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Respect and Honor?

By Mordechai Plotsker | May 9, 2019

In corporate America we adulate those who succeed in the “elevator pitch” — i.e., a very concise presentation of an idea covering all of its critical aspects and delivered within a few seconds. Headed to work one morning, I boarded the B44 at Nostrand Avenue and Kings Highway in the direction of Flatbush Junction. Sitting adjacent to me was a familiar face, an “elderly” gentleman from Marine Park who recently celebrated his 70th birthday but felt that his notable milestone was “bittersweet” in the sense that he was now exempt from performing a mitzvah that he had practiced his entire life: standing up for the elderly, the infirm and pregnant women. Now 70, he understood that he was then suited to be honored and “offered a seat,” despite his youthful energy and appearance. He now joined a cadre of individuals he had spent his entire life honoring. “I never fully appreciated this mitzvah,” he said, his voice drifting into the morning bustle as the B44 approached Flatbush Junction. Before parting paths, I wished this sagacious member of our community blessings for continued health and success. It’s amazing how one impromptu meeting can impart an indelible lifetime lesson, one that served as the impetus for the following Dvar Torah.

מִפְּנֵי שִׂיבָה תִּקּוּם, וְהִדְרִית פְּנֵי זָקֵן; וְנִרְאֵתָ מְאֻלְקִיד, אֲנִי ה'.

Rashi explains that one might perceive that this commandment “You shall rise in the presence of an old person” applies even to a wicked and ignorant individual, one who is devoid of Torah knowledge. To teach us otherwise, the verse states זָקֵן — an elder, Ain zakain ela mi shekana chochma, an elder implies one who has acquired Torah wisdom. Rashi appears to learn the literal understanding of the pasuk from Unkelos who states, Min kadam d’sabar D’oraisa tikum, stand up for one who has acquired Torah knowledge (chochma). To strengthen Rashi’s position (that the pasuk is referring to one who has acquired Torah knowledge), the following Gemara is cited: “Da kani mah chaser, da lo kani, ma kani? He who has acquired (Torah), what is he lacking? If he has not acquired (Torah), what has he acquired?” To demonstrate honor, continues Rashi, one must not sit in an elder’s place, not correct his words, and not foolishly think that the presence of the old person can be ignored by closing one’s eyes. Au contraire, for the pasuk concludes, “You shall have fear of your G-d,” meaning, for He — Hashem — knows your true intention.

In principle, the Vilna Gaon (GRA) agrees with Rashi and states that the above verse refers to one who serves Hashem. The Kli Yakar explains one should give greater honor to a זָקֵן who has acquired Torah than to a שִׂיבָה, an elderly individual who reached an advanced age (i.e., 70 years). Further, moreh rabach, kmoreh shamayim: fear of one’s rabbinical leaders is akin to fear of Heaven. As Chazal explain, et Hashem elokecha tirah — lirabot talmidei chachamim, fearing Hashem includes demonstrating fear toward the rabbinical establishment. Therefore, since the זָקֵן, irrespective of his age, acquired Torah knowledge, he is compared to a 70-year-old, a שִׂיבָה, and deserving of kavod.

The Ramban and Rabbainu Bachya disagree with Rashi and opine that one must show honor and respect to any שִׂיבָה, irrespective of his degree of Torah knowledge. This opinion may support the Ibn Ezra who learns that one must demonstrate kavod to an elderly individual, not because of his Torah accomplishment but because an aged person is closer to death. Perhaps this reasoning has a deeper meaning that may involve the inherent blessing of reaching a ripe old age.

The Rambam states that one must not only stand up for an individual who is advanced in age, but demonstrate the proper kavod even if he is not a chacham, and even if he is a non-Jew. Further, since one must initiate kavod when the שִׂיבָה or זָקֵן are found within four amot, the שִׂיבָה and זָקֵן (chachamim) should make an effort not to trouble others by walking toward people in order that they should stand up for them. The Baal Haturim also differs with Rashi and observes that since the following verse states, “And if a convert dwells among you in your land, do not harass him,” were an elderly person to approach you, even one devoid of Torah knowledge, you should provide him with dignity and respect.

Questions the Ohr Hachaim Hakadosh: Why didn't the verse simply state that before a שִׁיבָה and before a זָקֵן you shall rise and show honor? Perhaps Hashem seeks for us to distinguish between one who has lived many years (שִׁיבָה) and one who has acquired Torah knowledge (זָקֵן); one must show greater respect to the latter than the former. Continues the Ohr Hachaim Hakadosh b'derech drash, since Avraham and Yitzchak looked exactly alike, Avraham desired upon his advanced age (שִׁיבָה) such that he should be recognized as the father of Yitzchak. Hashem acquiesced to Avraham's request, as the verse states V'Avraham zakain: that to distinguish himself from his son Yitzchak, Avraham was the first person to grow white hair. Thus, each time an individual rises and provides honor to a זָקֵן, he is indirectly giving honor to Avraham Avinu. Therefore, And you shall honor the presence of an elder can also be interpreted as a great merit to Klal Yisrael. As the Gemara states, "Praised be your children who do not embarrass their elderly."

Allegorically, b'derech remez, one who shows honor and respect to a שִׁיבָה and זָקֵן may earn the zechut of not having to experience physical disabilities that are common to occur with advanced age. Secondly, the Gemara states that when the tzaddik leaves this world, Avraham is praised with the following adage: "Praise be to you, Avraham, for this righteous individual was born from your loins (meaning, he followed your example and observed mitzvos)." Advancing this thought, our verse concludes, "and you shall have fear of your G-d (וַיִּרְאוּ), I am Hashem ('אֲנִי ה'), a reference to both the Divine attribute of justice (Midat Hadin), and the Divine attribute of rachum and chanum, mercy and grace (Midas Harachamim).

On a deeper level of understanding (Sod), it is brought down from the Zohar Hakadosh that showing honor to the שִׁיבָה and זָקֵן are equivalent to showing reverence to the written and oral Torah law, respectively. Rabbainu Bachya learns that since וְהִדַּרְתָּ פְּנֵי זָקֵן, a reference to Torah scholarship (chochma, wisdom), is preceded by מִפְּנֵי שִׁיבָה תִּקְוֶה, the latter is not only dependent on the former but a symbolic reference to the written and oral Torah law. Adds the Kedushas Levi, the terms זָקֵן and שִׁיבָה are symbolic of rachum and chanum, mercy and grace (Midas Harachamim), since Hashem appeared at Sinai as a זָקֵן, malai rachamim. As my chavrusa, Reb Avraham Backenroth, is known to say, Hashem chafetz lima'an tzidko, yagdil Torah v'yadir: Since Hashem desires that we should all become tzaddikim, He therefore gave us a vast amount of commandments by which we can sanctify our existence.

In closing, my father, Reb Menachem Mendel ben Reb Mordechai, a"h, zt"l, often repeated the following homiletic parable concerning two rabbis who frequented the local beis midrash.

Upon entering the yeshiva, one rabbi commented to his counterpart, "There are sheva mei'os (700 hundred) talmidim learning here." The other rabbi countered and said, "There are arbeh mei'os (400 hundred) talmidim learning here." Talmidim found it odd that two distinguished rabbis would debate such a matter, and that given the disparity, the proper resolve would be to simply count the students. Indeed, they were not fighting. Rather, they were marveling and enjoying the kol Torah, saying, "The room is filled — savah — with talmidim." The other rabbi countered and said, "There are harbeh mei'os — many — talmidim."

May you be zoche to savah, a life "filled" with harbeh, "many," mitzvot/maasim tovim. This is, after all, the cornerstone of ziknah: ein ziknah elah mi shekanah chochma, one who has acquired Torah wisdom — similar to that noble "elderly man" I met on the B44 a short time ago.

Good Shabbos!

By Mordechai Plotsker

Mordechai Plotsker runs a popular 10-minute nightly shiur on the parsha with a keen interest on the invigorating teachings of the Berditchever Rav, the Kedushas Levi. Plotsker resides in Elizabeth with his wife and children, and can be reached by email at marc.plotsker@gmail.com.