

"OUT OF RESPECT"

One of the most memorable commandments in this Sidra is that concerning respect for the aged: וְהִדַּרְתָּ לְפָנֶיךָ אִישׁ זָקֵן. "You shall rise before the hoary head and honor the presence of the old man, and you shall fear your God; I am the Lord" (Lev. 19:32).

Society has not done too well by this commandment. It is not easy to do so, especially in a time and country where the elderly population is increasing rapidly, creating problems in proportions unknown before. Moreover, part of the heritage left to us by the recently deceased Counter-Culture is an infectious stridency in which the young shout at the old as an act of political morality.

We Jews have done exceedingly well by this norm historically, but far less well, often to the point of disgrace, in our own days.

But my theme for the present is not the institutionalized aspects of וְהִדַּרְתָּ לְפָנֶיךָ אִישׁ זָקֵן (honor for the aged), but our personal relationships to the elderly and to the scholarly; for tradition has conventionally assigned to each half of this parallelism -- rising before the "hoary head" and honoring the presence of the "elderly" -- two different definitions, declaring "the hoary head" to refer to those who are chronologically old, and defining Zaken as one who is old in wisdom even though young in years. To both categories, the elderly and the wise, we must act out of respect.

That that respect is somewhat lacking nowadays is evident from the experience of all of us. Permit me to share with you a few scenes. A few weeks ago here at The Jewish Center, some youngsters -- they were not our own youngsters -- came down in an elevator filled with elderly folk. When the elevator came to the landing, the young people pushed past the elderly ones with such force, that they left the old people dazed and frightened.

Another scene, a bit less troubling but also not encouraging: several years ago, on a Saturday afternoon, I walked into the lobby of The Jewish Center together with an elderly gentleman. Around the table were seated one adult and several youngsters, amongst them a few young people who were my students. When we walked in, the adult rose, and greeted us respectfully. The youngsters merely nodded in our direction, muttered a semi-intelligible greeting which I assume was meant to be Gut Shabbos, and proceeded to act as if these two unwanted presences had

accommodatingly made themselves invisible... Instead of acting out of respect, they presumably simply ran out of respect...

There is another scene that is fairly ubiquitous, and which was apparently foreseen by the Sages. In their comments on two words in our verse, *ויראת מאלהיך*, "you shall be afraid of your God," they comment: *אדם יראתו כבודו לא יראהו*, that the fulfillment of respect for the elderly requires the fear of God as well, thus, if one does not fear God he will act as if he does not see the old man or old woman approaching, and close his eyes or turn his face. But if he is truly God-fearing, he will attempt no such subterfuge, but will rise.

Is it not possible that our Rabbis were gifted with prophecy, or with at least a most remarkable prescience? -- that in their great wisdom they were able, so many hundreds of years ago, to foresee the behavior of young New Yorkers in their subways and trains, who read their newspapers casually -- but suddenly, upon the approach of an old man or woman, will begin to study the newspaper with the care and intensity one usually reserves for a "difficult Rambam," as normal eyesight suddenly fails and, in their near-sightedness, they bury their very noses in the papers themselves...?

Do my comments mean that I am complaining about "the younger generation?" Yes and no. Yes, because they still have a long way to go before they act out of respect without running out of respect. And no, because even the most cursory glance at history, from Scripture to our own days, will reveal that this is a perennial complaint against the younger generation! Every generation was accused of acting disrespectfully towards its elders, and it in turn levelled the same accusation at the generation that followed. Moreover, if we speak about youngsters in our own community, I believe that today's young people are no worse than youngsters were in the days when I was in my teens.

Indeed, there is some merit to the reverse. For instance, this past week there passed away an old and distinguished man of saintly personality, Rabbi Jacob Lesin ז"ל. In his younger years, when I went to Yeshiva, he was the *משגיח רוחני*, the spiritual supervisor. For the last many years, until his death at the age of 95 or 97, Rabbi Lesin was inactive and therefore unknown to the overwhelming majority of Yeshiva University students. Yet they all came to his funeral, and crowded into Lampport Auditorium. The funeral orations lasted well in excess of an hour and a half, and all were in Yiddish -- a language almost totally unknown to 99% of the students. Yet, they stayed out of respect and did not leave. Surely this is a tribute to them!

Moreover, our Sages make a point of teaching that this relationship between young and old is not a one-way street. It is not a carte blanche for older people to legitimate their orneriness and impose themselves upon younger people. R. Simeon ben Elazar teaches that the commandment to honor the aged is followed by the words, "And you shall fear your God," meaning that *וְיִירָאוּ אֱלֹהִים*, that the old man too must fear God! He must not cause unnecessary distress to the young, abusing his or her status by destroying the peace of mind of those who would like to observe the proprieties, and inconveniencing others by unreasonably demanding respect and honor.

Yet, after all is said and done, the fact remains that respect for the old is a foundationstone of Torah and a corner-stone of our sacred Masorah. Our tradition teaches that the Lord Himself honors the aged. And in the Kaballah, one of the Names of God is *עתיק יומין*, "The Ancient of Days."

What is the rationale for this mitzvah? It is difficult to discern. It may be an expression of concern for those weaker than we, and the aged, who feel their strength ebbing, are certainly in that category. Thus, our verse is followed by the commandment *וְלֹא תִכְרֹס*, you shall not oppress the stranger. The stranger shares with the elderly the feeling of powerlessness. However, this could not be the sole explanation for this law, for the Halakhah includes also the healthy and the powerful elderly in the commandment to give them respect.

The explanation may be because time and experience themselves confer wisdom upon a man, the wisdom of life itself. Yet this is problematical. Even as there are young fools, are there not old people who are wanting in intelligence and wisdom? And the Torah commands us to honor the *יְנִיק וְחָכָם*, the young who are wise, as well as the elderly; and the Halakhah decides that we must accord honor as well to *זָקֵן אֲשֶׁמָּא*, the old man or woman who is a boor, who is ignorant and unintelligent.

Perhaps the law is simply a tribute to longevity itself, to survival, to the accumulation of years of pain and joy and love and frustration, to the scars and wounds inflicted by time and successfully resisted.

Perhaps all of this is a remarkable expression of Judaism's love of life, its celebration of life itself, which is so deep that it awards Kavod (honor) to those who have warded off the Angel of Death from premature triumphs.

Whatever, *שְׁבוּת תְּהִיָּה* is independent of the particular old person, whether he is strong or weak, wise or ignorant. In all cases, we must act towards him or her out of respect.

In this connection permit me to commend to your attention a remarkable interpretation, by the saintly author of "אור החיים", on our key verse. This great commentator breaks up the verse in two and says that the second is the result of the first. Thus, וַתִּשָּׂא תְהוֹם, "you shall rise before the hoary head." And if you do, then וְהִזְדַּרְתָּ פָנָי זָקֵן, you will be honoring the presence of the old man, the well-known zaken, and that is -- Father Abraham! Abraham was known as the Zaken, as it is written, וַאֲבִרָהָם זָקֵן, "and Abraham was old, well stricken in days."

Every time that we rise before an elderly person, we are in effect granting honor and 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, one fine day, simply die. One could not tell from looking upon a man or a woman whether that person was old or young. It was Abraham who prayed to God for sevah (the hoary head), the signs of age, כִּדִּי שִׁיבָה נִיכָר הָאֵב מֵעַבְדִּי, so that people might distinguish the father from the son. Since it is Abraham who is responsible for the "hoary head," then whoever honors the hoary head in effect honors Abraham.

However, we are permitted to wonder: Why was Abraham so concerned with the external signs of age? Indeed, how many parents today pray for the exact reverse, striving with all their might and main to look as young as their own children? Are there not whole industries dedicated to the fulfillment of such pious prayers?!

I suggest that this prayer by Abraham is a reflection of his profound humility and his admiration for his own son.

The great event in the life of both Abraham and his son Isaac, the one that was to bind them together for all of time, is the Akedah, the offering up of Isaac by Abraham at the command of the Lord. Throughout our liturgy, we always refer to the Akedah as an expression of the heroism of Abraham, of his utter devotion, of his unquestioning faith. Yet Abraham thought that the Akedah is a tribute not so much to him as to his son, to the unflinching courage, the consummate devotion, the magnificent submissiveness of Isaac to the word of God.

Thus, Abraham thought: If respect is to be accorded on the basis of merit, then it is I who must respect him, not he who is to honor me! If Kavod is conditional, and is to be given only on the basis of worth and achievement, then it is



possible for a person to grow old and even ancient and never attain the least bit of dignity that comes with acknowledgement and respect by society. If only merit is to be acknowledged, what happens to the non-achiever, to the failure, to the unlucky one? Is he never in his life to achieve any recognition at all? For that matter, do parents too have to prove their worth before their children fulfill the commandment, "Honor thy father and thy mother?"

Hence, Abraham prayed for sevah, so that he and other "unworthy" elderly, would have at least some sign -- if nothing more than a white head, a furrowed brow, a wrinkled face, a stooped posture -- to earn for them some token of respect and acknowledgement by the world about them, though it be formal and unrelated to merit or attainment.

So that when we show courtesy to a Zaken, even if he is empty and has accomplished nothing and is ornery; if we force ourselves to act with filial respect to father and mother even if we dislike them and are filled with resentment; if we do these things, we are fulfilling וְהָיָה כְּהוֹדוֹתָם, we are honoring the presence of that "old man" Abraham, indicating that he is still alive with us. Then we are honoring Judaism, the faith of Abraham, because we are following his teaching in "rising before the hoary head," even if we think that that hoary head crowns a body and a personality that possess no innate merit and no inherent claim to honor. We owe respect not only to those who are achievers and wise and contributors and good people, but also to sevah for its own sake. That is our tribute to the zaken of our people and his teaching.

I therefore urge that this commandment not be neglected, but that we make special new efforts to enforce it properly. If anyone above the age of 70 (the halakhic definition of sevah) passes within six feet, stand up before him or her, whether Jew or Gentile! If a talmid hakham (a scholar) passes by, no matter what his age -- rise in his presence! The Talmud refers to those who rise before the Sefer Torah but fail to rise before the scholar who embodies and incorporates the knowledge of the Sefer Torah, as אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה, as fools.

Indeed, I heard of a beautiful custom (which I believe is practiced by Sephardi Jews) that when a father receives 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.

Perhaps it is best to conclude with an interpretation by Ibn Ezra who offers a reason or motivation for our law that is less worthy than the others that I mentioned, but is more compelling because it appeals to self-interest. He too refers to the end of that verse: *וְיִרְאֶה אֱלֹהִים*, "You shall fear your God, I am the Lord." "I am the Lord" who will still be here when you are an old man and have attained your "hoary head." When you are weak and lonely and aged, when you feel your strength ebbing and the future shrinking, you too will pine for some bit of recognition, some token of respect. But if now, when you are young and strong, you neglect the elderly, you do not "fear your God," then you must expect the same treatment in your own old age. Then you will indeed have something to fear! Here, then, is a religiously inspired social contract: Honor the old man now, so that you will be honored when you reach his age.

As individuals and as a community, our task is to create both the institutional forms and the patterns of personal relationships, so that the entry into zikhnah (old age) will not occasion yirah (fear) -- the fear of neglect and solitude and powerlessness -- but that old age will be a period of dignity and joy; that the Autumn of life will not be one of dread of the Winter to follow, its coldness and barrenness, its futility and frost and forlornness, but rather -- an Indian Summer of harvest and honor, in affectionate companionship with those in the Spring and the Summer of their lives, all under the blessed providence of the One who overarches all seasons and all ages: *וְיִרְאֶה*.