

**Address at Retirement of Rabbi Sol Roth**  
**Fifth Avenue Synagogue — November 18, 2003**

I suppose I was invited to address you because I was a classmate of Rabbi Roth from elementary through סמיכה. And indeed, that is sufficient reason, because Rabbi Roth was always a superior student – in all areas: math, philosophy and, especially, in Talmud. He was one of the most perceptive disciples of the “Rav,” of blessed memory. He absorbed the Rav’s שעורים both comprehensively and critically. In the course of his fruitful career, he taught philosophy as professor at Yeshiva University, received an Honorary Doctorate (and I am proud that this was one of the first honorary degrees I gave, in 1977), was always a loyal alumnus, served as President of the Rabbinical Council of America and, lest I forgot, served as Rabbi of the Fifth Avenue Synagogue. Indeed. It was I who prevailed upon him, despite his initial reluctance, to accept the call to this pulpit. (I hope he does not hold that against me...) The fact that he served as your rabbi for twice as long as any of his predecessors—19 years, quite a record for Fifth Avenue Synagogue—is sufficient testimony to his popularity, to his diplomatic talent, and to his endurance.

I regard myself as probably the only one who, as a recent semi-retiree, can identify, albeit incompletely, with him in his deliberations as to his future. Some people look forward to retirement. As an example, Thomas Jefferson in 1792 wrote a letter to George Washington, saying: “I look to that period (of retirement) with ‘the longing of a wave-borne mariner who has at length the land in view and shall count the days and hours that still lie between me and it.’” I was curious as to why he was so eager about retiring, and found what I believe is the answer in a letter he wrote ten years earlier to James Monroe. In 1772, he wrote, “Public service and private misery are inseparably linked together.” And he wasn’t even in the rabbinate...

But I have the impression that most people, even Presidents and CEOs, dread retirement. I sympathize with stock traders, undertakers, physicians, and heads of corporations, even Presidents of the USA, who regard retirement as a threat, with the prospect of loss of power, influence, and things to do. But for a *Rav*, especially if he has a PhD and thus even larger horizons, retirement signifies the opportunity to read and think and write and grow and be creative. So I say to Rabbi Roth, “Yes, Sol, there *is* life after retirement.”

Permit me to expand on this in light of an important Talmudic discussion. The Torah commands us, תִּפְנִי שִׁיבָה תִּקְוֶם וְהִדַּרְתָּ פָנֶי זָקֵן, “you shall rise before the aged, and show deference to the elderly” (Lev. 19:32). The key words here are שִׁיבָה and זָקֵן, which I translated as, respectively, “the aged” and “the elderly.” But that is not necessarily the only correct translation. The Talmud records three different views of the Tannaim (*Kid.* 32b-33a). The first and anonymous opinion is that זָקֵן is a term reserved for the wise: “אִין זָקֵן אֵלָא חָכָם”, and therefore the Torah, mentioning both terms, implies respect for one who possesses both the qualities of advanced age (שִׁיבָה)

and wisdom (זקן); a זקן אשמואי or elderly ignoramus need not be honored. The next or middle opinion is more radical: the only criterion is wisdom, so that even a very young person who is learned deserves our deference: “אפילו יניק וחכם”. The third view, one that is accepted as the halakha, is that all elderly people, whether brilliant or ignorant, i.e., the זקן אשמואי, must be shown the proper respect.

I have a number of problems with this Talmudic text. For one, generally, what is driving the Talmud to make such distinctions? Second, I can understand why the learned person, albeit a youngster, has earned our deference. He (or she) has, after all, put in so many hours and days of hard intellectual labor, and the results are potentially of great significance for the community. But why shower honor on a person whose only claim to our respect is that his parents transmitted to him the right genes? I’d rather honor pluck than luck...

I suggest that we have here two separate motifs: *respect* for the achievements of scholarship, and the requirement to *encourage* the elderly.

Older people, as they age, are sensitive to the encroaching mortality that younger people usually ignore. They are more prone to diseases and broken bones. They are troubled by the aches and pains that are the inevitable lot of longevity. They often feel like strangers, exiles from the hubbub of activity, unneeded and unwanted. And “senior moments” leave them unnerved for hours and days and perhaps longer.

Hence, the commandment to respect the learned is an aspect and product of כבוד התורה, while the mitzvah to encourage the elderly by, for instance, standing up when they enter the room, is an expression of כבוד הבריות, the respect due to all God’s creatures, or perhaps כבוד החיים, the respect for life itself.

Rabbi Roth qualifies for all categories. He is a man of grace and dignity, a true gentleman. Above all, he is זקן חכם, a man of great learning and wisdom and so fully deserving of respect and honor.

But he also deserves our encouragement—that even after his formal retirement we need him and those like him very much, that we want him to continue to serve albeit in other ways. Both זקנה ושיבה are resolved in him—and he will always be a source of pride – to his family, to Yeshiva University, to the Fifth Avenue Synagogue, and to the entire Jewish community.

Indeed, Rabbi Roth can and must continue specifically in one way. Let me explain by means of an apparently irrelevant event about which I recently read. The great jurist and Supreme Court eminence, Oliver Wendell Holmes, got onto a train in Boston. Soon the conductor approached him and asked him for his ticket. Holmes was upset. He was visibly upset searching through his pockets, when the conductor, who obviously recognized him, said, “Judge, don’t worry, we know who you are and will trust you.” Holmes replied, “it’s not the ticket I’m worried about. I’m concerned that I don’t know where I am supposed to be going.”



So for *shuls* or schools or all the community: the laity must make sure we have the tickets – the wherewithal, the budget, the facilities—to prosper. But it is the spiritual leader, particularly if he combines the qualities of long and laudable experience together with wisdom and learning, who must provide the purpose and vision and ultimate goals of all this effort.

Rabbi Roth has served this congregation with dignity, and endowed it with purpose and vision. Whether individuals have benefited from this or not depends upon the attitudes the individuals bring to it. There is a poignant comment in a Kabbalistic midrash, the *Midrash Hane'elam* (cited by the author of צרור המור) on the verse in וירא that Father Abraham welcomed his three guests by saying, "השענו תחת העץ", rest under the tree. Why "the" tree? Was it a special tree? Yes, it was. This tree had a mystical sense of who it was who came to it seeking shelter. If they were worthy, it would spread its branches over them and protect them from the blazing sun. But if they were not worthy, היתה מתמר ועולה, it would fold its branches upward so that hardly any protection was offered to those who sought it.

So it is with Rabbis. If their people are worthy, if they come to their *Rav* earnestly and respectfully seeking from him the wisdom of Torah and Jewish living, they will find solace and comfort under the branches he spreads over them. But if all they have to offer is captious criticism and cynicism, and an employer-employee relationship – the Rabbi will not be able to share with them the benefits of his wisdom and commitment; his branches will fold up and offer very little of what he is capable.

It is worth bearing this in mind as this congregation welcomes its new Rabbi, Rabbi Kermaier, and has the pleasure of counting Rabbi Roth as a distinguished member of his congregation.

I conclude with a verse, used by the Torah to describe the first Saul, the first king of Israel and appropriate for Rabbi Roth whose name in Hebrew is likewise שאול. We can say of him: בָּחֹר נָטוּב וְאִין אִישׁ מִבְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל טוֹב מִמֶּנּוּ. שאול. We can say of him: מִשְׁקָמוּ וְמַעֲלָה גָבֹהַּ מִכָּל הָעָם. He is amongst the chosen, a good man, such that there is none in Israel better than he; he is head and shoulders above all the people.

In offering these thoughts, I offer as well my very best wishes to Debby, the charming helpmeet of Rabbi Roth, and their children, and congratulations to Rabbi and Mrs. Kermaier for a long and creative tenure.