Episode Book

EPISODE #6562

When Distance Is How You Honour a Parent

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SYNOPSIS

The fifth commandment's codified text—from Maimonides' Mishneh Torah to the Shulchan Arukh—forbids humiliating a parent in the moment, not maintaining contact with an abusive one. Prompted by a listener facing decades of scolding letters and grievance lists, this conversation unpacks rabbinic rulings from the Maharik, the Rema, and Rabbi Dov Linzer's 2018 responsum. Together they show how Jewish law prioritizes your own wellbeing, and why distancing a harmful parent can be the very thing that fulfills the obligation.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

We have a special prompt today — our first in a while from a listener rather than Daniel. Miriam in Manchester sent it in, and Miriam, consider yourself very welcome, because this one is a proper piece of work. She grew up religious, still takes the fifth commandment seriously — honour your father and your mother — and her problem is that her father has spent her entire adult life using her as a verbal punching bag. Scolding letters. Grievance lists. A habit of rewriting history so she's always the villain. The only stretches of peace she's ever had were stretches of no contact. And every time she puts up a boundary, a voice says, "you're his son — you're his child, you owe him."



Herman

Herman Poppleberry here, and Corn, before you go on — the fifth commandment is one of the only commandments that comes with a promise attached. Honour your father and mother, that your days may be long. It's the only one of the ten with a reward written into it. Which is exactly why it's so hard to put down.



Corn

Miriam's question has two halves. One is rabbinic: what do the Jewish sources actually say about honouring an abusive parent — she's heard the Rambam and the Shulchan Aruch discuss parents who are mentally unwell or wicked, and she's heard the claim that the obligation is really about not humiliating the parent rather than maintaining contact. The other half is philosophical: how do Christianity, secular ethics and Confucian filial piety handle the same tension — and is there a coherent way to say, "I honour you by staying away"? The first thing worth saying is that the sources are far more permissive than the communal pressure suggests.



Herman

Start with the text as written, because it is every bit as extreme as she's heard. Mishneh Torah, Laws of Rebels, chapter six, halakhah seven. Rambam asks: to what degree does the obligation extend? Even if the parent takes your purse of gold and throws it into the sea in front of you, you should not embarrass them, should not shout, should not vent anger. Accept the decree and remain silent. And on the fear side, mora, it gets worse — even if you were wearing fine garments, sitting at the head of the community, and your parents came and ripped the clothes, struck you on the head and spat in your face, you should not embarrass them. Remain silent and fear the King of kings.



Corn

Spat in your face in public, and the obligation is to sit there.



Herman

The Shulchan Arukh codifies it almost verbatim, Yoreh De'ah 240:3. Same purse, same spit, same silence. So the communal voice has a real text behind it. Nobody invented this.



Corn

But here's the thing I want to nail down before anything else, because the entire episode hangs on it. That text commands a negative. Do not embarrass them. In a moment of confrontation. It never says stay. It never says seek them out, keep the letters coming, keep the relationship alive. It's a rule about what you don't do when you're standing in front of the spitting.



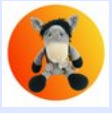
Herman

That's the hinge. The codified command is a single restraint in a single moment of provocation. It is not a command about contact. Miriam's instinct — that the obligation is about not humiliating rather than maintaining a relationship — is correct on the plain text.



Corn

And there's a second half to the codification that almost nobody quotes.



Herman

6:8, the very next halakhah. Although these commands have been issued, the parent is forbidden to lay a heavy yoke on his children and be particular about his honour to the point of being an obstacle to them. He should forgo his honour and ignore affronts — because if a father desires to forgo his honour, the honour is his to forgo. The parent holds the release valve, and the Rambam is ordering him to open it.



Corn

So a father keeping a grievance list — the Rambam has a word for that, and it isn't "honourable."



Herman

He's the one transgressing. The letters, the rewritten history — that is a father being particular about his honour to the point of an obstacle. The daughter's silence is being demanded by the one man the code says must not demand it.



Corn

I'll admit, when I read that pairing as a unit — 6:7 and 6:8 — I stopped being surprised that the tradition arrives where it arrives. The heroic silence was always conditional on the parent being merely difficult, not on the parent being the obstacle.



Herman

Now the narrowing, because it starts almost immediately. No sooner was the ink dry on the purse ruling than the Rishonim qualified it. The Talmud's case was a purse already thrown — the money was in the sea, the damage done, the only question left was the son's mouth. The Rema, in Yoreh De'ah 240:8, rules that a child can act to prevent a parent causing financial harm, even if preventing it pains the parent. You can grab the purse before it leaves his hand.



Corn

And nobody's honour is dishonoured, because the wallet never hits the water.



Herman

And Rabbi Dov Linzer, whose responsum on exactly this question came out in twenty eighteen, makes the obvious extension — it goes without saying, he writes, that this would be true in a case of emotional pain. Which is a whole different register. A purse of gold is money. Grievance letters delivered for decades are the emotional version of the purse, thrown again and again.



Corn

Tell me about Linzer's responsum, because he's answering Miriam's exact question — must a person honour and mourn an abusive parent?



Herman

He opens with, "the short answer is no." The principle is hayekha kodmin — your life comes first. Your own physical, emotional and psychological health takes priority even if the obligation of kibbud av v'em has to be set aside. And he doesn't leave it at permission: "One is not just permitted to act this way; one is obligated to do so." If she needs to move away, cut off, or limit interactions for her mental health, that is what she should do.



Corn

That's stronger language than I expected from a halakhic responsum. "Not just permitted — obligated."



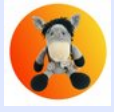
Herman

And the spine of his argument matters, because it's three moves. First, the obligation governs behaviour, not feeling — you must show respect, you are not required to feel it. He says the Torah does not make unreasonable demands on us, which I find a lovely way of putting it, because most people assume the opposite about halakhah. Second, the heroic Talmudic stories — the ones where the sages absorb staggering humiliation — are aggadah, narrative, not law. He leans on Gerald Blidstein's phrase, "the codifying of the heroic": the Rambam wrote down the ideal, and the ideal is real, but, in Linzer's words, "most of us are not heroes." Third, the Rishonim gutted the wallet case, which we've done.



Corn

It lets the tradition keep the story without pretending the story is the standard.



Herman

You can admire the sage who forgave a hundred insults and still be entitled to leave the room. There's also the Maharik — Rabbi Yosef Kolon, fifteenth century, Italy — responsum one sixty-six, who ruled on the question of a father interfering in his son's choice of whom to marry. The son need not obey. And the reason he gives is the one that matters here: the mitzvah of honouring a parent does not extend to cases where it would cause the person emotional pain. Linzer calls that directly relevant, and it is. It's the closest classical



Herman (continued)

precedent to Miriam's situation, because the Maharik's parent isn't violent — it's a parent inflicting purely verbal, psychological damage.



Corn

A non-violent parent who keeps inflicting pain through words is the exact case the Maharik carved out six centuries ago. It's just that his version was a wedding and hers is a postal service.



Herman

Then there's the impaired-parent case. The Rambam, later in the same chapter, addresses parents who lose control of their mental faculties — and the ruling, as the Aish essay summarises it, is that if living with them becomes impossible, the child may step away and arrange for others to provide proper care. I flag the attribution honestly: I know that through Aish's paraphrase, not the verbatim Aramaic. But the mechanism is what's useful. The Rambam's own precedent for an impaired parent is substituted care plus physical distance. Not continued cohabitation, not endurance. Distance, with the duty discharged through an intermediary.



Corn

He invented the care home before the care home existed.



Herman

There's also the wicked-parent question, and here it's a genuine dispute — the Rambam and the Tur disagree about whether any obligation survives when the parents are resha'im, wicked. And whether a given parent counts as wicked depends on the severity and nature of the abuse, so it's not a label you apply from across the room. But the DinOnline responsum from twenty eleven has the sentence that answers Miriam in one line: abusive parents should be distanced from their children. "Distancing the parents would also solve the problem of honoring them."



Corn

Read that again slowly, because it inverts everything the communal voice assumes. Distance isn't the failure of the honour obligation. Distance is the solution to it.



Herman

The same responsum cites the Aruch HaShulchan on the drunk-parent case — the advice is to move out of the neighbourhood and avoid confrontation. Physically leave. And behind all of it sit the classic limits: the Talmud reads "and live by them" as "and not die by them" — nearly every commandment yields when life or health is at stake. And Leviticus puts "revere your mother and your father" in the same verse as "observe My Sabbaths," from which the Talmud derives that a parent who commands a child to desecrate Shabbat must not be obeyed, because parent and child are both equally obligated to God. The parent is not God. The parent is a fellow servant.



Corn

Which means the parent can never claim the relationship outranks the person in it.



Herman

The modern authorities line up the same way. The Aish essay reports rulings from Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Auerbach and Rabbi Asher Weiss that psychological wellbeing takes precedence even where it means limiting or avoiding contact with a harmful parent — done respectfully, not vindictively. I'd call those reported rather than quote them, since I've only seen them secondhand. But the direction of travel is consistent across seven centuries.



Corn

Let me press on one thing, though, because the sources are one thing and the voice in Miriam's head is another. Every responsum you've cited frames abuse as physical, sexual or broadly emotional. None of them, as far as I can tell, describes a father who writes letters — decades of scolding letters and grievance lists, no raised hand anywhere. The Maharik's emotional-pain principle is the closest fit, and it's a fifteenth-century wedding ruling being stretched over a postal campaign.



Herman

That gap is real. The responsa were written for the cases that arrived at the rabbi's door, and the letter-writing father rarely did — partly because the son couldn't prove a letter the way you can prove a bruise, and partly because the son assumed it didn't count. Miriam's question is partly the discovery that it counts.



Corn

And that, I think, is what the voice is protecting. Not the halakhah. The voice says "you're his child, you owe him" — and what's striking is that the codified law doesn't say that. The law says don't humiliate him in the moment, and even that sits alongside a prohibition on him being exacting. So if the voice isn't quoting the sources, whose voice is it?



Herman

It's quoting the community. It's the accumulated pressure of every Shabbat table where someone said, "but he's your father." And the interesting thing is that when you take that voice to the other traditions, they've run the same argument — and two of them land somewhere very close to Miriam's instinct. Take Christianity first, because it's split down the middle.



Corn

Split meaning what — some say endure?



Herman

Some say endure, some say run, and some say running is the commandment. On the permissive side you've got the standard pastoral material — the Bible commands honour, but not remaining a prisoner in a dysfunctional family. A pastor named Mark Reynolds makes the same point more sharply: the Bible never commands people to remain trapped in destructive relationships, and suggesting otherwise misuses Scripture to keep people stuck in harm. He even cites John 2:24 — Jesus did not entrust himself to them — as precedent for measured non-disclosure. Not telling your family everything is biblically precedented.



Corn

Jesus had boundaries.



Herman

But the sharpest version is a survivor's essay on The Gospel Coalition, "Honoring Your Father When He's Evil," and it goes further than anything in the Jewish material I've read. Her line: "keeping the fifth commandment means refusing to submit to evil parents. We cannot obey both God and evildoers." And then she does something structurally identical to what DinOnline did — she lists the forms honour takes at a distance. "I honored my



Herman (continued)

father by reporting his abuses. I honored my father by breaking the cycle and being a godly parent to my children. I honor my father daily by not letting him near my daughters."



Corn

Honour as a list of things you refuse to do alongside him.



Herman

What she's doing with that list is separating the commandment from the parent's interpretation of it. Because the most useful thing she identifies — and I want to give this to Miriam directly — is the mechanism. She writes that homes warped by abuse have their own language. "Forgive" meant pretend you're happy even when you're covered in bruises. "Honor your father" meant obey him even when you're terrified. "Don't gossip" meant telling anyone the truth. She calls that spiritual abuse: the vocabulary of the tradition repurposed as a cage.



Corn

That's the voice. "You're his child, you owe him" is the family dialect for "obey him even when." The words are religious; the grammar is his.



Herman

To be fair to the other side, there's a companion piece, "Before You Cut Off Your Parents," that pushes toward forgiveness and continued connection where possible — while conceding that abuse is a compelling reason to sever. And Thomas Keene's distinction is worth having: as children we honour through obedience, as adults we "honor by being a blessing." The Christian tradition isn't unanimous. It's having the same argument Miriam is having with the voice, out loud, in public.



Corn

Which is oddly reassuring — the argument is load-bearing everywhere.



Herman

Then take the tradition everyone assumes is the strictest: Confucian filial piety. It inverts the Western stereotype entirely. The Analects, 4.18 — in serving your parents, remonstrate gently. If your will is not followed, be all the more respectful, do not oppose, take the burden on yourself and do not resent. So far, endurance. But the Classic of Filial Piety, chapter fifteen, has Zeng asking Confucius whether simple obedience counts as filial piety, and Confucius replies, "What words are these! What words are these!" — meaning: what an absurd question. A son must remonstrate against unrighteous conduct, because blind obedience would bring the whole family to ruin.



Corn

The founder of the tradition reacting to "just obey your father" with a double sputter.



Herman

And then the payoff, which is the Zeng Shen story from the Han Shi Wai Zhuan. Zengzi's father beat him with a staff so hard he collapsed, unconscious. Zengzi came to, got up, and asked whether his father had hurt himself — worried about the man's hand, after the beating. The locals praised him as the perfect filial son. Confucius was furious and refused to see him. He cited Shun, the sage-king: when Shun's parents sought him to serve, he was never absent from their side. When they sought him to kill, he was never to be found. He waited for the beating when it was a small stick, and fled when it was a large staff. Confucius calls the son who stood there and took the blow unfilial.



Corn

The paragon of filial piety is famous for being unfindable at the right moment.



Herman

Shun is xiao — filial piety — personified, and part of his filiality was strategic absence. Distance isn't a failure of filial piety in that tradition. It's a canonical requirement of it. Confucius's objection isn't even mainly about Zengzi's safety — it's that by letting himself be beaten unconscious, the son handed his father a transgression. Letting your parent harm you is itself a harm to the parent.



Corn

That's a sharper idea than any of the Western material. You protect the parent's soul by being out of arm's reach.



Herman

Honest caveat, though, because the Confucian tradition contains its own counterweight. A twenty twenty-three article in the Journal of Confucian Philosophy and Culture, "How Remonstration Fails," argues the remonstration endorsements are actually weak — the Liji's "Nei ze" chapter permits only gentle admonition and requires redoubled filiality even if you're beaten until blood flows. So the tradition holds both the Shun licence to flee and an endurance ethic in the same canon, and the tension is live, not settled.



Corn

Two thousand years and they haven't finished the argument either.



Herman

The secular philosophers have. Jane English, in "What Do Grown Children Owe Their Parents?" — her answer is: nothing, not in the sense of a debt. The parents' sacrifices were unrequested by the child; you can't incur a debt from a gift you never asked for. What the sacrifices create is love or friendship, and the duties grown children have are the duties of friends — they arise from whatever love actually exists. Where the love has been destroyed, an additional filial obligation, in her words, would only arise from whatever love may still remain.



Corn

I find that both liberating and cold. It frees Miriam completely — no friendship, no duty. But it makes every child's duty conditional, including the good ones'. The parents who did everything right get a duty that lasts exactly as long as the affection does.



Herman

James Wang pushes back on exactly that, from the Confucian side — filial duty is existential, communal and historical, not contractual. It doesn't depend on the parent having earned it, which is why it survives even a bad parent. And Mark Coppenger calls English's friendship criterion thin on decency — even disappointing parents generate some duties. But notice what's happening here: the religious traditions say the duty is



Herman (continued)

unconditional and then spend centuries carving out exceptions. The secular tradition says the duty is conditional and then feels guilty about how cold that sounds.



Corn

Everybody ends up in the same middle, arriving from opposite directions.



Herman

Which means we can now assemble the answer to Miriam's actual question. Is there a coherent way to say "I honour you by staying away"? I count four independent supports, and none of them leans on another. Halakhically, DinOnline's line — distancing the parents would also solve the problem of honoring them — plus the Rambam's own precedent of substituted care and physical distance. Narratively, Shun being unfindable when his parents meant him harm, with Confucius's blessing. Christianly, the survivor's "I honor my father daily by not letting him near my daughters." And conceptually, the distinction everything has been circling: honour is a posture you hold, not a channel you keep open. The codified act is silence in the moment of provocation. Absence is simply the condition under which the silence can be kept.



Corn

You don't have to keep not-humiliating someone in person if the letters are doing the visiting.



Herman

And there's a harder point under it that the letters force. Miriam's father isn't asking to be honoured. Read the grievance lists again — those aren't requests for respect. They're demands for a verdict. He wants her to agree that the history happened the way he's written it, with her as the villain. The alternative on offer isn't honour; it's countersigning a false account. Staying away may be the only form of honour still available, because every form that involves presence has been converted into assent.



Corn

Which reframes what the silence is for. The Rambam's silence — the purse of gold, the spit — is silence in the presence of a provocation, with witnesses watching and the son absorbing it. It's a public posture. The letter-writing father wants a private one: silence as



Corn (continued)

agreement. He wants the posture of the codified text without the provocation being visible to anyone.



Herman

And that's the one thing the sources don't give him. The silence in 6:7 is witnessed — the community sees the father's behaviour and the son's restraint. The letters ask for unwitnessed surrender.



Corn

Miriam said the only peace she's ever had was during no contact, and I notice she phrased it as peace, not happiness. That reads like a person who's already run the experiment both ways and is asking the sources to confirm what she's observed rather than to permit it.



Herman

And the sources do confirm it. That's the quiet punchline of the whole halakhic trail — the communal voice says "you owe him," and when you actually walk the texts, Rambam, Rema, Maharik, Aruch HaShulchan, Linzer, the line runs the other way.



Hilbert

The purse was already thrown.



Herman

It was. The Talmud's case is destruction completed —



Hilbert

I know what the case is, Herman. You got there, I'm saying why it matters. There's a difference between a thing thrown and a thing taken, and everyone skips it. A man throws your purse in the sea, that's an outburst. A man sits down over years and writes lists of what you did to him, that's accounting. The Rambam's father loses control. Miriam's father



Hilbert (continued)

never lost anything. He's kept it, dated.



Corn

You've read the responsum yourself, then.



Hilbert

I have a photocopy of the page with the line underlined twice. Blue, slightly broad, someone pressed. I cannot for the life of me remember whose it is, and I've decided not to ask around, because if I find out it was a cousin of mine from Netanya I'll have to be pleasant about it.



Herman

The underlining is twice, though. Whoever it was wanted the thing found.



Hilbert

Whoever it was wanted the thing found by somebody else. I'm just the shelf it landed on. Look — the one place I'd push on what you two said. You keep reaching for "wicked," whether the father counts as wicked, the Rambam and the Tur dispute it. Wrong drawer. That man isn't wicked, he's exacting. 6:8 forbids the exacting. It's a behaviour, you can point at it, put a date on it, put a stamp on the envelope. Wicked is a category. Categories you can argue about for six hundred years. A man who posts a grievance list is not a category.



Corn

The behaviour is easier to file than the man.



Hilbert

A relative of mine liquidated something once, family thing, sentimental value, and the family's been arguing for years about whether it was thrown or sold. I keep my own record of that kind of thing. Not grievances — I want that clear, Herman, it is not a grievance list



Hilbert (continued)

— a notebook. Every time someone in my family describes a past event differently than I remember it, I write it down with the date. I've never shown it to anyone. Been keeping it since twenty nineteen. And I'll tell you where it's left me: I no longer know whether the notebook makes me the reliable one or the one who needs the notebook.



Corn

The second one keeps the notebook.



Hilbert

Corn, it's four by six, dark cover, lives in the drawer with the batteries. The page I'm on now has eleven entries. Eleven... no, twelve. There's one from October I keep forgetting to enter.



Corn

Which means he's still on the fence about it. That's the part that stays with me — he's not defending the notebook, he's auditing himself.



Herman

And the audit is the honest half. The notebook question, whether keeping the record makes you the reliable witness or the one with the problem — that's the same question Miriam's voice is asking her, dressed differently. He just happens to have noticed it from the other side of the desk.



Corn

The distinction is real, though. There's a difference between keeping a record to win an argument and keeping one to stay oriented. The grievance list says: here is what you did to me, and you will confirm it. The notebook says: here is what I remember, against the day someone tells me otherwise.



Herman

And the Rambam's 6:8 test is the separating line. The father with the grievance list is being particular about his honour to the point of an obstacle. That's the transgression the code names. Hilbert's distinction is worth keeping — exacting is a behaviour with a date on it, and behaviours are addressable in a way categories aren't.



Corn

It also hands Miriam a cleaner sentence for the voice. The voice says "you owe him." The sources say the parent is forbidden to be exacting. She's not refusing to honour a father. She's declining to fund a transgression.



Herman

"Declining to fund a transgression" — I'd put that in front of any rabbi and watch them squirm, mostly because they'd have to agree.



Corn

Where that leaves us, then. The law said no. Confucius said run from the big stick and called the son who stood there unfilial. The survivor said she honours her father daily by not letting him near her daughters. And Jane English said the debt was never real to begin with. Four directions, one formulation, and Miriam asked for it directly: "I honour you by staying away." It's coherent. It's defensible from all four. And it will still feel like a loss, which may just be the honest thing to say about it — the sources give permission, and permission is not the same as peace.



Herman

The open question, the one I'd leave her with, is about the voice itself. It doesn't answer to citations. We've established that. So what does it answer to — habit, grief, the family dialect she was raised in? That's the work, and it isn't textual. And the unresolved edge is that no responsum we found describes a father who only writes. The Maharik's emotional-pain principle is holding up a lot of weight on very little precedent, and it's the closest thing there is.



Corn

Then Miriam's case is the precedent being written. Somebody has to be the first person to ask whether a postal campaign counts, and she asked it well. Miriam, thank you for sending this one in — it's the kind of prompt this show exists for, and we hope some of it



Corn (continued)

lands where you needed it. Thank you, as ever, to our producer Hilbert Flumingtop, who keeps the desk, the levels and apparently a small dark notebook. This has been My Weird Prompts. You can find us at my weird prompts dot com, or follow us on Spotify. We'll be back soon.

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