

Parenting Your Parents

By Abraham J. Twerski

The *yetzer hara*, a mortal foe, seeks to attack where it can do the greatest damage. One favorite target seems to be the relationship between parents and children. The Talmud says that when children respect their parents, God says, “I consider it as though I were dwelling amongst them and they were respecting Me” (*Kedushin* 30). Disrespecting parents is tantamount to disrespecting God.

Conditions today are radically different than they were just a few decades ago. Medical science is constantly advancing the average life span. In the first half of the past century, the average life span was 40 years. Now it is 80, and rising. Yet, while science has increased the average life span, it has failed to cure many diseases that afflict the elderly. Thus, while people are indeed living longer, they are still prone to arthritis, strokes, impairment of vision and hearing, and perhaps the most dreaded of all diseases of the elderly, Alzheimer’s disease.

Depending on a variety of factors, including finances, living conditions

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for the elderly may vary. Some fortunate individuals may be able to maintain total independence, others may require some help in the home, still others may need to move to an assisted living or a total care facility. In certain situations, the only option is for the parents to live with their children.

Thus, often people in their 40s with adolescent children find themselves having to care for an elderly parent or parents living with them. The needs of the elderly parents may be very different than those of the children.

Teenagers, for example, might play their music at decibel levels that are annoying to the grandparents. They may dress in ways which the parents tolerate but the grandparents do not. The parents, who feel an obligation toward both their children and their parents, are caught in the middle. Consequently, they are often referred to as “the sandwich generation.”

The situation is even thornier when both parents must work to support the family. These parents have limited time for their children, and giving attention to their elderly parents further detracts from time spent with the children. Indeed, the pressure and demands from both sides of the spectrum makes a wise a more appropriate analogy than a sandwich.

When one is in “a sandwich situation,” one may feel that he is in the midst of a tug-of-war. Inasmuch as one has limited time, energy and resources, one may feel guilty regardless of what one does. One feels neglectful of either one’s parents, one’s children, or both. It may appear to be

a “no-win” situation.

When a person has tried to do what is right to the best of his ability, there is no reason to feel guilty. If one has in fact done something wrong, guilt is a healthy feeling that leads to the correction of the wrong deed and the avoidance of its repetition. Unwarranted feelings of guilt, however, are the work of the *yetzer hara*.

The only way to thwart the interference of the yetzer hara in parent-care problems is to seek a halachic decision and abide by it.

The problems that can arise for “the sandwich generation” are legion. For example, should one quit work in order to look after an aging parent? Is it appropriate to go on a vacation if that involves turning the care of a parent over to others? Is it legitimate for siblings to place the responsibility of caring for a parent on their children? When grandparents make unreasonable demands on the grandchildren, should the latter be forced to comply?

A parent is in a nursing home, and the son gets an excellent job opportunity which will enable him to be a better provider for his family. The job is in a distant city, and therefore, he will not be able to make weekly visits to his parent. Should he forego the opportunity?

In regard to these decisions, competent and authoritative guidance is necessary.

The ethicist, Rav Shlomo Wolbe, says that the greatest danger lies in our being unaware of our feelings. If we are aware of our feelings, we are capable of managing them.

In a recent article in *Newsweek* (March 2002, p. 12), a daughter described her “sandwich role”—simultaneously caring for her 80-year-old mother and three-year-old daughter. “I remember being delighted when my daughter decided to toilet-train herself. It was the same week my mother became incontinent.

“When I was growing up, our roles were always very clear. Her [her mother’s] job was to critique, guide and teach, and mine was to absorb, react and learn. But now it’s as if we’ve trad-

ed parts, like actors in a play who've switched roles on a whim."

It is especially distressing to see a parent become childlike. The woman describes how she makes clown-faced pancakes for both her mother and her little girl.

"Between my daughter's ear infections and my mother's occasional falls, the emergency room feels like our second home. ...Going out for an evening is nearly impossible, since few babysitters are willing to look after two generations. ...

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despair, something always saves me. My daughter will crawl up in my lap or sing me a little song. My mother, for her part, can surprise me. The other day she told me she is happy now, despite her pain and confusion."

Often, a person may feel guilty for feeling that taking care of his parent is an imposition. "I must be a terrible person to feel that my parent is a burden," he says to himself. Consequently, a person may disown the negative feeling and banish it from his consciousness. Rav Shlomo Wolbe is right. Disowned feelings can result in emotional problems.

As a child, I remember Reb Binyamin, a saintly appearing man with a flowing white beard. Reb Binyamin was a widower, and lived with his son, Laibel. Laibel's devotion to his father was legendary. My father used to point to Laibel as the finest example of one

who excelled in *kibbud av* (respect for a father). He used to relate that Laibel once said to Reb Binyamin, "Pa, I wouldn't give you away for a million dollars, but I wouldn't give a nickel for another one of you."

My father noted how Laibel's remark was indicative of a healthy attitude. Laibel loved his father, and was sincerely devoted to him. But Laibel did not delude himself into thinking that caring for his father was not an imposition. There were many things he was not free to do because he had to attend to his father. He willingly sacrificed his comfort, but remained aware that it was a sacrifice. If he had been threatened in feeling that his father was a burden, he would have had to disown the feeling. Buried in his subconscious, the resentment and guilt would have affected his behavior in a way that would have detracted from the care he gave his father.

This principle applies to many feelings. The Torah is aware that when a person gives *tzedakah*, he may feel imposed upon and bear resentment toward the recipient. One cannot simply be told, "Do not feel resentment." This is why the Torah explains, "You shall surely give to him [the poor], and let your heart not feel bad when you give to him, for in return for this matter, God will bless you in all your deeds and in your every undertaking" (Deuteronomy 15:10). In other words, *tzedakah* is not a gift. It is an investment which will bring rich returns. Certainly one does not feel bad making an investment which he knows will increase greatly in value. Without such assurance, one might have fulfilled the *mitzvah* grudgingly.

Laibel was an unusual person. His quip indicated that his love for his father was not lessened by the imposition. Those who have difficulty dealing with certain feelings generated by caring for their parents should regard their situation as a wise investment. As the Torah says, "Honor your father and your mother, so that your days will be lengthened" (Exodus 20:12). 