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DEREKH ERETZ!

In an era when aging has become a "problem" and the elderly are sometimes abused, it becomes urgent to recall the Torah's admonition, "You shall rise before the hoary head and honor the presence of the old man (zaken)" (Lev. 19:32).

Respect for aged and the wise (the term zaken comprehends both), derekh eretz for the elderly, is the sacred duty of every Jew -- despite (or because of) youth cultures, nursing home scandals, or a general atmosphere of irreverence and insensitivity. It is of the essence of Judaism.

The saintly author of Ar ha-Hayyim interprets our verse in a remarkable way. He says that the second half is the result of the first. Thus, "you shall rise before the hoary head." And if you do, then you will be honoring "the presence of the old man," the well-known zaken, namely, Father Abraham! Abraham was known as the Zaken: "And Abraham was old, zaken, well stricken in days."

Every time that we rise before an elderly person, we are in effect showing respect for Father Abraham. Why is that so? Because, our commentator explains, the Midrash teaches that until the days of Abraham, old age was unknown as a physical phenomenon. People would grow old, very old, but their age would not show on their faces and in their bodies. They simply would live to 120 or 180 and then simply die. It was Abraham who prayed to God for the "hoary head," the signs of age "so

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continued: DEREKH ERETZ:

1 that people might distinguish the father from the son." Since it
2 is Abraham who is responsible for the "hoary head," then whoever
3 honors the hoary head in effect honors Abraham, "the old man."

4 When we show courtesy to a zaken, even if he is empty and has
5 accomplished nothing and is ornery; if we force ourselves to act with
6 filial respect to father and mother even if we dislike them and are
7 filled with resentment; if we do these things, we are honoring the
8 presence of that "old man" Abraham, indicating that he is still alive
9 with us. Then we are honoring Judaism, the faith of Abraham, because
10 we are following his teaching in "rising before the hoary head," even
11 if that particular hoary head crowns a personality that possesses no
12 innate merit. We owe respect not only to those who are achievers and
13 wise and contributors and good people, but also to age for its own
14 sake. That is our tribute to the zaken of our people and his teaching.

15 This commandment must not be neglected. We make special new
16 efforts to enforce it properly. If anyone above the age of seventy
17 (the halakhic definition of sevah) passes within six feet, stand up
18 before him or her, whether Jew or Gentile! If a talmid hakham (a
19 scholar) passes by, no matter what his age -- rise in his presence! The
20 Talmud refers to those who rise before the Sefer Torah but fail to rise
21 before the scholar who embodies and incorporates the knowledge of the
22 Sefer Torah, as "fools,"

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continued: DEREKH ERETZ:

Indeed, there is a beautiful custom (which I believe is practiced by Sephardi Jews) that when a father received an Aliyah, and is called to the Torah, his children will remain standing during that entire period that he is at the Torah. I have adopted that custom in my family. When I receive an Aliyah, my children stand. When my father receives an Aliyah, I rise for that entire period. I would like this practice to be adopted by all the families that constitute our Jewish Center Family.

Let us show derekh eretz for the father of our people!

NORMAN LAMM