

Can You Honor Your Parents Without Obeying Them?

By Rabbi Eric Tokajer

We live in a broken world filled with broken families—families in which many sons and daughters have been raised to believe in the G-D of the Bible and to be responsible to live by the Ten Commandments. Many understand and do their best to keep these commandments, but an increasing number struggle with the fifth commandment, the commandment we find in Exodus 20:12:

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“Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long upon the land which Adonai your God is giving you” (Ex. 20:12, TLV).

As a rabbi, barely a week goes by where I do not hear a question about this commandment, such as: “How can a son or daughter honor a parent who doesn’t believe in G-D?” Or “How do I honor a parent who is abusive?” Or “How can I honor a parent who is an adulterer?” Or “How can I honor a parent who is an addict?” Or even “How can I honor a parent who won’t allow me to—or doesn’t want me to—worship and live for G-D?”

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Too often, believers are taught that honoring G-D means being obedient to or respecting the decisions of our parents. Honoring can result in both of these things, but being honoring and being obedient are not always synonymous.

Honoring our parents is living our lives in such a way that

our actions, our choices and our lives bring honor to our parents. In other words, the way we can honor our parents most is when we walk in G-D's ways and obey G-D's will—even if doing so would not be looked at as being obedient to our parents.

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