

The Fifth Commandment

כִּבֵּד אֶת אָבִיךָ וְאֶת אִמְךָ כְּאֲשֶׁר צִוְּךָ יְיָ אֱלֹהֶיךָ
לְמַעַן יֵאָרִיכוּ יְמֵיךָ וְלִמְעַן יֵיטֵב לָךְ עַל הָאֲדָמָה אֲשֶׁר יְיָ צִוְּךָ לְהֵיךָ נָתַן לָךְ :

A. The Reason:

Sefer haHinuch, Mitzvah 33

משרשי מצוה זו, שראוי לו לאדם שיכיר ויגמול חסד למי שעשה עמו טובה, ולא יהיה נבל ומתנכר וכפוי טובה, שזו מידה רעה ומאוסה בתכלית לפני אלהים ואנשים. ושיתן אל לבו כי האב והאם הם סיבת היותו בעולם, ועל כן באמת ראוי לו לעשות להם כל כבוד וכל תועלת שיוכל, כי הם הביאוהו לעולם, גם יגעו בו כמה יגיעות בקטנותו.

The source of this commandment is that it is proper for one to recognize and show kindness to whoever has done him a favor and one should not be an ingrate for that is a bad and very disgusting trait before God and men. One should take to heart that his father and mother are the cause of his being in the world and because of that it is truly fitting for him to give any honor and help that he can for they brought him into the world and toiled for him many times during his childhood.

B. The Definition – Bavli Kiddushin 31b

Our Rabbis taught: What is 'fear' and what is 'honor'? 'Fear' means that he [the son] must neither stand in his [the father's] place nor sit in his place, nor contradict his words, nor tip the scales against him. 'Honor' means that he must give him food and drink, clothe and cover him, lead him in and out.

C. The Limits – Bavli Kiddushin 31a-b

1. Money - It was propounded of R. 'Ulla: How far does the honor of parents [extend]? — He replied: Go forth and see what a certain heathen, Dama son of Nethinah by name, did in Askelon. The Sages once desired merchandise from him, in which there was six-hundred-thousand [gold denarii] profit, but the key was lying under his father, and so he did not trouble him. Rab Judah said in Samuel's name: R. Eliezer was asked: How far does the honour of parents [extend]? — Said he, Go forth and see what a certain heathen, Dama son of Nethinah by name, did in Askelon. The Sages sought jewels for the ephod, at a profit of six-hundred-thousand [gold denarii] — R. Kahana taught: at a profit of eight-hundred-thousand — but as the key was lying under his father's pillow, he did not trouble him. The following year the Holy One, blessed be He, gave him his reward. A red heifer was born to him in his herd. When the Sages of Israel went to him [to buy it], he said to them, 'I know you, that [even] if I asked you for all the money in the world you would pay me. But I ask of you only the money which I lost through my father's honor.'

2. Embarrassment - When R. Dimi came, he said: He [Dama son of Nethinah] was once wearing a gold embroidered silken cloak and sitting among Roman nobles, when his mother came, tore it off from him, struck him on the head, and spat in his face, yet he did not shame her.

3. Physical Work - R. Tarfon had a mother for whom, whenever she wished to mount into bed, he would bend down to let her ascend; (and when she wished to descend, she stepped down upon him). He went and boasted thereof in the school. Said they to him, 'You have not yet reached half the honour [due]: has she then thrown a purse before you into the sea without your shaming her?'

When R. Joseph heard his mother's footsteps he would say: 'I will arise before the approaching Shechinah.'