

Commanded Community or Virtuous Volunteers?

They asked Rabbi Eliezer, “How far must one take the mitzvah of honoring father and mother? He said to them, “Consider what a certain idol worshipper of Ashkelon, Dama ben Natina by name, did concerning his father. The sages sought to buy from him precious stones for the High Priest’s breastplate—precious stones that would yield him 60,000 in profit. Rabbi Kahana had a tradition that said the profit would have been 80,000! But the key to the vault was tucked away under his father’s pillow and he would not trouble him.

The following year the Holy One gave Dama his profit when a red heifer was born into his flock. The sages of Israel came to him to purchase that rare sacrificial animal the ashes which when mixed with water could purify the deepest of impurities. Dama said to them, “I know you. Regardless of how much I ask, you would be willing to pay it. But I am not going to ask of you anything beyond the profit that I had to forgo as a consequence of honoring my father.”

And Rabbi Hanina said, “Now, if such is the reward for one who is not commanded and yet does, how much more so for one who is commanded and does.” For Rabbi Hanina had taught: “One who is commanded and does is greater than one who is not commanded and does.”

Babylonian Talmud Kiddushin 31a

Talmud commentary of the Tosafot, 12th-14th century:

It seems that the reason one who is commanded and does is preferred in that he worries and troubles himself lest he violate a command as opposed to one who does something without being commanded, who has a basket full of bread and if he wants, he can set it down.