

Good Shabbos Everyone. In this week's Parsha Yisro, we read the 10 Commandments. Being that the Ten Commandments are the foundation of Jewish belief, let us focus in on one of the Ten Commandments in order to strengthen our observance of the fundamentals of our faith. We will concentrate our discussion this week on the Fifth Commandment: Honor your Father and Mother.

The mitzvah of honoring parents is very dear to Hashem. As the commentator the Chinuch explains, if one is meticulous in honoring his parents, he will come to honor Hashem. (Mitzvah 33) Because, one who appreciates his parents who give him his material needs, will surely come to appreciate and honor the One who gives the Universe its spiritual needs. Because, if Hashem were to "pull the plug", the Universe would cease to exist. Thus the mitzvah of honoring one's parents is dear to Hashem because it is a mitzvah which leads to honoring the Master of the Universe. The mitzvah of honoring one's parents applies to one's grandparents also. The following amazing true story told in the first person will inspire us all to honor our parents and grandparents properly.

"After sustaining a severe heart attack in 1973, my grandmother sank into a deep coma and was placed on life support systems in the hospital. Her EEG was totally flat, indicating zero brain activity. She was hooked up both to a pacemaker that made her heart beat artificially and a respirator that made her lungs breathe artificially. But technically, as the doctors told me privately, she was basically as good as dead. "She'll never come out of the coma," they said, "and she's better off this way. If she did, her life would be meaningless. She'd exist in a purely vegetative state." Even though she was in her mid-seventies and had lived a full life, I refused to believe that my beloved grandmother could simply slip away like this. She was too feisty, too vital to just disappear into a coma. My instincts told me to start talking to her and keep chatting away. I stayed at her bedside day and night, and that's precisely what I did. I spoke to her all the time about my husband and our two small children, about other relatives, about her own life. I told her all the news that was circulating in Australia at the time. Anything and everything was grist for the mill. I also kept urging her to keep clinging to life, not to give up.

"Don't you dare leave us!" I exhorted. "I need you, Mom needs you, your grandchildren need you. They're just beginning to get to know you. It's too soon for you to go!" It was hard for me to do battle for my grandmother's life, alone as I was. During the time that she fell ill, I was her only relative in Sydney. Her daughter (my mother) was away overseas on a trip, and my only sibling -- a brother -- lived in Israel. My husband was home caring for our children so that I could take my post at her bedside. I stood a solitary vigil, but that was not what placed such tremendous pressure on me. What was enormously difficult was being asked to make decisions alone. The emotional burden was huge.

When four days passed with no signs of life flickering in either my grandmother's eyes or her hands, and no change recorded by the EEG, the doctors advised me to authorize the papers that would turn off the life support systems. I trembled to think that I held the power of consigning my grandmother to an early grave. "But she's really already dead," the doctors argued. "She's just being kept artificially alive by the pacemaker and the respirator. Keeping her hooked up to these machines is just a waste."

"Well, listen," I said. "It's Thursday afternoon, and in the Jewish religion we bury people right away. My parents are overseas -- practically two days away -- and they would certainly want to be here for the funeral. But we don't do funerals on Saturday, the Jewish Sabbath. The earliest we could do the funeral would be on Sunday. So let me call my parents to get ready to fly home, and I'll sign the papers on Sunday." It was all very cold and calculating, but deep inside, my heart was aching. Meanwhile, I didn't let up. I kept talking up a storm, discussing weighty matters, babbling about the mundane. "Guess what, Grandma?" I gossiped. "You won't believe who ended up being your roommate here in the hospital! Stringfellow! Your next door neighbor at home, Mrs. Stringfellow, was just brought in with a serious condition. Isn't that a coincidence? She lives next door to you in Sydney and now she's your roommate here in the hospital!" On Shabbos, I was at my usual post at my grandmother's bedside, getting ready to start a round of tearful goodbyes, when I thought I noticed her eyes blinking. I called a nurse and told her what I had seen. "It's just your imagination, dearie," the nurse said compassionately. "Why don't you go downstairs for some coffee, and I'll stay with her until you come back?" But when I returned, the nurse was brimming over with excitement herself. "You know," she said, "I think you may be right. I've been sitting here watching your grandmother, and I could swear I saw her blinking, too."

A few hours later, my grandmother's eyelids flew open. She stared at me and then craned her neck to look at the empty bed on the other side of the room. "Hey," she yelled, "what happened to Stringfellow?" By the time my mother arrived at the hospital the next day, my grandmother was sitting up in bed, conversing cheerfully with the hospital staff, and looking perfectly normal. My mother glared at me, annoyed, sure I had exaggerated my grandmother's condition. "For this, I had to schlep all the way home?" she asked. Later, my grandmother told me that while she was in the "coma" she had heard every single word that was said to her and about her. She repeated all the conversations to me, and her retention was remarkable. "I kept shouting to you," she said, "but somehow you didn't hear me. I kept on trying to tell you, 'Don't bury me yet.'" After she was discharged from the hospital, my grandmother's quality of life remained excellent. She lived on her own as a self-sufficient, independent, and high-spirited lady and continued to live in this manner until her death sixteen years (!!!) after I almost pulled the plug."

Good Shabbos Everyone.

In memory of Shusha Malka bas R' Avrohom ob'm

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