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HONORING PARENTS WHO ARE ABUSIVE

Part 1*

As a clinical psychologist in the *frum* community I have frequently been asked by patients to address the question of the obligation to honor abusive parents. As a result, I have researched the issue and have discussed it with some prominent *Rabbonim*. I would like to share some of what I have learned with other clinicians and anyone else who needs to address this issue.

It goes without saying that *kibbud av va'eim* is a very important and complex *mitzvah*. Any particular situation will involve specific clinical and *halachic* issues that have to be evaluated by a knowledgeable *Rov* for specific guidance. It does help, however, if the questioner is as knowledgeable as possible about the issues involved. It is for that reason that I would like to share with the readers some interesting and not so well known dimensions of this issue.

Talmud Kiddushin 31a

A frequently quoted Talmudic passage regarding the extent to which one is obligated to honor even an abusive parent is the story in *Kiddushin (31a)* where a Roman officer (Dommah Ben Nesinah) is praised for maintaining his composure even after his mother tore his clothes off and spit in his face in public. Unfortunately, the comment of the *Tosafos* there that, according to the *Midrash*, the mother in the story was *meturefes b'daata* (e.g., insane or suffering from Alzheimer's disease) is usually not cited. This fact certainly puts the story in a very different light. Certainly, an Alzheimer's patient cannot be held responsible for such behavior. (Yet, it was terribly embarrassing to the son and therefore he is commended for remaining passive. Anyone who has cared for such a patient will testify as to how difficult it is not to respond harshly). It is unfortunate that this *Gemara* is cited as evidence that a child is required to passively submit to

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chronic abuse by a parent (who is not *meturefes b'daata*) in the name of *kibbud av va'eim*!¹

The well-known commentary on the Talmud, the *Yam Shel Shlomo* (RøShlomo Luria, the *Maharshal*), cites the *Tosafos* and adds (free translation):

I agree that this mother must have been *meturefes b'daata* since this story is cited in order to teach us the laws of *kibbud av va'eim* and if she wasn't *meturefes b'daata* the son would be permitted to protest in order to prevent his mother from causing him financial harm and certainly he can prevent her from causing him bodily harm. And even if she had already harmed him he can sue for damages in *bais diní* .. So we must say that she was *meturefes b'daata* and that's why he couldn't protest and that's why he didn't rebuke [*ōgo'arō*] her [the implication is that if she wasn't *meturefes b'daata* the son would be permitted to protest and rebuke her in order to prevent her attack].

The *Yam Shel Shlomo* then comments on the *Tur* who also cites this *Gemara* (without the qualification that the parent was *meturefes b'daata*):

This ruling of the *Tur* [that one should remain passive in response to such a parental attack] must be referring to a situation where he is unable to protest because it is already after the fact, and therefore he shouldn't insult [*kelimah*] or rebuke his parent.

We see that this widely quoted event that supposedly mandates that children need to passively submit to chronic abuse, is in fact limited to where the parent is insane or where it's after the fact.²

The *sefer Kibbud Av Va'eim* (Rabbi Hillel Litwack, p. 32) asks how a child can permit his parent to violate a Torah law by submitting to being hit and embarrassed in public by his parent. He also suggests that the child is not even permitted to be *mochel* [to allow, to forgive] the parent since a person is not permitted to harm himself. Likewise it's possible that one is not permitted to allow a parent to embarrass him in public since it is comparable to murder. He also concludes that it must be after the fact. Rabbi Litwack also asks why the *Mechaber* doesn't discuss the issue if the child is permitted to try to stop the parent before the fact as he does in a different case involving monetary loss. He cites one authority who suggested that it may be too obvious to mention that the child is not obligated to allow the parent to hit him for no good reason.

¹ The *Midrash Rabbah* (*Devarim* 1:15) also states that Dommah Ben Nesinah's mother was *chasras daas* (mentally deficient) and that he told her *ōdayaich imiō* (enough Mother) i.e., he didn't remain silent.

² I have purposefully avoided defining the term *ōabuseō* which can run the gamut from mild verbal abuse to sexual molestation. The point here is to establish the fact that at some point parental abuse may impact on the child's obligation to honor his/her abusing parent.

Wicked parents

The *Yam Shel Shlomo*, suggests that perhaps it would be a meritorious act (*midas chasiddus* ó i.e., beyond the letter of the law) not to protest even before the fact, providing the parent truly (albeit erroneously) believed that this was an appropriate educational intervention,¹ for if the parent simply acted in a fit of anger then he is a *roshta* [wicked person]. In the *Chidushei Rabbeinu Yaakov me'Lublin ve'Rabbeinu Heshel me'Krakaw* (in the *Tur Hachodosh*) it states that if the father is acting like a *roshta* then the son is permitted to insult him [*lehachlimo*]. While the *Rambam* and the *Mechaber* rule that there is an obligation to honor a wicked parent, the *Ramo* and the majority of *poskim* disagree. The *Oruch Hashulchan* rules like the *Ramo*. A very prominent *posaik* told me that the normative *Halacha* is like the *Ramo*.

The *Yam Shel Shlomo* then relates a dispute between the *Rambam* and *Ravad* regarding the obligation to personally care for a parent who acts inappropriately. He distinguishes between such behavior when it is due to *tiruf ha'daas* (e.g., suffering from Alzheimer's disease) where according to the *Ravad* there is such an obligation, and where the parent is acting out of *ro'ah lev* (a wicked heart) where there is no such obligation.

While we do not hesitate to describe acting out teens as having a *lev rah* (wicked heart),² we resist thinking of abusive parents as acting out of *ro'ah lev*. However, the *Yam Shel Shlomo* and others recognize this possibility and make it clear that there is no obligation for a child to honor such a parent. Where possible, it is best for the child to move away. However when not possible, according to these *poskim* a child is permitted to take steps to protect himself from abuse and can seek recourse in a *beis din* after the fact. It is very unfortunate that some teachers may (inadvertently) imply to children that the *Torah* obligates children to passively tolerate chronic abuse by parents when this is not the case.

The *petur of choleh*

Harav Dovid Cohen *shlit"a* has stated [see addendum] that if interacting with an abusive parent makes a person emotionally ill then the child is exempt from this obligation. Since one is not required to spend more than a fifth of his assets for a *mitzvas aseh* then certainly one is not required to make himself sick. Obligating abused children to unconditionally honor their abusing parents will almost certainly exacerbate their emotional distress and/or disability and they are therefore, not obliged to do this.

When presenting a particular abusive parent question to a *Rov* it is imperative to be completely open regarding the extent of the abuse and the degree to which the abuse is causing the child emotional distress and disability. Often children find it very difficult to

¹ And presumably, providing it doesn't make the child emotionally ill, as discussed below.

² This is often expressed ó even by parents ó with comments such as, "He's manipulative, lazy, self-centered, he has a character flaw," etc.

be fully open even with themselves in this regard and it then becomes the clinician's duty to help the patient to formulate his/her question fully and accurately.

Defending oneself

Many children feel that defending themselves from false parental accusations is a violation of *kibbud av va'eim*. This is not so. In the *Sefer Ben Yechabed Av* (p. 91) he states that a child is permitted to respectfully state that the accusation is false.

The obligation to admonish [tochocha]

Rabbi Litwack (*sefer Kibbud Av Va'eim*, p. 34, and p. 47 in the name of the *sefer Chadrei Daiah*) suggests that since children are obligated to admonish their parents if they are violating a *halacha* therefore, if parents speak to their children abusively ó clearly a violation of *halacha* ó the children are obligated to rebuke their parents [as respectfully as possible under the circumstance].¹

Clinical consideration

I have elsewhere discussed at length the clinical challenges of treating Orthodox adolescents with abusive parents.² One area of conflict is the *kibbud av va'eim* obligation. I explain why children are so resistant to acknowledging the abusive nature of their parent's behavior (even when it is blatant) and why it is important to help the child to overcome this resistance. I also elaborate on why it is imperative that abused youngsters be told clearly that what their parents are doing is abusive, against the Torah and inexcusable. Likewise, they need to be told that the parental abuse does mitigate their *kibbud av va'eim* obligations (the degree and nature of mitigation needs to be determined by a knowledgeable *Rov*).

The Maharik on the limits of the *kibbud av va'eim* obligation

The popular perception (often reinforced by self-serving parents) is that the *mitzvah* of *kibbud av va'eim* is all-encompassing and without limits or qualifications. It is important to realize that there are clear parameters to this obligation. For example, the *Maharik* states that a father does not have the authority to forbid his son to marry the woman he desires and the *Ramo* rules like the *Maharik*.

¹ See *Tanah Debei Eliyahu Rabah* (19:1), regarding the obligation to rebuke a parent who is speaking inappropriately, which would seem to apply also to a parent speaking abusively. [See also part 3, item 1].

² Sorotzkin, B. (2002). "The denial of history: Clinical implications of denying child abuse." *The Journal of Psychohistory*, 30, 29-53. See also my article, "The role of parents in the current crises of rebellious adolescents: Dare we discuss it? Can we afford not to?"

The *Maharik* gives three reasons for his ruling and I believe these reasons are clearly applicable to a child contending with an abusive parent.

- 1) The *halacha* is that the parent has to bear the financial burden of the son's fulfillment of the *mitzvah* of *kibbud av va'eim* (*omishel av*, e.g., the son has to prepare and serve the food for his father but the father pays for the food). If the child is not required to undergo a financial loss then he certainly does not have to endure personal suffering by not marrying the women of his choice.
- 2) We see in many places in the Talmud that the *chachomim* are concerned that a wife should find favor in her husband's eyes so that they have a good marriage. By trying to force his son to forgo his choice in a wife it is as if the father is ordering his son to go against the Torah since he is not likely to have a good relationship with a choice forced upon him. [One can perhaps likewise argue that abused children frequently rebel against their parents' religious beliefs, or develop serious emotional disorders, neither of which is desired by our *chachomim*.]
- 3) The *Maharik* rules [and this is the normative *halacha*] that the obligation to honor parents applies only when the parent asks for something that benefits the parent directly, e.g., bringing him food. The obligation does not require obeying commands that do not directly benefit the parents, for example, whom the child marries.¹

Defending the strong at the expense of the weak

It is sad that, as a community, our religious sensitivities causes us to be more concerned with the obligation of abused children to honor their parents than with the serious violations of *halacha* being committed by abusive parents! We are very comfortable saying to an abused boy, "Sure, it's unfortunate that your father is abusive, but that's how he is and he isn't going to change. You are obligated by the Torah to honor him so just get over it." Abused children are often told that they are obligated to forgive their abusive parents even when their parents never acknowledged the abuse and have certainly never apologized for it and are still continuing to abuse them currently. What's more, they are often compelled to apologize for getting angry over the abuse!

In contrast, we seem to be too intimidated to say to the abusive father, "It's unfortunate that you are having difficulties with your boy, but every time you speak to him abusively you are committing numerous *aveiros* (e.g., *V'ahavta l'rayacha komocha*), and these violations are especially egregious because your victim is a family member."²

¹ See more on this issue in part 3.

² See *Sefer Kibbud Av Va'eim* (Rabbi Hillel Litwack) p. 65, citing *Sefer Habris*. Rabbi Yechiel Jacobson, a well-known *mechanech* in *Eretz Yisroel*, relates a story. A father told the Steipler Gaon that he is concerned that his son is violating the *mitzvah* of *kibbud av va'eim* by not listening to him. The Steipler got upset at the father. "If you tell him things you know he won't listen to then **you** are in violation of *lefnei eiveir lo setain michshol*. As for your son, there is a simple solution, you can be *mochel* him, and if you don't you are foolish because you will be held responsible for that also."

As *Harav* Dovid Cohen relates [see addendum], when a prominent person is arrested for molesting children there is often more concern in the community for the fate of the molester than for the wellbeing of the child victims.

The abused become abusers

A substantial body of research has shown that, while far from inevitable, children who are emotionally abused tend to develop a variety of emotional and behavioral problems including drug abuse and other addictions. They also are more likely to be emotionally abusive of their own children later in life as compared to children who are not abused.

Research by Briggs¹ and others on sexually abused children has found that those victims who minimized the depravity and negative consequences of their abuser's actions were substantially more likely to become abusers themselves in adulthood. It is as if they say to themselves, "If what was done to me wasn't such a terrible act, then it won't be so terrible if I do it to someone else."

Children have a natural tendency to deny and/or minimize the harmful nature of parental abuse. It would seem likely that compelling children to honor their abusive parents would reinforce this tendency by indicating that abusing children does not diminish a person's honor. This would likely increase the likelihood of perpetuating this type of behavior.

When the community starts putting more pressure on parents not to be abusive rather than pressuring children to honor abusive parents, we may then begin to make a dent in the ever increasing tide of youngsters with serious emotional and behavioral disorders.

¹ Briggs, F. & Hawkins, R. (1996). "A comparison of the childhood experiences of convicted male child molesters and men who were sexually abused in childhood and claimed to be nonoffenders." *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 20, 221-233.

Addendum

**Excerpts from a speech by Harav Dovid Cohen, *shlit"a*.
"Counseling the contemporary Orthodox Jewish family."
Young Israel Council of Rabbis Annual Conference, February, 2000.**

í í . It has happened in our community [that] the person who was [sexually] abused was made to suffer by the community. [They were not so concerned] about the person that was being abused, [rather they were] worrying about the abuser that he not *chas v'shalom* go to jailí í í ..

To address some of the questions [presented by] Dr. Sorotzkin [**regarding the obligation of *kibbud av va'eim* in a case where children were abused by their parents**] Now I maintain there is a difference as far as the type of abuse concerned. *kibbud av va'eim* comes with *nisyonos*, as the *Gemara* in *Kidushin* tells us, *ad heychan kibbud av va'eim* the *Gemara* tells us where the mother of the Roman officer came and took off this *chashuva beged* and spat at him, so the *Tosfos* brings that she was a *meturefes*, she was insane. So, of course, that has a lot to say why the soní did not really feel that his mother was embarrassing him, maybe he felt a tinge of embarrassment, but everyone understood because they saw she was a *meturefes*. But, in a situation where a child was [sexually] abused by a parentí . we know it is worse than being a *choleh* [ill person]. A child who has to deal with a parent, who sexually abused that child, it's almost to say that that child will never become *meshuchrar* [freed], it's very difficult to get the damage out, and if the person has to deal with the parent, there are very few people that can possibly do so. So certainly when it comes to sexual abuse, I feel that it is not worse that a *mitzvah* where most *poskim* will tell you that a *choleh* is *potur* [exempt], we are talking about *mitzvas asech* now, just as there is a *shiur* of *mitzvos ad chomesh* [one is only obligated to spend one fifth of his assets for a positive commandment]í ., so the *Poskim* say when it is a question of being a *choleh* that it is the same thing, that being a *choleh* is like *ad chomesh*, so that there is really no *chiyuv* [to make one's self ill for the sake of *kibbud av*]í ...

There is another *snif* to be *matir* [reason for leniency], because when a parent is a *rosha* [wicked person], in sexual abuse the parent has a *din* of a *roshaí* . So in the case of a *rosha*, even though there are two *daos* [opinions] in the *Shulchan Aruch*, which is a little strange, because *rov rishonim* disagree with the Rambam, and they hold like the *pashtus* of the *Gemora*, that there is no *chiyuv kibud av* by *eino osech maaseh amcha* [i.e., a *rosha*]. The Rambam says there is a *chiyuv*. But there are many, and the *Bach* is clear on this that the Rambam only meant this that it is a *d'Rabanan*. So again we have an extra *kula* [leniency], we have a *machlokes Rishonim* [most *Rishonim* rule that there is no obligation of *kibbud av* by a wicked parent] , and we also have the *kula* that it is only *m'Darabonin*, so we can be *meikil*, as far as that is concerned.

[Regarding the question presented by Dr. Sorotzkin if it is permissible for a child to speak negatively about his or her parents in therapy.] In a situation of speaking to a therapist concerning these things, I'm not speaking [only] of sexual abuse necessarily, but all [issues] where the therapist feels that by discussing these things they can turn the patient around, [for example] where the patient could acquire affection from the parent, even though the patient has various *tainus* [complaints] on the parent, I believe the *mekor* [source to permit this] is the *Gemora* in *Sanhedrin* (84b), where the *Gemora* speaks about a child taking a splinter from a parent, where it can cause a *chabura* [wound] and the *Gemora* says a very interesting *heter* [reason for leniency] - *v'ahavta l'rayacha komocha* [love your neighbor like yourself]. The way *Rashi* explains it to mean [that one is only prohibited to do to others that that he would not want done to himself ó this excludes being ðwoundedö in the process of having a splinter removed]. This to my mind [is similar to when] the *poskim* speak about *lashon harah l'toeles* [for a helpful purpose], which is not limited to *loshan harah*. Any [transgression of] *bein adam l'chaveiro* [when it is] *l'toeles* is *mutarí* .. Indeed, the *heter* of a parent to hit a child is because it is *l'toeles* for the *hadracha* [guidance] of the child. Any [transgression of] *bein adam l'chaveiro* is *mutar* [permissible] when it's *l'toeles*. That's why a parent [is only permitted] to hit a child [if it's] *l'shem shamayim*. And from that *Gemora* you see - and it's a *sofek* - that *kibbud av va'em* has a *din* of *bein adam l'chaveiro*. There are many other *sevaros* [reasons] to be *matir* [to be permissible], but I feel it is certainly *mutar be'chei hai gavna* [permissible in this type of situation].

Part 2*

I recently came across an article by Rabbi Yitzchok Zilberstein, the Rov of Ramat Elchonon, Bnei Brak (and the son-in-law of Harav Y. S. Elyashev *shlit"á*) in the Torah journal, *Kol Torah (Nissan 5763)*. The article contains four *teshuvos* on the permissibility of offending the honor of parents for therapeutic purposes. I would like to focus on the fourth *teshuvah*, as it reinforces the point that a patient's psychological state and/or emotional needs can sometimes diminish his or her *kibbud av va'eim* obligations.¹

Rabbi Zilberstein was asked the following by a mental health professional (free translation):

Much of children's (and adults) emotional pathologies result from unhealthy and inappropriate parental behaviors and attitudes. [During therapy] there is a focus on the pathological family relationships that contributed to the patient's emotional difficulties (e.g., double messages, parentified children, unrealistic parental expectations and demands, inappropriate parental behaviors, etc.). In the course of treatment therapists bring to the consciousness of their patients, directly or indirectly, the role of their parents in their difficulties and encourage them to externalize and direct their anger to the appropriate people rather than to repress the anger, since repression causes excessive guilt feelings, self punishment and other psychological symptoms. The question is: Does this type of therapeutic intervention, where the therapists encourages the awareness and expression of angry feelings toward parents, possibly causing patients to not properly respect their parents, conflict with *halacha*?

The inquiring clinician added a brief illustrative case example.

An 18 year old female student requested therapy for depression, social anxiety, and difficulties concentrating. She applied without the knowledge of her parents because she feared that they would object and she would be punished. In the third session the patient related with great difficulty and hesitation that her father had been cruelly molesting [*"mitalel"*] her since the age of 10. She didn't relate this to her mother, because she had a weak character and always stood by her husband. The patient believed that she was responsible for her father's behavior, because she must have unwittingly provoked his desire. She tried to correct this by becoming anorectic and losing a great deal of weight. She saw herself as a bad person deserving of punishment. At times she would cause herself pain and injury in an attempt to attain atonement for her sins. She also experienced suicidal ideations. The goal of therapy was to help the patient see herself as the victim and not as an accomplice to a sin, to

^{*)} From the *Nefesh News*, April, 2004, pp. 30-31.

¹ These *teshuvos* were recently published in Rav Zilberstein's *sefer* (") . The *teshuvah* cited below is from volume 4, p. 398.

affirm her right to privacy and her right to decide how people should relate to her so that she could deal with her father's inappropriate and pathological behavior in an effective and consistent manner and to direct her anger and punitive behavior externally rather than against herself. With significant encouragement on the part of the therapist, this was successfully accomplished. The patient became more assertive, was able to reject the father's advances and she spent less time at home. Rather than directing anger inward by hurting herself physically and emotionally she began expressing more openly her repressed rage and hate toward her father, both within and outside the therapy setting.

The question is: Was the treating psychologist performing a *mitzvah* [of healing, etc]. or an *aveirah* by causing the patient to disrespect and even despise her father..?

Rabbi Zilberstein responded with the following. If the father hasn't done *teshuvah* (repentance) then he is a *rosha* (wicked person) and there is no obligation to honor him. While the *Shach* rules that although one isn't obligated to honor a wicked father it remains forbidden to cause him pain and if the father would be aware that his daughter was receiving this type of therapy it would cause him pain, Rabbi Zilberstein suggests that perhaps it would still be permissible because;

In this situation the father damaged her and acted immorally. The prohibition against disrespecting and despising a parent applies only when the child's goal is to disrespect for the sake of humiliating the parent but not when it is done for the sake of treatment and for the sake of [the health of] the daughter. After all, it is also to the father's benefit that he have a healthy daughter, able to marry. The therapy is not a disgrace for the father; rather it is a healing for the daughter. After all, it was the father who damaged his daughter by acting inappropriately and he caused her to be emotionally ill and therefore it is his obligation to make her well.

Rabbi Zilberstein cites evidence from *Pesachim* 56 that one is permitted to disgrace parents for a constructive purpose [to 'eless], such as achieving a *kaparah* for them. "Likewise here, the father destroyed his daughter's world and he is therefore obligated to suffer in order to heal her."

Rabbi Zilberstein then proceeds to discuss the *halacha* if the patient's father had done *teshuvah*¹ (repentance) in which case;

¹ When I discussed this issue with Rav Dovid Cohen *Shlit"a*, on Feb. 14, 2004, he made the following point. A person who behaved in a manner that made him a *rosha* cannot simply say to *bais din* "I did *teshuvah* so now you are obliged to accept me as a witness." Similarly, a parent who was deemed a *rosha* cannot merely say to his child "I did *teshuvah* so now you are obligated to treat me with respect." In both cases the person has to demonstrate, to the *bais din* or to the child, over time and in a consistent and convincing manner that he has sincerely repented.

One can assume that he would consent that his daughter disrespect him in her heart so that she should [be healed and] be able to marry, and so that he should achieve a *kaparah* for what he did to her.¹

Rabbi Zilberstein concludes that the therapist, in this case, acted according to *halachah* and fulfilled many *mitzvot* including that of healing the sick.²

Part 3*

I would also like to share with the *Nefesh News* readers a responsa from *Dayan* Y. Y. Fisher in *Shu"t Even Yisroel* (Vol. 9, p. 146). *Dayan* Fisher was asked regarding the obligation to obey parents when they request something that does not directly affect them. Although the *Rashba* rules that the obligation to respect parents (*kovod*) only applies to something that they get physical enjoyment from (e.g., bringing them food) the *Makneh* (*Kidushin*, 32) asserts that one would violate the requirement of *morah* (fear) if he disobeys a parent regarding any type of command. So what would be the practical application of the *Rashba's* ruling? *Dayan* Fisher responded that one violates the commandment of *morah* (fear) only if one tells the parent openly *l'vayon* not going to listen, but if the child doesn't answer *he* can then do what he wants, since it doesn't directly affect the parents. *Dayan* Fisher also ruled that when parents demand obedience from a child in regard to a *mitzvah* (e.g., who to marry, where to learn), the child can openly tell the parent that he won't listen.

In part 2, I cited a responsa from Rabbi Yitzchok Zilberstein. I have since corresponded with him in order to clarify a few issues. I would to share with the readers some of his comments.

1. In his responsa Rabbi Zilberstein stated that one may speak disparagingly regarding a parent in order to prevent him from sinning. I asked him if one could extend this reasoning to a situation where a parent is reprimanding a child in an

¹ Rabbi Zilberstein suggests that if the father did *teshuvah* it might be proper to involve the father in the treatment in order to avoid embarrassing him as much as possible. Likewise, after the patient heals, marries, and her trauma subsides she should be encouraged to return to honoring her father (if he did *teshuvah*).

² Rabbi Zilberstein concludes his article by recounting a story from the *Sefer Chut HaMeshulosh*. When the *Chasam Sofer* was only 10 years old he was already an accomplished scholar studying together with older students under the great *Gaon*, Rav Noson Adler. The *Chasam Sofer* was once asked to take a turn at giving a *chabura* (seminar) to the other students and visiting scholars. In the course of his comments he cited a profound Talmudic question posed by his illustrative grandfather. He then remarked that, with all due respect, he feels that his grandfather erred and that there really is no difficulty. When the *Chasam Sofer's* father heard his son state that his grandfather erred, he got furious and slapped him across his face. The young boy was very embarrassed and he ran to hide in shame. When Rav Adler heard about the incident, he told his student to never speak to his father again because he feared that the father's critical attitude may dampen his son's enthusiasm for learning. The *Chasam Sofer's* father accepted this decree and in fact never spoke to his son again. Rav Adler raised the *Chasam Sofer* in his home as one of his own children.

* From the *Nefesh News*, March, 2005, pp. 18-19.

abusive manner. Perhaps the child should be permitted (or even obligated) to object in order to prevent his parent from sinning in this manner. Rabbi Zilberstein concurred.

2. Rabbi Zilberstein cited a ruling from Rav Moshe Feinstein (YöD, part 2, 103) that a teacher is not permitted to ask a child to tattletale (ösnitchö) on another child. I related to Rabbi Zilberstein that, in fact, this is common practice (often accompanied by threats) in almost all the *frum* schools in the United States (even after they are shown Rav Moshe's *teshuva*). I asked Rabbi Zilberstein if there is any place for leniency in this matter which would perhaps justify this common practice. He responded that ösince in the U.S. they accepted Rav Moshe's *halachic* authority there is no *heiter* (leniency) to disregard his ruling.ö
3. I related to Rabbi Zilberstein a situation where a young lady was molested by her stepfather for many years until she left home. Her stepfather never acknowledged his misdeeds and certainly never apologized. She avoided speaking to him or to her mother who did nothing to protect her. Her relatives ö who knew what happened to her ö criticized her for her lack of *kibbud av va'eim* because she distanced herself from them. Rabbi Zilberstein remarked; öHer relatives are total fools (*shotim gemurim*).ö
4. I related a common situation where parents are overly critical and harsh to their children. As a result their children are afraid to be open with their parents and they certainly don't confide in them when they have problems. Is a child permitted to tell his parents that he would like to be open with them but he can't because they are too critical? Rabbi Zilberstein responded; öIt is permitted for a child *lidrosh* (to request [or demand?]) this if he speaks in a respectful manner.ö

I also corresponded with Seymour Hoffman, Ph.D. an Israeli Nefesh member who was the clinician that presented the original questions to Rabbi Zilberstein. He informed me that the responsa was also cited in an article published by Dr. Hoffman in the *Israel Journal of Psychiatry & Related Sciences*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (2001), 123-126. Dr. Hoffman also quotes a responsa from Rabbi Nachum Rabinovich from Maaleh Adumim in an article he published in *Assia ö Jewish Medical Ethics*, Vol. VI, no. 2, (2004), 36-38. Dr. Hoffman asked:

Since most parents would not be considered *reshoim* [in the *halachic* sense] even though they may have caused, unwittingly, emotional turmoil and damage to their offspringí . may [the therapist] encourage the child to speak freely about his negative feelings toward his parents, ifí this is necessary for the therapyí ?

Rabbi Rabinovich responded:

In my previous reply I cited an example of a wicked parent as an extreme case. [However, even if the parent is not considered a *rosha* in *halacha*]

whenever a wrong is committed there is an element of wickedness, even if unintentional, which requires *kaparahí* . If the expression of negative feelings is intended to bring about a therapeutic result, it is certainly justified.

I again reiterate what I previously emphasized, that *kibbud av va'eim* is a very important and complex *mitzvah* and any particular situation has to be evaluated by a knowledgeable *Rov* for specific guidance.

Hashem as a tyrant r"l

I have decried the tendency to present the *mitzvah* of *kibbud av va'eim* to children with the implication that they are required to submit passively to abusive parents. Lest someone think that I am overstating the problem, allow me to quote from a recent issue of a newsletter put out by a very popular program run in many *frum* schools that promotes the observance of the *mitzvah* of respecting parents and teachers. The newsletter first relates the incident with *Dommah Ben Nesinah* that I cited in Part 1 (without the qualification of *Tosafos* or the *Yam Shel Shlomo* that his mother was *meturefes b'daata*) and then continues:

The key to such awesome self-control [i.e., not responding angrily to an abusive parent] is developing the proper attitude. We are instructed: "One should not respond negatively to his parents, but should remain silent and fear the *Melech Malchei HaMelachim* who has instructed him so" (*Yoreh Deah* 240:3). For, were a mortal king to instruct us to fulfill a difficult request, would we question his instructions? (e.g., If Saddam Hussein told you the sky is purple, would you dare to argue?) [emphasis added].

This is the message our children are getting! Even if your parents tell you something that is obviously wrong pretend that it is right because an evil and powerful bully (*Hashem* as Saddam Hussein *r"l!*) will torture you if you dare show any sign of disbelief or displeasure. Is this the understanding of *kibbud av va'eim* we want our children to have? And is this the image of *Hashem* we want them to have?

The well-known *mechanech*, Rabbi Dov Brezak, relates that he once asked the revered sage, Rav Leib Steinman *Shlit"a*, how a parent should react to a child who is obstinate and uncooperative. Rav Steinman responded: "Do the parents do everything they are supposed to do right away? Are they such righteous people that they constantly fulfill their obligations perfectly? Parents are to understand that it is normal for a child to be lax in his duty of listening to the parent and rather than getting upset we must search for alternative means to elicit cooperation. High ranking among them is discussion."²

¹ [This final segment was not published in the *NEFESH News*.]

² "The Principal's Principles," *Community Magazine*, April, 2007, pp. 30-32.

Parents and Children: Rabbinic and Psychological Views¹⁸

Benzion Sorotzkin, Psy.D.

ויקרא/אחרי מות (ט:ז:יז) "וכפר בעדו ובעד ביתו ובעד כל קהל ישראל"

Twerski on Chumashö (Artsroll, 2003 - Rabbi Dr. Abraham J. Twerski):

In discussing the proper formula for vidui (confession), the Talmud (Yoma 36b) cites the verse, "We have sinned with our fathers, we have caused iniquity and wickedness" (תהלים, קו:ו) חטאנו עם אבותינו העוינו הרשענו: The Hebrew term used for "sin" is chait, which denotes an unintentional transgression. The words used for "caused iniquity and wickedness" are avon and pesha, which refer to willful and defiant transgressions. MaHarsha points out that we implicate our ancestors only in regard to chait, inadvertent sins, but not to willful sins.

People who consult psychotherapists for emotional problems are asked about their childhood experiences, and particularly how they were treated by their parents. Not infrequently, the therapist will attribute the patient's emotional problems to faulty parenting. While it cannot be denied that early experiences may have great impact, it is important that parents should not be vilified. Unfortunately, there are some parents who are negligent or abusive, but the vast majority of parents wish to do the best for their children. They may indeed make mistakes in parenting, but there are generally done with good intentions. It is even possible that parents who have consulted purported experts in child rearing may have been given wrong advice. Although children may suffer from parental mistakes, we should bear in mind that these were most often inadvertent rather than willful errors.

In some cases, the awareness that one's problems are the result of faulty parenting has turned children against their parents. This accomplishes nothing therapeutically, and the rift that is created between children and parents deprives both of one of the most meaningful relationships in life. Both parents and children are made to suffer needlessly.

Except in those cases where there has been frank abuse, we should realize that our parents' errors are not a reason for resentment. Rather than dwell on parents' mistakes, we would achieve much more if we addressed our own behavior. It has been correctly said, "Even if you are what your parents made you, if you stay that way, it's your own fault." The words in the psalm are well chosen. We should not impart any malice to our parents. Even if they erred, they invariably meant well.

I have a few comments on this *vort*.

- 1) First of all, the *MaHarsha* was inadvertently misrepresented. The *MaHarsha* says that **our** unintentional transgressions can perhaps be attributed to our parents since they may have not taught us that certain acts are prohibited. For our willful acts, in contrast, we

¹⁸ This section was published in *öMental Health in the Religiously Observant Populationö ó Nefesh Israel*, 2011, pp. 98-104.

have to take responsibility since, by definition, we cannot claim ignorance for willful acts. The *MaHarsha* is **not** addressing the question of the intentionality of parents' mistakes in raising their children. (See footnote for the text of the *MaHarsha*¹⁹).

- 2) Objecting to vilifying the parents is, in my opinion, attacking a straw man. I don't believe that there is any reputable therapist who advocates vilifying parents. Helping a patient become aware of his repressed anger over years of not having his feelings validated, being criticized or perhaps himself being vilified, as a means of understanding his own symptoms and to moderate his internalized self-criticism is a far cry from vilifying parents. In fact, most therapists who take this approach do so as a prelude to encouraging the patient to build a more honest and open relationship with his parents. In my view, protecting the parents from the resentful feelings of their child is a very short-sighted favor for them. This will only help them maintain a façade of a relationship at the cost of their child's mental health.
- 3) Regarding the assumption that parents are most often acting out of good intentions, even when they are being overly critical or controlling; if what we mean is that, on the conscious level, parents are convinced that they are doing it for the child's own good; that is almost always true. After all, almost all parents would give their lives for their children.²⁰ But if we mean that it isn't common for parents to be motivated by unacknowledged, unhealthy, subconscious emotional needs (e.g., a need to control) in their mishandling of their children, then I believe that we can not make that assumption. (This is also clearly indicated in many *seforim* – see footnote. Note that Rav Wolbe writes that an unhealthy need for control is frequently found among parents.²¹)

¹⁹ מהרש"א

²⁰ It is important to emphasize that acknowledging the role of parents in the development of their children's emotional difficulties and acting out behaviors is not an issue of moral condemnation or assigning blame. In fact, I wholeheartedly agree with the words of an eminent therapist (Bertram Karon, "Treatment of severely disturbed patients in private practice," *Psychologist Psychoanalyst*, 20, 40-43, 2000) who spoke of the need to enlist the aid of parents in the treatment of emotionally disturbed patients; "This may seem strange because so many of the therapeutic issues have to do with hurtful experiences concerning their [parents], but typically the destructive parenting experiences have derived from [the] unconscious defenses of the parent. The parents had no conscious knowledge or control of these defenses, and in most cases are very decent people who would never consciously hurt their child. Often they will go to great lengths to help their child." [p. 43]

²¹ רבי גמליאל רבינוביץ, ספר טיב השידוכין (' - ') :

רבי שלמה וולבה, ספר זריעה ובנין בחינוך (' ') :

abuse, and it's considered the child's own fault, is it ok to say that the parents **share** the blame? I find it interesting that there is a tremendous backlash if one actually says that a child's problems is his parents' fault, even when it's clear that they made serious errors, yet there is no hesitancy at all to say it's the child's fault. [Incidentally, I never say it's the parents' fault since that is a moral judgment best left to *Hashem*. I only explore the parents' role, as in "cause and effect."]

A colleague called my attention to Rabbi Eliezer Melamed, Rosh Yeshivah Har Bracha, comments in the January 1, 2005 edition of the weekly paper *Arutz-Sheva* in his article "Psychologists and Honoring Parents: Problems of Psychologists":

Many psychologists nowadays tend to blame a patient's problems on his parents (1) the parents pressured him, got angry at him, and even hit him; in other words, "abused" him. Since the patient is considered a victim of his parents' treatment, it follows that he himself is never to blame for his troubles. His conscience can be clear and he can free himself from his distress. The parents are to blame for all his problems and troubles which he inflicts upon himself and his surroundings. From this perspective, it is clear that the relationship between the child and parents will worsen and with the encouragement of the psychologist, he will scornfully transgress the commandment of honoring parents. Even if such a treatment would have been psychologically effective, it is nevertheless forbidden to take part in it since it is against the laws of the Torah. Just as a person is not allowed to steal or murder in order to relieve himself of suffering, so he may not transgress the commandment of respecting his parents in order to relieve himself of suffering.

With all due respect, I find this comment astonishing. Rabbi Melamed is also clearly attacking a straw man. I am not familiar with any reputable therapist who fits the caricature drawn by Rabbi Melamed. Becoming aware that parents contributed to one's emotional difficulties does not automatically translate to "The parents are to blame for all his problems and troubles which he inflicts upon himself and his surroundings" nor is it encouraging him to "scornfully transgress the commandment of honoring parents" or anymore than helping a newly minted *baal teshuva* be patient with himself when he finds his progress in mitzvah observance going slow automatically translate to encouraging him to feel that he is permitted to violate all the *mitzvos*!

The question of the permissibility of using an effective psychotherapeutic approach that may result in the patient being less respectful of his or her parents is certainly a complex *halachic* issue and not one that I am qualified to decide on. From my discussions with Rabbonim on this issue, however, it seems clear that many of them would not agree with Rabbi Melamed that it is never permitted. Rav Dovid Cohen (the Rov of Gevul Yavetz and of Nefesh) has made it clear to

