

HONOR AND REVERENCE OF THE ELDERLY

Dilemmas Facing Adult Children

RUBEN SCHINDLER, PH.D.

*Former Dean of the School of Social Work and Associate Director of the Family Kukin Center,
Bar-Ilan University, Ramat-Gan, Israel*

Talmudic and post-talmudic sources place honor, veneration, and reverence as central to family relationships. However, these sources also reflect inherent intergenerational tensions and recognize the complexity and difficulty of implementing these values in everyday family life. Therefore, family practitioners can gain much insight into contemporary family dynamics from talmudic teachings.

Ethics or the study of standards of conduct and moral judgment is an important dimension in human relations. This article addresses the standards of conduct governing filial responsibility of adult children to their parents. Its frame of reference is Jewish talmudic and post-talmudic texts that provide direction for family behavior. Although it is well known that these sources express universal themes of family caring, they also reflect inherent intergenerational tensions. Family practitioners can gain much insight from historical talmudic teachings that are still quite relevant to contemporary family dynamics and point to directions for intervention for certain clinical dilemmas.

DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGES

In the past few decades there have been significant changes in the age distribution of the elderly population (Torrey et al., 1988). The number of persons aged 65 and over is expected to increase to about 400 million by the year 2000. In Western Europe, Japan, and the United States, the elderly will comprise between 15 to 20 percent of their respective populations (Smith, 1991). In regard to the Jewish population Habib (1992, p. 16) notes:

The Jewish world has continued to age rapidly. Sixteen percent of the world Jewish population and 20% of the Diaspora population is already past the age of 65. Some time

around the year 2030 it is projected that one of three Jews in the Diaspora will be over the age of 65.

In Israel the elderly will comprise about 15 percent of the population by the year 2000 (Schindler, 1992).

Within the elderly population, the cohort of the more vulnerable aged—those 75 years and older—will increase greatly. Kop (1986, p. 65) writes that the size of this group, “up by some 40 percent during the first half of the 1980s will double by the turn of the century. They will consequently account for some 45% of all elderly. Stated differently, close to half of the elderly will have entered the most vulnerable bracket.”

AGING PARENTS, ADULT CHILDREN

Losses associated with aging constitute a series of incursions on the psychological and physical integrity of an older person. Depression and anxiety are common reactions among the elderly and have significant effects on their adult children. Because older children turn to their families for support, identification, and a sense of continuity, relationships with aged parents may intensify internal and interpersonal conflicts. The strains between adult children and their parents will likely increase due to greater family responsibilities, loyalty conflicts, limited economic resources, health issues, and choice of residence.

It is important that ethical and philo-

sophical principles guide professionals when dealing with these issues. Nagy (1993), at a recent conference at Bar-Ilan University in Israel, stated that "the balance of fairness between people is the most profound and inclusive context....Relational ethics is the most fundamental dynamic force holding family and societal relationships together." He has also suggested "that an hour spent working on basic dynamic leverages of relational trustworthiness can do more than hours spent unraveling symptomatic difficulties" (Nagy & Ulrich, 1981, pp. 162-163). Bowen (1988) also addresses the issue of retaining intergenerational relationships so that trust can be established. Strains facing the family at present and conflicts of the future can then be faced more openly and solutions sought.

Filial relationships between parents and children have been a source of interest in ancient Jewish sources, which provide guidelines for ethical deliberations. The issues are apparently timeless, covering the span of centuries.

Honor

It is well known that the dictum to revere one's parents has its source in the book of Genesis, although it is only ratified legally later in the fifth of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:2): "Honor thy father and mother in order that thy days may be long upon the land." Yet, veneration is also viewed on a higher spiritual plane, as when the Talmud makes honoring one's parents equivalent to hallowing God:

There are three partners in man. The Holy One blessed be He, the father, and his mother. When a man honors his father and his mother, the Holy One, blessed be He, says I ascribe (merit) to them as though I had dwelt among them and they honored Me (*Kiddushin* 30b).

The juxtaposition between honor and the relationship of the Creator to humankind is

succinctly put by Blidstein (1975, p. 4): "With this parallel firmly impressed, the honor and reverence of parents becomes a basis of the Jewish ethos, as weighty as the honor and reverence of God; indeed God himself."

In Jewish sources, honor is viewed in very concrete terms, is service oriented, and is utilitarian in outlook and action. "Honor means that he (son or daughter) must give his or her parents food and drink and cover him and lead him in and out" (*Kiddushin* 31b). Such behavior is seen as normative practice in the talmudic period. The sixteenth-century scholar Rabbi Joseph Karo, the author of the *Shulhan Arukh*, the Jewish law code, adds that the caretaking functions must be performed with kindness and dignity, as in the following account:

One may give his father pheasants as food, yet deprives him from the world to come, whereas another makes him grind in a mill yet this brings him to the world to come (*Kiddushin* 31b).

The commentaries interpret this passage as follows: by using comforting words and imposing the work tolerantly and leniently (e.g., by suggesting that the labor could not be done without him), the son in this account frames the chore as an act of dignity.

The spirit of the above talmudic account is reflected in the biblical Book of Proverbs. "A soft answer turneth away wrath; but a grievous word stirreth up anger" (Proverbs 15:1), and "A soothing tongue is a tree of life; but perverseness therein is wound to the spirit" (Proverbs 15:4).

Issues of some controversy are what personal services is the adult child required to perform and what should he or she spend to obtain such services on behalf of the aged parent. Is it the responsibility of the father or son to provide the financial resources? The Talmud and the major commentaries rule that the aged parents are responsible for paying for the cost of their care and support. "*Mishel mi?*" "At whose expense?"

the Talmud ponders. The ruling is "*Mishel av*,"—"the father's charge." Maimonides in his code of law (*Mishneh Torah*, Hilchot Mamrim 6:3) and the *Shulchan Arukh* (Hilchot Kibud Av Vem 240:5) both note that the services and caretaking activities are the responsibility of the aged parents. The responsibilities are thus clearly articulated, freeing children from incurring expenses relating to the obligation of honor.

However, what happens when the aging parents are unable to support themselves? Is it the children's responsibility to do so? The view of the Babylonian Talmud is that service is a valid demand, but financial expenditures are beyond the obligations of the children. However, they are required to limit their business transactions and economic activities in order to provide caretaking services. The time dimension is thus the critical factor in caring for one's parents. One should use one's time to care for one's parents, giving one's own economic concerns a lower priority. When the issue of honoring one's parents is at stake, the Babylonian Talmud states:

It is said, "Honor thy father and thy mother" and it is also said, "Honor the Lord with thy substance" (Proverbs 3:9). Just as the latter means at personal cost, so the former too. But if you say at the father's expense how does it affect him?—"Through the loss of time (*Kiddushin* 32a)."

The Jerusalem Talmud, in contrast, takes a broader view of children's responsibility to their parents. It requires both personal caregiving and financial support. We read the following:

R. Yanni and R. Jonathan were sitting and this man came to me and complained about his son, that he does not support him. I told him, "Go gather the congregation in the synagogue and publicly shame him." R. Yanni asked, "And why did you not compel the son to support his father?" Rabbi Jonathan responded, "Can one compel that?" R. Yanni answered, "You don't know that?" R.

Jonathan then began to teach as a fixed rule, "one may compel a son to support his father" (Jerusalem Talmud 21b).

However, the normative opinion is that of the Babylonian Talmud: the son is not required to support his father. At the same time, the majority of scholars are in agreement that the children are not exempt from providing financial assistance within the framework of *tzedekah*, charity. According to the modern talmudic scholar, Adin Steinsaltz, there is unanimous agreement that the son is required to support his parents financially, with the precept of charity as the major organizing principle. Indeed, it is an act of *chesed*, lovingkindness, of the highest order.

The picture of filial relationships becomes more complex when we add the second dimension of filial responsibility: *morah*, reverence. This dimension is given special prominence in the Talmud. "The son (daughter) must neither stand nor sit in his (father's) place, nor contradict his words nor tip the scales against him" (the latter refers to agreeing with another party in his father's presence in a scholarly controversy or other dispute; *Kiddushin* 31b). This passage rings of modern structuralist thinking in family work that emphasizes the importance of hierarchy and functional relationships. However, it provides not organizational directives but rather instructs reverence for others, which should be internalized.

It is interesting that the above dictum is viewed intergenerationally by the Torah scholar, Abraham Danzig (1747-1820), the halachist and moralist who suggests that the parent-child relationship is based on indebtedness. He states (Hayye Adam, 1964):

Obligations of the son toward his father are repayment of the debt owed the parents for their good nurture. Part of this repayment must be that he love them strongly...and that he not consider them an unwelcome burden (p. 111).

It is these loyalties that comprise part of the honoring experience.

Filial Relationships and the Infirm

The responsibilities of adult children to their sick and infirm parents was a subject for scholars in the talmudic and post-talmudic period. Illness could be either physical or mental. The Babylonian Talmud presents an insightful story of R. Assi that was later adopted by scholars to determine codes of behavior.

R. Assi had an aged mother. Said she to him, "I want ornaments." So he made them for her, "I want a husband." "I will look out for you." "I want a husband as handsome as you." Thereupon he left her and went to Palestine. On hearing that she was following him he went to R. Johanan and asked him, "May I leave Palestine for abroad?" It is forbidden he replied. "But what if it is to meet my mother?"

The Talmud relates that R. Assi apparently felt remorse about leaving his mother. Yet, the Rabbis find legitimacy in his behavior, and the Rambam in his code sets down the now-classic ruling (*Mishneh Torah*, Hilchot Mamrim 86:10):

If one's father or mother should become mentally disordered, he should try to treat them as their mental state demands, until they are pitied by God. But if he finds that he cannot endure the situation because of their extreme madness, let him leave and go away, deputing others to care for them properly.

According to Blidstein (1975, p. 118), "the incident of R. Assi is assumed to reflect a legitimate and normative option...he understands the crucial element in the situation to be in fact parental senility and not the moral deterioration of the relationship: the mental health aspect alone is decisive in the code."

However, R. Abraham b. David, the

Ra'abad (1120-1198), a contemporary of the Rambam, dissents and places the responsibility of caretaking squarely upon the adult children regardless of the burden involved. He notes, "This is not a correct teaching. If he leaves, who will be in charge to supervise the well-being of his parents?" (Hilchot Mamrim 6:4). The Ra'abad does not accept the option of transferring caretaking responsibilities to others.

Although the Rambam's ruling is the normative one, there are many talmudic illustrations that point to the need for tolerance, endurance, forbearance, and composure in the face of parental infirmity. This vignette tries to establish supererogatory precedents despite the "rules."

Dama the 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...Rabbi Eliezer was asked, "How far does the honor of parents extend?" Said he, "That he should take a purse, throw it in his presence into the sea and not shame him" (*Kiddushin* 32a).

This vignette recommends patience and respect, although the Talmud is quite realistic about the limits of honor and reverence. Indeed, the parent must be sensitive to the particular needs of the child. Maimonides Mamrim (6:8) writes:

The father is forbidden to place too heavy a yoke upon them [his children], to be too exacting with them in matters pertaining to his honor, lest he cause them to stumble. He should forgive them and shut his eyes; for a father has a right to forgo the honor to him.

The notion that the father has "a right to forgo the honor due to him" suggests a compromise position when his mental state permits. The *Sefer Hasidim* attributed to R. Yehuda the Hasid (12th century in Germany) relates the following:

Two brothers or a father and a son that quarrel and are angry and a Rabbi and his student, even though he gains knowledge from him, it is best that they not live together because they pain and injure each other. Do not state that just because the father is pained as is the teacher, but even though the son is in distress it is best that the father and son part because they can't bear the pain together.

In summary, Jewish sources place honor and reverence as central to the ethos of human relationships. However, they are aware of the complexity and difficulty of their implementation.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK

Social work like other professions places its ethical and value stance on an equal plane with knowledge. As mentioned above, family work places particular emphasis upon the moral dimension. Nichols (1984, p. 64), referring to the approach of Nagy, suggests that "one of his most important contributions was to introduce the criterion of morality to therapeutic goals and techniques....Neither the pleasure/pain principle nor transactional expediency is a sufficient guide to human behavior...family members have and base their relationship on trust and loyalty and they must balance the ledger of entitlement and indebtedness."

The structural approach of Minuchin (1974) suggests that the key to successful adaptation is the transformation of structure through boundary negotiation. Boundaries are the rules and regulations that separate the system from its environment. The clarity of boundaries is predicated on how well lines of responsibility have been thought out and how clearly the lines of authority have been articulated. For families to function effectively, there must be effective, hierarchical patterns. That is, parents must be in charge, and boundaries and roles and subsystems must be defined. Respect, honor, and reverence are the expected norms that can bring growth and change to the family.

One of the most difficult challenges facing adult children is balancing their obligations to parents with those to their own children and spouse—relating to their parents with respect and honor but yet on occasion having to disagree with their petition since it would create excessive strains on their own families. Two case illustrations highlight this challenge, and a third shows how intergenerational relatedness can enrich the family organization as a whole.

Mr. and Mrs. S. emigrated to Israel 20 years ago and are now in their nineties. They had been living independently until six years ago when Mrs. S. could no longer cope with the role of homemaker. The adult children raised the issue of alternative housing, but the couple objected strenuously. "We came to Israel to live in Jerusalem and not to live in a home for the aged," Mr. S. insisted. The adult children arranged for meals on wheels, homemaking, and nursing services and for volunteer visitors to provide occasional outings. This arrangement was fine for two years until physical illness set in and living independently became more difficult.

The adult children were in constant contact with their parents and offered several care alternatives, including entering a residential facility. Both adult parents realized that a nursing home would be the most logical alternative, with father saying with authority, "It is time to move to Belz (a nursing home in Jerusalem). Their move was successful, although two years later Mrs. S. became blind and gradually lost her hearing.

Her deteriorating condition required Mr. S. to assume more caretaking responsibilities for his wife, which gave him little opportunity to pursue his own development and expression. It was through the efforts of the professional staff and constant encouragement of the family that Mr. S. realized that he was not helping his wife and though her handicap required much care it was best that it be provided by nursing personnel. The main challenge of the children was to bring their father to the decision that it was in his wife's best interest that he give up his nurs-

ing of her and that she be moved into another helping floor.

Throughout this extensive period of time, enabling the adult parents to make the major decisions by themselves was a principle guiding the intervention by the adult children and the professional staff.

The second example demonstrates that honor and reverence within a family context cannot always be fulfilled, particularly when the relationship of aging parents to their adult children is characterized by tension and disparagement.

Mr. and Mrs. A, both survivors of the Holocaust, had lost most of their immediate and extended families in the Holocaust. They had both remarried, and the relationship with their adult children was one of constant strife and difficulty. They were now in their seventies. This past year Mrs. A. died, and her husband managed alone until a few weeks ago when he notified his adult children that he would like to move in with them. "I have lost everybody except my children and I want to be with you; it would benefit us both." The request was received without joy by his children, but they felt that it was their responsibility to take in the father since "he has experienced so much pain and hurt." His moving to the children's home only aggravated their relationship. A major concern was the strong coalition established between grandfather and grandson that pre-empted the father's authority and created unending tensions. The family realized that the father's place was not with his adult children, causing the former great displeasure and disappointment.

Much effort went into explaining to father how his stay in a protective living facility would be of benefit to him and how a link to the family would continue. Indeed it did, but from the father's perspective it was not a consolation or a source of solace for him.

A final illustration deals with the unique relationship that grandchildren and great-grandchildren have with the elderly.

Mr. C. had spent six weeks with his children before a place would open for him in a new nursing facility. He was in his late eighties and had spent time with his grandchildren only sporadically and never had seen his great-grandchildren who were now aged ten, seven, and three.

When the issue of placing father in a nursing home was first raised it was the grandchildren who opposed the idea. "Why can't he stay with us?" they asked. Much discussion centered around this issue. They were naturally pleased to hear that he would indeed be staying with the adult children if only for a short period of time. The grandchildren, all of whom were now young adults themselves, were experiencing for the first time a real encounter with their grandfather. If one could sum up the experience for them, it was primarily gaining a sense of history, in particular of their grandfather's adventures in Germany where he was born, his escaping the Holocaust, and his extended stay in the United States before settling in Israel. The grandchildren enjoyed these discussions, and no doubt their relationships became more meaningful and closer because of these encounters.

It was the great-grandchildren who provided the most joy for him and probably for themselves. He was viewed by them as part of the family in every sense, with the youngest, aged three, smartly cuddling to her 90-year-old great-grandfather. A sense of continuity and security permeated these family meetings regardless of the differences of age and language.

CONCLUSION

Honor, veneration, and reverence are timeless values in filial relationships, as well as important dimensions in talmudic teachings and contemporary family work. The structure of the family is built upon these exalted values. Yet, the tensions and conflicts that families face, particularly in their care of infirm parents, may require these values to be compromised.

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