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## PERCEPTION OF PARENTS IN JUDAISM\*

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### Abstract

The divine religions i.e. Islam, Christianity and Judaism have numerous features in their respective legal systems. They have common or distinctive provisions (ahkam) about various sins such as murder, theft, adultery, bribery, false witnessing, oppression and injustice. In addition to the legal rulings pertaining to these cases, respect for parents and elders have always been an issue of critical nature.

In the aforementioned universal religions, respect for parents and elders constitutes a religious obligation. Therefore, by complying with this order one deserves to be rewarded and one who fails to comply with it would be severely punished. This article deals with perception of parents in Judaism. It endeavours to ascertain the status of the parents in Jewish culture by examining a number of Judaic sources regarding this issue.

**Keywords:** Judaism, Parents, Perception, Point of View.

### INTRODUCTION

Human beings, it has been argued, are innately inclined to believe in a religion. It may therefore be assumed that religions and systems of belief would exist today and into the future as well. Divine religions i.e. Judaism, Christianity and Islam are the most prevalent ones on earth. Thus adherents of these religions account for almost half of the world population. The said religions, with their divine origin, have numerous qualities with regard to their respective law systems. Murder, fornication, theft, violation of rights, bribery and perjury may be mentioned as instance for items of criminal law. Rules prescribed by religions have either a purely religious character or a religious and moral dimension at the same time. Of the most important rules of divine religions are moral principles.

Moral principles can be found in religions which are not of divine origin as well. These principles have been transmitted through generations by both written and oral means. Morality is definitely a fact which has existed since the creation of human beings and is essentially a humane quality (Erdem 1990: 225). By speaking of moral principles we mean here those required by religion and not those separate from religion. The discourse in this regard is of a kind of morality which is based on a religion, and originates with a transcendental being that determines what is good or bad (Kemal 1914: 66).

The religion within the scope of this study, Judaism, is at its very formative stage a religion originating with a divine authority. Therefore rules prescribed in Judaism, not dissimilar from those found in other religions, make a claim to both religious and moral sanction. This fact is supported by the Ten Commandment whose rules are as follows:

“You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments. You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name. Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns. For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy. Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you. You

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shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor. You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male or female servant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor." Exodus 20 (3-17).

When the contents of these commandments, which the Prophet Moses had received from God, are examined, it can be easily conceived that they form a set of moral rules. Interestingly the above-stated commandments accord with the general religious and moral orders of Islam. This resemblance can be seen in the following Quranic verses:

"Say, Come, I will recite what your Lord has prohibited to you. [He commands] that you not associate anything with Him, and to parents, good treatment, and do not kill your children out of poverty; We will provide for you and them. And do not approach immoralities - what is apparent of them and what is concealed. And do not kill the soul which Allah has forbidden [to be killed] except by [legal] right. This has He instructed you that you may use reason. And do not approach the orphan's property except in a way that is best until he reaches maturity. And give full measure and weight in justice. We do not charge any soul except [with that within] its capacity. And when you testify, be just, even if [it concerns] a near relative. And the covenant of Allah fulfill. This has He instructed you that you may remember." al-An'am (6/151-152)

It is consequential that commandments similar to abovementioned ones exist in all divine religions. This fact indicates the origination of the divine religions with the exalted Creator.

### **Family**

Respect for the parents who form the base of the family, the smallest core of the society is both a religious duty and a moral code. The family is of great importance in terms of reflecting the character of the society and sustaining the presence of nations in all ages and civilizations. Even though the structure of the family has fluctuated due to social, historical, geographical, political and religious factors from time to time, no change in the presence of the family has been seen. The fact is supported by the results of researches which have studied the family unit over time. According to data collected in this regard no society could be able to maintain its presence without family (Yasdıman 2001:242-243). Since every society creates the institution of family in order to sustain its presence within its own culture (Eröz 1991:225), the Jews have similarly created this institution too.

Either when they had been nomads or they had settled in, or they had been exiled, Jews have preserved their family structure. This national preservation is undoubtedly rooted in the rules set by the Jewish holy scripture and the Jewish clergy. In Talmud, R. Tanhum stated in the name of R. Hanilai: Any man who has no wife lives without joy, without blessing, and without goodness. 'Without joy', for it is written. And thou shalt rejoice, thou and thy house. 'Without blessing', for it is written, To cause a blessing to rest on thy house. 'Without goodness', for it is written, It is not good that the man should be alone. Yevamoth (62b) Another verse about the importance of the institution of the family is as follows: "Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare." Jeremiah 29, (5-7)

As it is understood from the above-quoted texts, having a child is the basic aim of the institution of family. In the ancient times, giving birth to a child was an important matter and yet an obligation. On the contrary, barrenness and being unable to have a child was an embarrassment. From the Rabbinic period in case of the deterioration of mother's health abortion is permitted. However, today in the heterodoxal congregations in addition to mother's deteriorating health the following circumstances, namely severe economic conditions, the mother's psychological state and her need to allocate time for the family makes abortion permissible (Gürkan 2008: 135).

According to what is expressed in the ten commandments, liaisons which are regarded illicit in Judaism are not tolerated since they would undermine the dignity of the institution of the family. Such an illicit liaison entails 'stoning to the death'. (Deuteronomy, 22:22 and 22:24; Leviticus, 20:10). However capital punishment including stoning was abolished around 30 AD. (Hasanov, 2008:183).

Due to the fact that the Jewish family has transformed into nuclear family from an extended family following the idea of tribalism the efficiency of the family members in the social fibre has been subject to change from time to time. The authority of the father in the Jewish family with a patriarchal character in the said transformation process has become weaker (de Vaux 2003: 46).

Because of the individuation of the family member and sheerly diminished family size in the modern age the attachment to the family and attitude towards parents has gradually declined. As a commandment of God, respect for the parents in Judaism is of great importance as in the other divine religions, Christianity

and Islam. In the abovementioned divine religions rules regarding respect for the parents abound and most of them resemble each other. For instance the fifth commandment from the ten commandments is about respect for parents : "Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you." Exodus 20, (12). The fifth commandment is a necessity for the continuation of the institution of Jewish family, maintenance of cultural structure and social welfare. In Judaism, the reward from God to persons who apply the command of showing respect to the parents is prolongation of the life.

### **Reward and Punishment**

Just as Islam regards respect for the parents as an act of worship and mentions this respect following worship to Allah so Judaism as well accepts respect for them as a kind of worship and mentions it immediately after worship to God. This fact implies how sacred respect for parents is. Reward of obedience to such commandment exists in both religions and it is in this world a happy and peaceful life.

It is logically true that when the presence of something requires and earns reward its absence as well will earn punishment. Therefore when reward is promised to those who have respect for the parents punishment is also inflicted on those who have no respect for them. This applies to the Old Testament along with the other holy scriptures. Mistreatments against the parents such as disobedience, despising and even talking or addressing them with bad words or beating them would with no doubt deserve severe penalty. The penalty for such acts is, according to Jewish holy scriptures, death. The following verse of the Old Testament clearly states the punishment: "Anyone who attacks their father or mother is to be put to death." Exodus, 21 (15). In the Old Testament cursing parents also requires the death penalty. Exodus, 21 (17) ve Leviticus 20 (9). The decisiveness with regard to the formation of the Jewish family structure and the continuation of Jewish life in the abovementioned verses draws attention. Shaping a society which lacks such definite rules (commandments) would be pretty difficult. The institution of family is essential in terms of Judaism. Thus, it is essentially due to this fact that Jews have formed a nation which have survived in exile for centuries. Obedience to the parents is a necessity for the reconstruction of the Jewish life after the liberation of the Jews with the Prophet Moses from the oppression of the Pharaoh. In the other words, respect for the parents is the foundation of the family institution which means the continuation of Jewish generations. This obedience constitutes a precondition of God for the Jewish society. These are what the ten commandments clearly indicate.

The child is sacred in Judaism and having a child is possible by God's endowment only. Those who would direct the child and prepare him/her according to a Jewish tradition are the parents and the child brought up is the one who would shape another generation in the future. This fact may be inferred from a piece of advice given to the child by the father. In the Old Testament, a father advises his son 'being wise, following the truth, staying away from wine-guzzlers and gluttons 'for the guzzler and the glutton will become impoverished', and not despising his mother 'when she has grown old'. Proverbs, 23 (19-22) Therefore respect for the parents who has been glorified by God and take care of the children, in other words the permanence of Judaism would be necessarily of great significance.

The parents in terms of Jewish life function as a bridge connecting the past and the present. Otherwise the transfer of Jewish culture and tradition and the permanence of the Jewish lineage would never be possible. The possibility of imagining Jewish life in any other way would create an unacceptable situation for the Jewish ideology (Yiğitoğlu 2012:1213). Obedience and reverence to parents in the Jewish world view is equal to devotion to the past and tradition and loyalty to the Jewish values. Those who are not loyal to his/her parents and do not respect them are individuals who do not claim Israel's legacy/heritage. As a result persons of such character are not supposed to exist in the Jewish society. Their punishment in the world is proportionate to the crime they have committed. As we mentioned above, the punishment of those who curse their parents is death. Besides, God's damnation (curse) for persons who mistreat their parents by despising and defiance is to be pecked out by ravens and eaten by vultures. Proverbs, 30 (17)

According to the Old Testament, parents who have a 'rebellious son' who they feel cannot be disciplined should take their child to the authorities and tell them 'This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious. He will not obey us. He is a glutton and a drunkard.' Then he would be stoned to death. Deuteronomy, 21 (18-21) This rule is only one of a number of harsh measures that, according to the scriptures, may be taken with the aim of protecting the public order. If it results in death or an injury, hitting or beating the parents or even raising ones hands against them causes the death penalty for the child according to the Jewish laws. However the attack causing no injury does not result in the death penalty. Whether both of the parents or one of them dies or gets injured, the child who attacked would certainly face death penalty. The difference is the application of the death penalty. If one of the parents gets injured due to the attack the child must be hanged to the death. However if he/she dies after the attack the child must be stoned to death. Rashi (ty)

### **Responsibility**

We have mentioned above how the Jewish children should treat their parents according to the Old Testament. In addition to the fifth of the ten commandments given to Moses quoted above, it may be appropriate here to refer to several other commandments which remind children of their responsibilities towards their parents. The following statement found in the Old Testament elucidates the importance of pleasing the parents along with the responsibilities due to them: "The father of a righteous child has great joy; a man who fathers a wise son rejoices in him. May your father and mother rejoice; may she who gave you birth be joyful" Proverbs, 23 (24-25). Therefore the Old Testament commands the respect for the parents through the following piece of advice reminding of the period of the life "Listen to your father, who gave you life, and do not despise your mother when she is old." Proverbs, 23 (22)

According to the interpretations of Talmud, the person should take care of his/her parents especially when they grow older. The parents should be looked after attentively and provided with food and accommodation and even supplied their need for transfer. In brief all these services are part of the main responsibilities of the Jewish family. If the parents in their old age would not like to stay with their children it is incumbent on the children to provide them with a special residence which allow them fulfill every need (Taylor 2001:68-71).

Rabbi Zelig Pliskin has comprehensively expressed the position on the the treatment of the children towards parents in Jewish culture in the following way: "They should be treated with care and the children should regard them as special persons. The children should even respond to them with soft tone of voice. Mistreating the parents with rough words is worse than monetary deception of them". Baba Metziah (58b) When parents are addressed, the titles, 'mother' and 'father' should be preferred and they should not be called by their names. They should not be waken up when they are asleep and their estates (such as house, workplace) should not be seized against their will. All these negative acts constitute disrespectful behaviour in the Jewish tradition. They should be pleased by being addressed by terms of endearment calls and the children should accompany or bid them farewell when they are travelling. Lob (ty)

The parents should also treat the children with consideration. They are indeed not supposed to harm them since it is prohibited for the parents to oppress the children by behaving oppressively. Sefer Habris (2/13) The parents should at first learn Torah and dignify the children if they would like to be treated well by them in the future. It is because the children in the future realize what they had lived through. Lob (ty)

In the Jewish culture and tradition, religion is undoubtedly of great importance. It is obvious how religious advice and rules shaped the people. Judaism just as, other divine religions, lays emphasis on respect for parents. As required by God, respect for parents is a religious obligation. In addition to this, regard for parents has a moral aspect as well. In other words, it is a set of moral principles which relies on the religion and originates with a sacred and transcendental authority. Among these principles is "Honour your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you" Exodus 20 (12). The following statement is also worthy of note: "Every man shall fear his mother and his father" Leviticus 19 (3) These commandments in the Jewish holy scriptures undoubtedly emphasize upon respect for the parents who are glorified by God and precious in the eyes of their children.

Besides the commandments mentioned above, the following statement in the Talmud are noteworthy in terms of the significance of the parents "the Writ assimilates the fear of parents to the fear of God." Kiddushin (30b)

The Old Testament equates respect for the parents with reverence for the Creator. It is because respect for the parents necessitates worshipping God. Thus both are interconnected. According to the Jewish holy scriptures the Creator is God. Although the creation is entirely at God's discretion, the parents play a big role in the nascency of human being. Therefore those who 'honour' the parents would be praised by God as in the following statement: "...as though I had dwelt among them and they had honoured me". Kiddushin (30b)

### **Conclusion**

Having a good attitude towards parents is rewarded with attainment of God's consent (pleasure) and praise in contrast to a bad attitude towards them leads to God's wrath and damnation. The Jewish society has in the course of history been subjected to the attacks of the Assyrians, the Babylonians and the Romans and exiled for centuries in accordance with the divine law. Therefore, the maintenance of the family structure has not been easy for them. It is because the survival of a nation in exile requires abiding by the rules of protection for the family structure. If the Jewish holy scripture and the relevant literature is examined it will be seen that by this reason the strength of the ties between the parents and the children is important. In the exile periods, the principles concerning respect for the parents and their relations with the children would not be loose and their application would be essential due to the need for the maintenance of the Jewish family. The fact that in the present day the principles of the Jewish scripture is not being applied may constitute a sign of the perception that the tough times which they as a nation had experienced are now left in the past.

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