's neighbor is against the Halakhah. The father cannot command the child to continue his own personal vendettas; the son need not inherit the father's private hatreds. The parent has no right to ask the child to mirror his own social conflicts; and the child's capacity to love must not be inhibited by a mother or father's failures in human relationships. This was an important and beautiful decision, meaning that a parent has to recognize his child's autonomy.

Similarly, the Halakhah asks about a parent who commands a child to desecrate the Sabbath. Are there limits? The borders reflect a covenantal value system, and this returns us to the initial question: "What is the motif of the covenantal commandment in the parental structure?" Does the concept of mitzvah circumscribe the authority of the parent by placing him in the context of covenantal norms? Clearly, the parent must recognize that he cannot create and embody absolute value for the child. The son or daughter's relationship to mother and father is not to be such that the offspring's own commitment to values has to be surrendered. Therefore, the Halakhah goes so far as to declare that although kibbud 'av v-'em (honor for father and mother) is a great mitzvah, it is no



greater than the command of talmud torah ("Study of the Law": see Mishnah Peah I, 1, Megillah 16b, Mishneh Torah, Book of Judges, Hilkhoth Mamerim VI, 13). Study of the Torah suggests the autonomous development of the person as a moral covenantal being, and accordingly, that what a child owes his parents cannot negate his responsibilities to his own values.

The familial structure features the creator-parents who give life, and who are in a sense local deities. But the family is also where God becomes a Teacher. In other words, when the Most High becomes our Instructor, then the family and the parents are not sources of permanent guilt.

### Creation and Guilt

Erich Fromm raised the issue: If God is Creator, then man should feel guilty presuming to create. Fromm claims that the Bible imposes this guilt. For example, ancient Israelites were compelled to bring an atonement with the first fruits of their land because biblical theism inflicts a view that human doing is hubris. Similarly, circumcision is seen to indicate guilt for creativity; the ancient Jew half castrated his penis as an act atoning for his creative powers. Only God is Creator, and therefore any human activity involves an essential usurping. The Creator God creates a permanent sense of sin. Religion incites guilt. Man is always culpable at any independence.

A similar dialectic can also appear in the family. The family can incite guilt. In other words, one can be conditioned to feel that he can never repay his father and mother. As a result, many say they do not want to have children, because they will make them feel blameworthy their whole lifetime, just as they have been made to feel inadequate all their lives. Some are always running away from mother and father because they feel no room to breathe. Rebellion becomes the only exit to oxygen. For after all, the grand tribal creative father, or the exalted mother goddess has given the child everything he is. "I gave it to you; from my milk. Everything you have is from me." The offspring spends his whole

lifetime wondering how he is ever going to pay this back.

The point is that the creational motif suggests the garden of Eden. One cannot live with a God who created everything. One must rebel. There are mystics who see man's mutiny as built into the creation of the universe; Gnostics who saw revolt as a great stride forward. We may say that in a sense, Eden introduces Sinai. In other words, the preface to Sinai is not the loftiness of Martin Buber's eagle's wings speech; the prolegomenon is rather man in the Garden discovering his nakedness, seeing himself, becoming self-conscious, aware. At this point, God the Creator becomes God the Teacher. The Self-sufficient Creator God begins to promote autonomous man and thereby alters His relationship with men. There is no covenant with God the Creator; only the God of history initiates an agreement. He does this only with a man who questions and stands up to Him - that is, Abraham. The covenant is initiated only with autonomous man who has his own portent of value, who owns the sense of natural right or wrong.

The relationship between the Absolute who is Self-sufficient, who speaks and the world comes into being and a God who gives the Torah, and initiates covenantal value is critical. Similarly, with the parents. The family starts with the creational experience.

#### From Creation to Covenant

The Tananim (see for example the Mekhilta' "Ba-chodesh" VIII, Ex. 20:12-14), and those after them emphasize that the parent-child relationship mirrors the God-man interaction. One with no regard for parents has missed the recognition that is fundamental to sound theology, that existence is a gift, and that this fact is illustrated by the parent. I am not my own source; life is received.

Awareness of the relational foundation, the recognition of good, gratitude that I am because others gave me life, is a foundation for deep meditation. How do I ever pay others back is a serious question. There seems to be no limit to kibud 'av v-'em because a man can never liquidate the debt.

Nevertheless, though the Halakhah features absolute gratitude, this unbounded thankfulness does not become paralytic; it does not incapacitate a person from developing his own sense of autonomy. The parental model demands the development of moral integrity embodied in the notion of Talmud Torah. It requires autonomy and commitment to standards, recognition that child and parents live in a covenantal universe. There emerges a context not only of gratitude, but also of values. In movement from the creational to the value dimension, the parent may not destroy autonomous judgment of norms. At this point, the Halakhah according to Siphra and Baba' Metzi'a 32a declares, "Kulkhem chayavim bi-khvodi" (You must all honor Me); the child should have reverence for parents and keep my Shabbat" (cf. Lev. 19:3). The Gemarah asks about the Leviticus 19 connection between observing the Seventh Day and revering parents; it answers that the juxtaposition is meant to show that parents cannot cancel the command of Shabbat.

May religion or God demand the negation of one's own autonomous moral judgement? That is a serious theological question. Plato asked in the Euthyphro (10a) whether something is holy or good because the gods commanded it, or if the gods command it because it is good? Today the religiously important question is: Does religious life demand the negation of man's autonomous moral judgment? Are there limits to the concept of moral integrity? The parent-family model is an example of how to play out this theme.

"I owe my life to my father and mother; I owe my life to God." With this staggering debt there is also movement towards development of a self which then



enters into relationships. I owe life to God, but then I learn to see Him not only as my Creator but also as my Teacher. When He teaches me, we share.

### Love and Self-Limitation

Commandment neutralizes theological guilt in Judaism. Mitzvah supplements the Creator God model. Non-Jewish mystic experiences have been characterized as all-enveloping and wholly absorbing. Judaism denies the rapture of mystical union because it fought against being completely dissolved. It always insisted on "Barukh Atah...; Blessed are You"...- a distance. The recognition of God's otherness allows room for me. The Kabbalistic notion of divine Self-limitation enables the world to come into being. It acknowledges that self-restraint is essential in order to make room for that which is other.

Similarly, parents make room for the son or daughter to become independent. A teacher's checking himself, or a parent's curbing of inclination is very important. Self-moderation is an act of love; self-limitation is to give a place for others.

How do I enable others to be? If I cannot set bounds for myself, then others cannot be in my presence. Being with those who give no room is like being digested. There is a story of a rabbi who was amazed when a student happened to figure out a Gemarah as well as he did. The Gemarah in Pirkei 'Avoth indicates that a teacher learns most from his students. It is an honor to learn from one's students. Such learning suggests that the rabbi enters a lesson not knowing it all. There is always a sense that to make room is to limit.

This self-limiting principle expresses itself in the most important mitzvah in Judaism. "Talmud Torah k'neged kulam" - the study of the Torah is superior to all (Peah I, 1). That seems crazy. What a strange thing to announce! Why is this a key command? Because any Judaism not built upon the centrality of learning the Torah ceases to be Jewish. A rabbi who does not encourage intensive

learning for his congregation degenerates into a cleric; and a congregation that ceases to study becomes something less than covenantal. To play Judaism is to open up a Gemarah and to learn. Why? Because learning develops autonomy; it clears the way for a man to be independent before God. It creates an "I" that can judge. It builds critical intelligence, and a person with spiritual resources within himself. Development of autonomous spiritual resources is central to the covenantal experience. The God who strives with men wants a protagonist who knows Torah. The God of Sinai is portrayed as a Teacher, a Rebbe who is listening when He instructs. If one learns, then the relationship between the Rebbe and the student is confrontational.

Nevertheless, even while there must be autonomy and integrity on the part of the child, the son or daughter is faced with two other responsibilities toward parents: kavod (honor) and yirah (fear).

#### Honor and Reverence

Yirah (or fear) means respecting the personality of the parent as an autonomous human agent. This suggests why a son is not to sit in his father's place, and is not to interrupt him when he speaks (Kiddushin 31b). The father is to be seen as a dignified man. There is a certain distance. Yirah prescribes the parents' integrity, their dignity, their portion. The Halakhah says that a child has to act in such a way as to show respect for parents. In other words, the parents' place in the family enlists the child's response. Yirah thus emphasizes the parent as a person, and points to his dignity.

What does kavod (or honor) mean? According to Kiddushin 31b and the Mekhilta, kavod from the child meant that the son is to take care of his mother and father with his physical resources. If they are hungry, he is to get them food; if poor, he is to find them a place to live. Kavod means supplying their material needs. The word does not mean love. "Honor" is an inadequate translation. According



to the Halakhah, kavod for parents means to take care of them, not to let them be lost.

Kiddushin 31a-31b, and Talmud Yerushalmi Peah (16c) however, tell a story of how a child is exhorted to take care of his parents. One son called his father "Pa!" and fed him steaks and delicacies. The father asked, "My son, you have so much money! Where did you get it?" The son answered "Be quiet and enjoy yourself. I'll write a check anytime." The Gemarah remarks that one person can feed his father ribsteak and inherit Gehinnom; and another can share black bread and onions, and be worthy of immortality. The issue here is the manner of response to the parents' helplessness.

The mitzvah of honoring parents is heeding their needs. Furthermore, kibud 'av v-'em means that the parent need not be frightened to become dependent on his child. In other words, respect for parents in the Halakhah requires that the parents must not live with the insane illusion that they might best function in the world without receiving something from their children. Respect for parents means acting toward them in a way so as not to make them feel ashamed that they need their offspring.

This points to the essential theological significance of the family: Creation of a reality in which people are not frightened to be dependent. The family partakes of a universe which shatters the illusion of self-sufficiency.

#### Education to Interdependency

The parental role in respect to the child is not to make him embarrassed that he needs his mother and father. This is a delicate art; it is difficult;

it must be worked on continually. One who wants to be a parent without making a mistake wishes to be the Creator God who saw that all was good - until He created man. If a person wants to be the Creator without experiencing any limitations, he must never have children. The idea of marriage without children is the illusion of perfection. Weaknesses and flaws and limitations are revealed in raising children. A pair who cannot live with that discovery might rather choose to model themselves as the perfect couple.

The essential point is that the family concretizes the recognition that the ultimate principle of life is interdependency; and that the function of the parent, with all the difficulties, is to bring up a child who is not frightened to love and not afraid to need. The greatest satisfaction a parent can ever gain is for a child to say, "I need you," because this reveals that the child is not alarmed at affection, and not terrified to rely on others. It signifies that the parent has succeeded in nourishing a person who can live in an interdependent world. The Gemarah intimates that parents themselves are not self-sufficient and one day will have to trust their children. A mother and father should be able to say, "I need you," and not be embarrassed by that. For generations, mothers used to say, "You should never have to come to children," as if to do so would be the greatest disgrace. What they are extolling is self reliance which can lead also to the illusion of self-sufficiency; the will to be self made, autonomous, or the Stoic sage. This is hallucination, and it is idolatry. (One form of idolatry is the fantasy of self-sufficiency.) The believing man knows there is no absolute human self-sufficiency; he recognizes that the family structure teaches him how to meet God.

The most elemental way to learn to meet the Most High is not to be embarrassed to be in a household. The family creates a world of interdependence. In a world of untouchable individuals, there is no faith. Redeeming commitment comes within a family in a world of men and women. Faith arises only when the family is a foundational principle of experience. Accordingly, the biblical drama begins with a husband and wife, and Judaism is dependent on the family, and how that dynamic gets working. How a man meets the ultimate reality, how a person lives with God, depends on how he lives with his family.