



To Call YOU Father

Dear Rabbi Heschel,

In general, I enjoy reading your column and the insights you share with us. However, I was shocked and appalled by your most recent article. You totally dismissed the pain and resentment felt by the one who sent in the question, calling it “unwarranted” because “our parents owe us nothing. We owe them everything.”

I’m not sure what you mean by “they owe us nothing.” Imagine for a second parents who fail to provide basic shelter, food and clothing for their children, who suffer terribly as a result. The pain, anger and resentment felt by those kids would be expected and understandable, and I would expect you to validate those feelings. As you pointed out, it may be that the parents were simply unable to provide their kids with their most basic needs, but that doesn’t lessen the trauma to the children and that must be addressed with empathy and understanding – not dismissed. If you don’t agree with this, I don’t think there is any place for you to write “chizuk articles.”

How much more so with regard to the emotional needs of one’s children. Parents who fail in this regard are likely leaving their kids far worse off than those who merely don’t take care of their children’s physical needs. The children can be emotionally scarred for life, with all that that entails. Maybe parents don’t “owe us anything,” but it is incumbent upon them not to shirk the responsibility that they took upon themselves by bringing children into the world. These parents are crippling their children. The anger felt by children in such a case is most certainly warranted. How do you have the audacity to dismiss decades of pain, wrought by the dereliction of duty of these parents?

I myself was brought up by parents who failed to provide me with the emotional support every child needs from his parents. I suffer from anxiety and related problems as a result. Every solitary day is a struggle for me. It is excruciatingly difficult to fight every day to heal from my past and succeed in life. (The two are directly related.) My wife comes from an abusive home (mostly emotional abuse). Even experienced Rabbanim and mental health

professionals were shocked hearing the stories my wife recounts from her childhood. She too is doing extraordinary work to heal from her trauma. We both are determined to give our children everything we were “owed” but did not receive.

Your cavalier disregard for the pain that is both valid and warranted is insulting and counterproductive. By not validating the resentment, you are in essence repeating the travesty perpetrated by the parents themselves.

Please print this letter, as I am sure it represents the sentiments of many other people as well.

It would be nice to see an apology too.

Thank you,

A Resentful Child

Dear Rabbi Heschel,

Thank you for your great column; it’s filled with inspiration and wisdom.

I read the question and answer of the woman trying to deal with conflicting feelings on her father’s passing.

You point out that the American idea of parents has crept in and robbed us (to a certain degree) of the beautiful *mitzvah* of *kibbud av va’eim*, and instead our attitude should be “Don’t ask what your parents can do for you, ask what you can do for your parents.”

How true! All that you explained is objectively correct.

But let us get subjective for a moment and look at the question.

The questioner wrote, “I felt he never really understood me... were often hurt... resentment...”

These are emotions expressed in writing. And with emotions, there is no reasoning. They don’t listen to what’s right or makes sense. They have a “mind of their own.”

So, in order to strive to learn the proper way of seeing our parents, I would like to add a few prerequisites to what you wrote:

1. To accept any feeling. This is very important to allow one to move on. A therapist could be helpful or necessary for this.

2. To accept the parent for who he or she is

— including the parent's limitations and flaws. To strengthen oneself with *emunah* in Hashem that He gave him this parent and it was for his ultimate good.

3. After steps 1 and 2, one can start to focus on all the good the parent has done and go after this rewarding *mitzvah*.

We know the Torah never has or never will be changed. However, its application can change from generation to generation. In my opinion, to say "Our parents owe us nothing, we owe them everything" to someone who is hurting because of the parental relationship is ineffective and more confusing. It's akin to a wound that needs treatment and is forced to heal without stitches, cream or a band-aid.

What worked for the last generation doesn't necessarily work today.

Another point: Harav Chaim Kreiswirth (Antwerp Rav) once said that a *yasom* is not (only) someone who lost a parent, but one whose parent doesn't understand him. This is an earth-shattering statement. Children can truly suffer from their parents' mistakes or limitations. This is not to blame parents, but to empathize with the suffering child. Such a child cannot be judged, and care must be taken to guide him to restore the relationship with the parent.

Respectfully,

E.A.

To Rabbi Avraham Y. Heschel,

Just because you thought your words may elicit some angry emails, I feel obliged to write of the pleasure I had reading your answer to the daughter with feelings of resentment.

I was so relieved to read such true words, full of a proper *Yiddishe hashkafah*, putting into proportion the relationship we should have with our parents who owe us nothing and to whom we owe *kibbud av va'eim*.

Unfortunately, many psychologists today tend to relate to and justify emotions in a way that is not the way of the Torah.

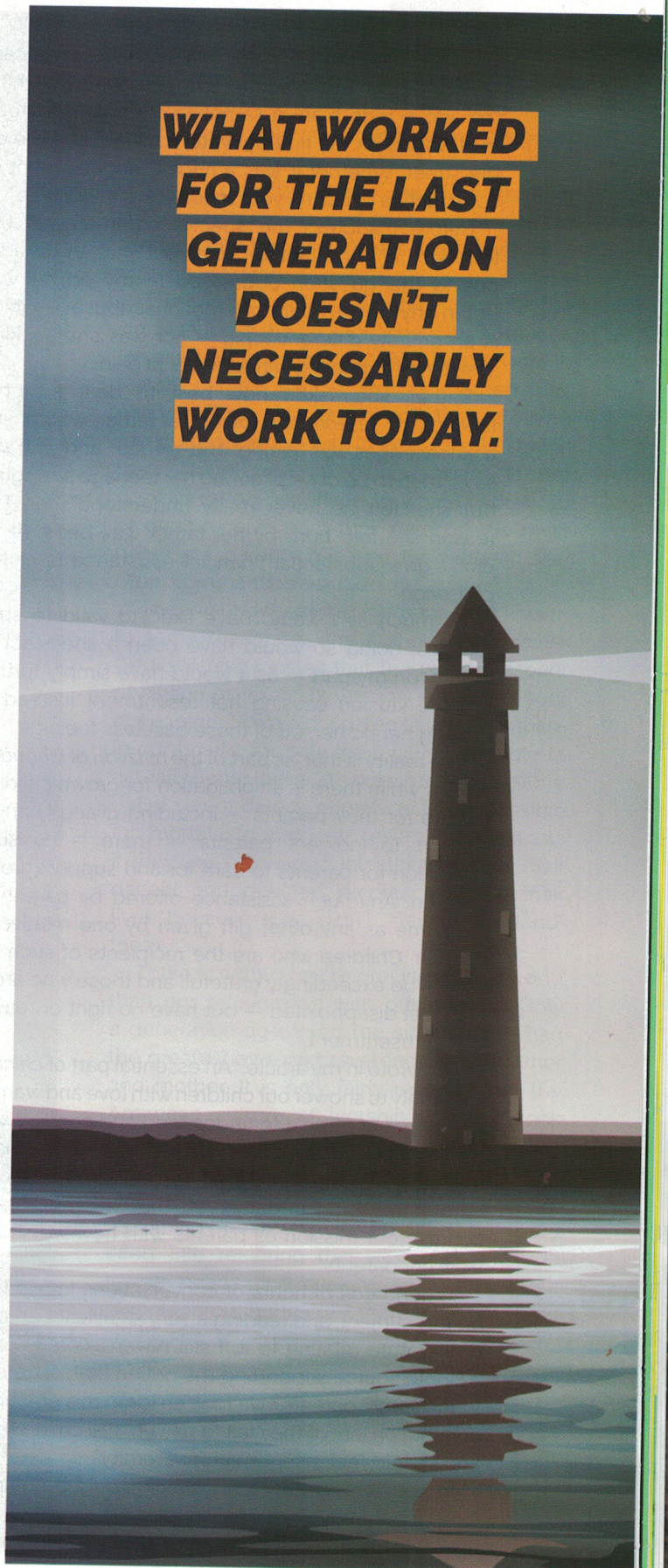
Harav Dessler would say that by respecting and feeling gratitude to parents we come to feel gratitude to the *Ribbono shel Olam*. One of the goals I had in mind when I wrote my book *Just One Word: Eemunah* (published by ArtScroll) was to dispel feelings of despair that result from feeling that Hashem owes us more. The *Yiddishe* way is to work on feeling gratitude to Hashem, which results in *emunah* and a happy approach to life, just like it elicits a healthy relationship with parents.

I enjoy your articles, which are full of sensitivity and *chizuk*.

Mrs. E. Stern

**Author of *Just One Word: Amen*
and *Just One Word: Eemunah***

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Rabbi Heschel Replies:

As expected, my articles elicited very significant — and very varied — reactions from readers, of which the above letters are a sampling. I am very grateful to all who took the time to write, call and stop me on the street. Whether it was a ringing endorsement or constructive criticism, your feedback is invaluable.

Before I address the specific comments in the letters, it is important to point out that the reader posing the question addressed in my article was not in any way a victim of emotional abuse — which is an entirely different topic — nor was she seeking assistance in dealing with emotional pain.

Rather, she asked how best to deal with her feelings of *resentment* toward a father whom she acknowledges was "caring" and "gentle," and who she says "tried to be of help" during her teenage struggles, but she "felt he never really understood" her. The reason she felt "hurt" by her father was because he didn't give substantial financial assistance *after* her *chasunah*.

As much as I would have liked to validate such feelings, doing so would have been a sheer act of cruelty on my part — as it would have simply furthered the illusion causing her resentment instead of helping her rid herself of these baseless feelings.

The reality is that, as part of the *mitzvah of kibbud av va'eim*, while there is an obligation for grown children to care for their parents — including giving financial support to indigent parents — there is no such obligation for parents to care for and support grown children. Any such assistance offered by parents is the same as any other gift given by one relative to another. Children who are the recipients of such aid should be exceedingly grateful, and those who aren't may feel disappointed — but have no right or reason to feel resentment.

As I wrote in my article, "An essential part of *chinuch* is not only to shower our children with love and warmth but to try our utmost to understand and connect with their emotions. That is the way I was raised and that is the *mesorah* I received from my mentors. At the same time, it must be underscored that we must never confuse our mission as parents with how we should view our parents."

In hundreds of hours of conversations I have held on this subject, and reading a very significant amount of literature relating to it, I still haven't come across a single source supporting the notion that, according to the Torah, parents *owe* their children this emotional connection, and if they fail to pay up, the children can and should feel resentment for eternity.

In addition, a little reality check would be helpful. Despite the plethora of published articles and available parenting classes, in many cases, it is virtually

impossible for parents to "really understand" the thought processes and emotional turmoil transpiring in the mind and heart of a teenager 30 years their junior. They were raised in different generations and live in different worlds. In many situations, the teenager doesn't even "really understand" himself or herself. In fact, many of the same adults who are bemoaning the way their parents raised them and expressing their determination to do it the right way with their own children would be mortified to discover what their own children really think of how well they are being "understood."

At the same time, I was deeply pained to read the letter of the anonymous reader who says his parents failed to provide him with "the emotional support every child needs from his parents," and as a result is still suffering on a daily basis from anxiety and related problems.

There is no doubt that he is going through a real challenge, and my heart goes out to him.

After an initial positive correspondence with him, I wrote to him saying that in order to reply properly, I would need some more information.

"Can you please briefly explain what makes you think that the anxiety you are unfortunately struggling with is due to being deprived of 'the emotional support every child needs,' and that this caused tremendous damage?" I asked him.

"Is this based on your own assumption? Is it based on what a therapist told you? Did a Rav with knowledge of the details of your upbringing confirm this reason for your anxiety? Also, can you very briefly explain what you mean by 'the emotional support that every child needs'?"

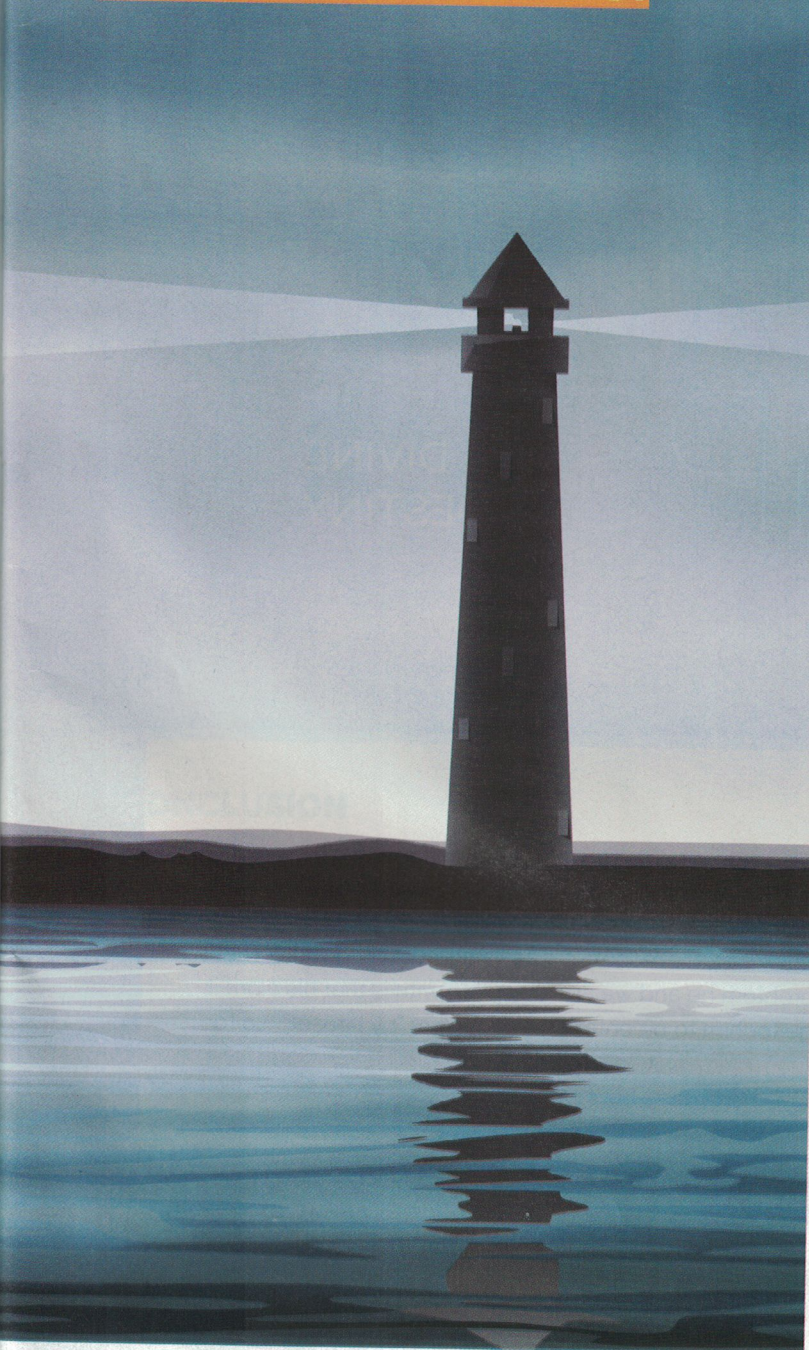
At that point, our correspondence suddenly halted. Because I never received clarification, I am not able to address his specific situation.

However, on a general note, I will point out that the claim that feelings of anxiety or other struggles experienced by adults are primarily due to a lack of unspecified and ill-defined "emotional needs" being filled by their caring, well-intentioned parents in their youth, is at best an unproven and highly controversial theory. At worst, it is a myth that has tragically destroyed a great many families.

To clarify: I am specifically *not* referring to cases of emotional abuse or other situations where children experience real trauma. I am referring to parents who did their best under the circumstances — and years later are being victimized by unfair demands and unrealistic expectations.

Subsequent to the publication of the original article, I met a noted *askan* who runs a very large and prominent *mosad* in Boro Park. In the course of conversation, I told him about the critical letters I had

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received. He responded by sharing with me a very powerful Torah teaching:

In the *Aseres Hadibros* in *Parashas Va'eschanan*, the Torah (*Devarim* 5:16) tells us, "Honor your father and your mother as Hashem, your G-d, commanded you..."

Rashi, quoting *Chazal*, teaches us that the words "commanded you" are referring to the fact that the *Bnei Yisrael* were taught this *mitzvah* in *Marah*.

The *Ksav Sofer* wonders about the significance of the location where it was taught. He explains that when the *Bnei Yisrael* were in *Marah*, parents neither fed nor clothed their children. They ate *mann* and their clothing miraculously grew with them. This illustrates that the *mitzvah* of *kibbud horim* is not dependent on nor linked to what children do or don't receive from their parents! We must honor our parents because the *Ribbono shel Olam* commanded us to do so.

The *Baal Hachareidim* (perhaps best known to some readers as the author of the *zemer* "*Yedid Nefesh*") writes that the primary aspect of *kibbud av va'eim* is the way we think about our parents. We are obligated to venerate them in our hearts, for only then will we be able to actually honor them with our words and actions.

Let us not delude ourselves; it is impossible for mortals to properly revere their parents if they are persuaded into thinking that their decent and devoted parents wrecked their lives because they didn't "fully understand" them.

There is nothing more precious in the world than our relationship with our parents. Only a generation ago, even the simplest *Yid* had the greatest awe and reverence for his father and mother. It is only fairly recently that the American culture of worshiping youth took its toll on our community and weakened this bond.

Instead of swallowing the distorted theories stemming from foreign waters, let us put every effort into restoring that awe and gratitude in our hearts and seeking to relate to our parents through the crystal-clear lens of Torah *hashkafah*. ■

Rabbi Heschel is a son of the Kopyczynitzer Rebbe, Harav Moshe Mordechai, z"ya. A writer and public speaker on inspirational topics, he is a longtime chizuk columnist for Inyan.

Questions can be submitted via email to aheschel@hamodia.com or by calling 718.853.9094 ext. 254 and leaving a voicemail.