

From the Rabbi's Desk
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Stories With a Twist [71]



How Far Must One Go to Fulfill the Mitzvah of Honoring One's Father and Mother?

Insights into Babylonian Talmud, Kiddushin 31a

Background to Our Story

Honor your father and your mother



http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Honor_your_father_and_your_mother

Honor your father and your mother is one of the *Ten Commandments*, which are widely understood as moral imperatives by legal scholars, Jewish scholars, Catholic scholars, and Post-Reformation scholars. The *Book of Exodus* describes the Ten Commandments as being spoken by God to *Moses*, inscribed on two stone tablets by the finger of God, or written on tablets by Moses.

Honor your father and your mother so that you may live long in the land that Hashem your God is giving you. – Exodus 20:12

In the *Torah*, keeping this commandment was associated with individual benefit and with the ability of the nation of Israel to remain in the land to which God was leading them. Dishonoring parents by striking or cursing them was punishable by death. In the *Talmud*, the commandment to honor one's human parents is compared to honoring God.

What constitutes "honor?" One must provide them with food and drink and clothing. One should bring them home and take them out and provide them with all their needs cheerfully. – *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* 143:7

The commandment to honor one's human parents is compared, by at least one writer, to honoring God. The Talmud says that since there are three partners in the creation of a person (God and two parents), honor showed to parents is the same as honor shown to God.

Ephod



<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ephod>



A passage in the Book of Exodus describes the Ephod as an elaborate garment worn by the high priest, and upon which the [Hoshen](#) (breastplate), containing [Urim and Thummim](#), rested. According to this description, the Ephod was woven out of [gold](#), [blue](#), [purple](#), and [scarlet](#) threads, was made of fine [linen](#), and was [embroidered](#) "with skillful work" in gold thread; The Biblical description continues without describing the shape or length of the ephod, except by stating that it was held together by a [girdle](#), and had two shoulder straps which were fastened to the front of the ephod by golden rings, to which the breastplate was attached by golden chains; from this description it appears to have been something like a [minimalist apron](#) or a [skirt](#) with [braces](#), though [Rashi](#) argued that it was like a woman's riding girdle. The biblical description also adds that there were two [engraved gems](#) over the shoulder straps (like [epaulettes](#)), made from shoham (thought by scholars to mean [Malachite](#), by Jewish tradition to mean [Heliodor](#), and in the [King James Version](#) is translated as [Onyx](#)), and with the names of the twelve tribes written upon them; the classical rabbinical sources differ as to the order in which the tribes were named on the jewels. Textual scholars attribute the description of the Ephod in Exodus to the [priestly source](#) and to a date later than the other mentions of Ephod; biblical scholars believe that the Ephod may have evolved over time into this highly ceremonial form from more primitive beginnings (the simple linen form described in the Books of Samuel), much like the manner in which the highly liturgical [maniple](#) evolved from an ordinary [handkerchief](#).

Besides use as a garment, an Ephod was also used for oracular purposes, in conjunction with [Urim and Thummim](#); the books of Samuel imply that whenever [Saul](#) or David wished to question God via oracular methods, they asked a priest for the Ephod. Since the oracular process is considered by scholars to have been one of [cleromancy](#), with the Urim and Thummim being the objects which were drawn as lots, the Ephod is considered by scholars to have been some form of container for the Urim and Thummim; to harmonize this with the descriptions of the Ephod as a garment, it is necessary to conclude that the Ephod must have originally been some sort of [pocket](#), which the priests girded to themselves. However, the biblical text states the Urim and Thummim were placed in the breastplate, not the ephod ([Leviticus 8:8](#)).

Red Heifer



http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Red_Heifer



The Red Heifer (Hebrew: Parah Adumah; translated to English as: Red Cow) in Abrahamic tradition, was a sacrificial cow whose ashes were used for the ritual purification of people who came into contact with a corpse.

According to [Numbers 19:2](#): "Speak unto the [children of Israel](#), that they bring thee a red [heifer](#) without spot, wherein is no blemish, and upon which never came yoke"—in other words, the animal must not have hairs of any other color, it must be in perfect health, and it must never have been used to perform work. The heifer is then slain ([Numbers 19:3](#)) and burned outside of the camp (Numbers 19:3–6). [Cedar](#) wood, [hyssop](#), and [scarlet](#) are added to the fire, and the remaining ashes are placed in a vessel containing pure water ([Numbers 19:9](#)).

In order to [purify](#) a person who has become ritually contaminated by contact with a corpse, water from the vessel is sprinkled on him, using a bunch of hyssop, on the third and seventh day of the decontamination process (Numbers 19:18–19). The [kohen](#) who have performed the ritual then become impure themselves. The kohen who performs the ritual must then bathe himself and his clothes in water. He shall be deemed impure until evening.

The existence of a red heifer that conforms with all of the rigid requirements imposed by halakha is a biological anomaly. The animal must be entirely of one color, and there are a series of tests listed by the rabbis to ensure this, for instance, the hair of the cow must be absolutely straight (to ensure that the cow had not previously been yoked, as this is a disqualifier). According to Jewish tradition, only nine Red Heifers were actually slaughtered in the period extending from Moses to the destruction of the Second Temple. Mishnah Parah recounts eight, stating that Moses prepared the first, Ezra the second, Simon the Just and Yochanan the High Priest prepared two each, and Eliechonnai ben Hakkot and Hanameel the Egyptian prepared one each. (Mishna Parah 3:5)

The absolute rarity of the animal, combined with the mystical ritual in which it is used, have given the Red Heifer special status in Jewish tradition. It is cited as the prime example of a chok, or biblical law for which there is no apparent logic and is therefore of absolute Divine origin. Because the state of ritual purity obtained through the ashes of a Red Heifer is a necessary prerequisite for participating in any Temple service, efforts have been made in modern times by Jews wanting to rebuild the Temple to locate a red heifer and recreate the ritual. However, multiple candidates have been disqualified, as late as 2002.

Ashkelon



<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ashkelon>

Ashkelon was the oldest and largest seaport in Canaan, one of the "five cities" of the Philistines, north of Gaza and south of Jaffa (Yafa). Archaeological excavations begun in 1985 led by Lawrence Stager of Harvard University are revealing the site with about 50 feet (15 m) of accumulated rubble from successive Canaanite, Philistine, Phoenician, Iranian, Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine, Islamic, and Crusader occupation.

The Text: Babylonian Talmud, Kiddushin 31a

שאלו את רבי אליעזר: עד היכן כיבוד אב ואם?
אמר להם: צאו וראו מה עשה נכרי אחד לאביו באשקלון, ודמא בן נתינה שמו.
בקשו ממנו חכמים אבנים לאפוד בששים ריבוא שקר ורב פהנא מתני: בשמונים ריבוא. והיה מפתח
מונח תחת מראשותיו של אביו, ולא ציערו.
לשנה האחרת נתן הקדוש ברוך הוא שכרו, שגול דה לו פרה אדמה בעדרו.
ונכנסו חכמי ישראל אצלו, אמר להם: יודע אני בכם שאם אני מבקש מכם כל ממון שבעולם אתם נותנין
לי. אלא אין אני מבקש מכם אלא אותו ממון שהפסדתי בשביל כבוד אבא.

They asked Rabbi Eliezer: How far must one go to fulfill the mitzva of honoring one's father and mother?

Rabbi Eliezer said to them: Go and see what one gentile did for his father in Ashkelon, and the name of the son was Dama ben Netina. Once the Sages wished to purchase precious stones from him for the ephod of the High Priest for six hundred thousand gold dinars' profit, and Rav Kahana taught that it was eight hundred thousand gold dinars' profit. And the key to the chest holding the jewels was placed under his father's head, and he would not disturb him.

The next year the Holy One, Blessed be He, gave Dama ben Netina his reward, as a red heifer was born in his herd, and the Jews needed it. When the Sages of Israel came to him. He [Dama ben Netina] said to them: I know, concerning you, that if I were to ask for all the money in the world you would give it to me. But I ask only for that money that I lost due to the honor of Father.



Explaining the Story

What's going on in our story? (The sequence of events)

Comprehension Questions

? Why were the Sages willing to pay such an exorbitant amount of money for the jewels for the ephod?

? Why didn't Dama ben Netina sell the jewels for the ephod to the Sages?

? How did God reward Dama ben Netina for honoring his father?

Extra Bonus ? Why didn't Dama son of Netinah ask the Sages "for all the money in the world" for his red heifer? What would have happened if Dama ben Netina had asked the Sages "for all the money in the world" for his red heifer? What would the Sages have thought?

Extra Bonus ? How do we know that Dama ben Netina valued money?

Bonus ? Why do you think the Sages brought an example of an idolater to exemplify the extent of the practice of the commandment “Honor Your Father and Your Mother”?

“The Twist” – Or the Lessons We Can Learn from the Text

! How far must one go to fulfill the mitzva of honoring one’s father and mother? Or, putting our values to the test, or when dilemmas involve a ‘win-lose’ situation.



Our story is brought by the Sages to demonstrate the extent of the Mitzvah of honoring one’s parents. Dama ben Netina, a gentile from Ashkelon, is presented by the Sages as a paradigm of a son who is ready to lose an exorbitant amount of money to honor his father.

The following year, Dama ben Netina is presented with an opportunity to “cash in” his mitzvah. Loyal to his principles, he passes on the opportunity, teaching the Sages –and all of us- that not everything is “for sale,” especially our values.