



מפני שיבה תקום Honoring the Elderly and Wise

■ The Scale of Values

Judaism is a religion of values, drawing its strength and inspiration from the world of Torah. It is precisely the opposite of the pagan world, that which developed over time into the Greek and Roman civilizations - cultures that admired physical strength and body development, as attested by their sports competitions and beauty contests. Youth is idealized in these foreign cultures, while the period of old age is unnecessary and disposable.

Judaism, however, and its scale of pure values, teaches not only acceptance of the elderly, but respect and admiration for them. The young are bidden to stand and honor the elderly who pass before them:

מִפְּנֵי שִׁיבָה תִּקְוִים וְהִדַּרְתָּ פָּנָיו וְיִרְאַתָּ מֵאֱ-לֹהֶיךָ אֲנִי ה'.

Rise before the aged, and give honor to the elderly.

You shall fear your G-d; I am G-d. (Vayikra 19,32)

This Torah mitzvah is not merely to show compassion and pity for the weak and elderly, and is much more than just finding a place on the bus for a poor old man to sit down. Quite the contrary; even if there are plenty of other seats for the elderly man, we must still stand for him. We thus express our respect and admiration for someone who has chalked up many decades of life experience.

Exactly how many decades are we talking about? At what point does Jewish Law consider a man old enough to have younger people stand for him? Pirkei Avot, the book of Mishna known as Chapters or Ethics of the Fathers, provides the answer:

Age 60 marks old age, age 70 marks fullness of years. (Avot 5,21)

Sixty years of life is good cause for honor and respect, though the Shulchan Arukh rules that we must stand only for one who has reached the age of 70. The Mishna does not clarify, however, what it is about the elderly that we are honoring. On what aspect of an older person are we focusing our respect?

The answer is found in the Gemara (Kiddushin 33a), where we learn that R. Yochanan would stand up for any elderly person, even a non-Jew. He explained, “Who can ever know how many experiences they underwent all these years!” Thus, we respect our elders’ rich life experience, as well as the wisdom that enabled them to make it through all their difficulties.

■ Fear of Heaven

In the same verse that commands us to honor our elders, appears an extra warning clause which seems not to be connected: “*You shall fear Your G-d*.” What is it doing here?

This warning to “*fear your G-d*” appears several other times in the Torah, but it usually appears where there is a concern that an injustice might be caused to one who is defenseless, unprotected or has no recourse. Let us look at some examples, beginning with this verse from the Torah portion of Kedoshim:

לא תקלל חרש ולפני עור לא תתן מכשל, ויראת מא-להיך אני ה'.
*Do not curse a deaf person,
 and do not place a stumbling block before one who is blind;
 you shall fear your G-d; I am G-d.* (Vayikra 19,14)

The warning here is very clear. Though the deaf do not hear and the blind do not see, the Torah reminds us that there is One above Who hears and sees for them. Hashem your G-d is present everywhere, and you must fear Him.

Another example:

ולא תזנו איש את עמיתו ויראת מא-להיך כי אני ה' א-להיכם.
*Do not defraud one another; you shall fear your G-d,
 for I am Hashem your G-d.* (25,17)

That is, don’t think you can fool your business partners because they cannot read your thoughts – because there *is* Someone Who can read your thoughts, and it is Him you must fear.

A final example:

וְכִי יִמּוֹךְ אֶחִיךָ עִמָּךְ וְנִמְכַר לָךְ ... לֹא תִרְדֶּה בוּ בְפָרֶךְ וְיִרְאֶת מֵאֶלֶיךָ.

If your brother becomes impoverished and is sold to you...

do not dominate him cruelly; you shall fear your G-d. (25,39-43)

Do not take advantage of the economic collapse of your fellow Jew in order to subjugate him with hard labor. Do not relate to him as if he is your private property with no one to protect him - for G-d is his protector.

The common denominator of these examples is G-d's protection of the weak and helpless.

In light of this, it is hard to understand why this same warning "*Fear your G-d*" follows the simple command to "*stand before your elders.*" Is there some kind of injustice here, or a fear that someone would be taken advantage of, that makes the Torah warn us to "fear G-d" when we encounter an old or wise man?

■ The Divine Wisdom

To answer this question, let us recall the famous ruling by King Solomon, at the beginning of his reign, when two women claimed the same baby as their own flesh and blood. With no proof for either side, the wise king proposed dividing the baby in half. One woman agreed, while the other immediately jumped up to protest, crying out, "Let the other woman have him!" Based on their reactions, King Solomon realized who was the true mother, and gave him to her who refused to accept his death.

The nation immediately responded with great admiration and awe: "*All of Israel heard [the king's] judgement and they stood in awe and fear of him, for they saw the wisdom of G-d in him...*" (Kings I 3,28)

The people stood in honor and esteem for King Solomon's imbued Divine ingenuity and Divine justice that enabled him to untangle this seemingly insoluble problem. We now see why "*fear of G-d*" accompanies the command to respect the elderly and wise; it appears not only when there might be injustice, but also where there is great justice – Divine Justice. The people rose and stood in honor of G-d.

This is also the case where the Torah commands us to stand before the elderly and show them respect, in an act showing Awe of G-d, as the verse implies. How so?

Our Sages taught that the Torah's word for "old man" - *zaken* – represents not only an advanced age, but also the wisdom that this person has acquired. The hint is found in the word itself, which sounds like *zeh kanah* - "he has acquired." What has he acquired? The Sages explained that the acquisition is "wisdom."

This is unclear, for *zaken* sounds only like *zeh kanah*, but does not indicate **what** he has acquired! Not for naught, then, did the Torah place the word שיבה, *sevah*, next to the word זקן, *zaken*, in this very verse that we are studying:

מִפְּנֵי שִׁיבָה תִּקְוֹם וְהִדְרַת פְּנֵי זָקֵן...
*Rise before **sevah** [one with gray hair],*
*and give honor to the **zaken**...* (Vayikra 19,32)

A person who has reached the age of *sevah* is one who is aged and elderly, and the *zaken* represents "acquisition." That is, he has accumulated, with hard work and great effort, that which the "regular" man of *sevah* acquired merely by virtue of having lived many years.

To explain: There are those who acquire wisdom merely by going through the many stages and experiences of life. They make mistakes, and learn from them, and thus become wiser as they age. This can be called "wisdom acquired after the fact." This is *sevah* – like that of some career army officers who receive a promotion every few years, not because of their military brilliance or courage, but simply because of the experience they have amassed.

But there is another type of wise man. He is one who invests time and effort to study not only Torah, but all types of wisdom, in order that he not make mistakes. This wisdom is not incidental; it is planned and purposeful. He is a *zaken*, one who has actively acquired what he has. *Zeh kanah chokhmah* - he has acquired wisdom.

It is regarding this wisdom that the Torah commands us to "*fear your G-d*." For this is the wisdom of the Torah, it is G-d's way. Our respect of such wisdom is akin to our fear of G-d. Thus, when we stand and respect the wise man, we are showing honor to the Divine wisdom within him.

This is precisely what King Pharaoh of Egypt said when he discovered Yosef's great abilities. Yosef had proposed to the king that in order to prepare for the great famine that was soon to overtake Egypt, a wise man must be given

charge of the country's food supplies. Pharaoh asked (B'reshit 41,38), "*Is there to be found such a man with the spirit of G-d in him?*" Pharaoh understood that what was necessary for such a great task was actually a form of Divine Wisdom.

To complete this point, let us delve further into the word שיבה, *sevah*. It is first mentioned in the Torah in G-d's promise to Avraham at the *Brit Bein HaBetarim*, the Covenant Between the Pieces:

וְאַתָּה תָּבוֹא אֶל אֲבוֹתֶיךָ בְּשָׁלוֹם תִּקְבְּר בְּשִׂיבָה טוֹבָה.
*But you [Avraham] will come to your forefathers in peace;
 you will be buried in a good old age* (B'reshit 15,15)

Hashem fulfilled His promise, and Avraham in fact passed away at age 175, as the Torah describes using the same word שיבה, *sevah*:

וַיָּגוּעַ וַיָּמָת אַבְרָהָם בְּשִׂיבָה טוֹבָה זָקֵן וְשָׂבֵעַ...
*And Avraham expired and died in a good old age,
 elderly and satiated...* (25,8)

Two words in this verse – *sevah* and *save'a* (satiated) – are similar; even the Aramaic translation of “old” is the similar-sounding סבא, *sava*. This teaches that at a very advanced age, a person no longer gets so excited at every new invention. He is already “satiated” from what the world has to offer and can no longer be easily infused with youthful spirit of life.

■ Adjacent Passages

We know that one of the Torah's methods of teaching us its messages is that of “adjacency.” That is, when two seemingly unrelated passages appear one after the other, their juxtaposition is meant to teach us a particular lesson.

In the case at hand, the “adjacency” method supports our thesis that respect for the elderly man of *sevah* and for one who has acquired wisdom is actually a form of awe of Hashem. Let us look at the verse that precedes the command to show honor to our elders: “*Do not turn to mediums or to wizards nor seek to be defiled by them; I am the Lord your G-d.*” (Vayikra 19,31)

The verse warns us against foretelling the future via spirits, magic, or the dead. In fact, the opposite is true, for directly after this verse comes the command to connect with the *living* – for that is where we can find the glory of G-d! That is why the next verse says: “*Stand up for the aged... I am G-d,*” meaning, “Don't look for G-d where there is death, as some cultures

do. Don't look for G-d in magic. Rather, look for G-d where there is life, where people have lived and gained wisdom. Connect to life, for Hashem is revealed via life!"

In other words, Hashem reveals Himself in this world via eternity and long life, and also via His exalted wisdom. The first is shown by the verse ה' לְאָרְךָ יָמִים, "*Hashem [exists] forever*" (Psalms 93,5), and the second can be seen in מָה רַבּוּ מַעֲשֵׂיךָ ה' כּוֹלֵם בְּחָכְמָה עֲשִׂיתָ, "*How wondrous are Your works, O G-d; You have made all of them with wisdom.*" (104,24)

The first is manifest in the elderly man of *sevah*, before whom we are bidden merely to stand: "*Rise before the aged.*" The second is represented by the man who has acquired wisdom, the *zaken*, whom we must admire and glorify: "*and give honor to the elderly.*"

Life and wisdom have a give-and-take interaction. Life brings a certain type of wisdom – that of *sevah*, as written:

בִּישֵׁשִׁים חֲכָמָה וְאָרְךְ יָמִים תְּבוֹנָה.

*With aged men is wisdom,
and length of days brings understanding.* (Job 12, 12)

And the wisdom of the Torah, that of *zaken*, creates life, as we learn in Proverbs:

תְּחִלַּת חֲכָמָה יְרֵאתָ ה' וְדַעַת קְדוֹשִׁים בִּינָה.
כִּי בִי יִרְבּוּ יָמֶיךָ וְיוֹסִיפוּ לָךְ שָׁנוֹת חַיִּים.

*The beginning of wisdom is awe of G-d,
and the knowledge of holy matters is understanding.
For by Me your days will be lengthened,
and will add years of life.* (Mishlei 9,10-11)

What is the difference between these two forms of life? Life that teaches wisdom is for our current physical world, i.e., a man's life span upon this earth. On the other hand, Torah wisdom that creates life, is everlasting life - not only for this world, but also for the World to Come.

■ Fear Your G-d!

This brings us to the very important discovery taught by the famed Rabbi Akiva. It appears in a story recounted in the Talmud, which discusses the meaning of the word אַת, *et*. This is a word that has no translation into English, and is used between a transitive verb and its definite-article subject.

For instance, the Hebrew for “to throw the ball” is “*lizrok et ha-kadur*,” or “to throw *et* the ball.” This word appears in the very first verse in the Torah:

בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם ...

In the beginning, G-d created et the heavens...

The word *et* seemingly adds nothing to the simple meaning of the sentence, and therefore, some of the Sages reasoned, it must come to add something on a deeper level. For instance, in this case it tells us that G-d created not only the Heavens, but also all the outgrowths of the heavens.

The Talmud (Pesachim 22b) tells us the following:

The Sage Shimon HaAmsuni used to derive laws or lessons from every *et* in the Torah. But when he reached this verse – את ה' אלוֹקֵיךָ תִירָא – *et your G-d you should fear* (D'varim 6,13) – he stopped [because he could not imagine who else, in addition to G-d, there is to fear; what, then, could possibly be derived from the word *et*?].

His students then asked him: “Our teacher, what will be with all the derivations and conclusions that you learned from all the other *et*-words in the Torah? Must they all be retracted?”

He answered, “Yes - and just as I received reward for that which I taught, I will receive reward for retracting these teachings.”

But then, Rabbi Akiva appeared and explained what the *et* in this verse teaches: “Not only must we fear G-d, we must also have awe of Torah scholars.”

What does Rabbi Akiva mean? Does he believe that fear of Torah scholars can be equated in any way with awe of Hashem? The explanation is as follows:

Shimon HaAmsuni spent many years teaching his students that every word “*et*” in the Torah had a special meaning. However, because of one instance that he could not explain, he immediately conceded that his entire methodology had been wrong. The one instance was the verse that refers to fear of G-d - because he realized that there is no one else to fear other than G-d! It was precisely because of his great fear of Heaven that he was able to come to his students and say, “I was wrong.” He was willing to accept defeat and humiliation before his students, so as not to imply that there might be someone who must be feared like Hashem.

When Rabbi Akiva saw this Torah scholar whose very being was so infused with such Fear of Heaven, he realized what the verse was teaching. He said, “When the Torah tells us, ‘*et G-d we must fear*,’ this comes to include also Torah scholars” – because when we stand in awe of a Torah scholar like Shimon HaAmsuni, we are actually standing in awe of the One that he fears, namely, Hashem.

This returns us to the verse that we have been studying: “*Rise before the aged, and give honor to the elderly; you shall fear your G-d; I am G-d.*” Yes, it is true that our fear of G-d requires us to stand and honor the elderly and the wise. But the wise man himself must realize that we are honoring his Divine Wisdom. Therefore, he himself must give honor to the Divine Wisdom that is in his heart - and not him himself.

From here stems the Halakhah (law) that a scholar who knows that people will stand for him must try to avoid such a situation, if possible. If he can take a different route and thus avoid troubling others to stand up for him, he should do so.

This is also the basis for the well-known law that states that one must not stand for his Rabbi more than twice a day. This is so that we will not honor our teacher more than we honor Hashem. We say Shma Yisrael in G-d’s honor twice a day, and we must not honor our teachers more than that. Since one’s honor for his teacher stems from one’s honor for G-d, it would be inconceivable that the latter would be smaller than the former.

■ The Heavens and the Earth

This conclusion helps clarify a Medrash that is difficult to understand both in its content and its style. The Medrash states:

R. Yishmael asked Rabbi Akiva: “You, who studied under Nachum Ish Gamzu for 22 years, and learned that the words אַךְ וְרַק (*ach* and *rak*) in the Torah come to exclude, while אֵת וְגַם (*et* and *gam*) come to include – how do you explain the first verse in the Torah, which states that G-d created *et* the Heavens and *et* the earth?”

R. Akiva answered: “The purpose of the words *et* in this context is to separate between the words ‘G-d’ and ‘Heavens,’ and between ‘G-d’ and ‘earth,’ so that it will not be thought that the earth and the heavens are gods.”

To this, R. Yishmael responded rather harshly:

We read that the Torah is “*not hollow for you*” (D'varim 32,47), meaning that if you find it to be hollow, it is only that way “*for you*” – because you cannot derive correct teachings from it when you do not work hard to understand it!

Rather, “*et the Heavens*” means to include the sun, moon, and Heavenly bodies, and “*et the earth*” includes trees, grass, and the Garden of Eden. (B'reshit Rabba 1,14)

Was R. Yishmael's answer so much deeper and more profound than that of R. Akiva, that it justifies R. Yishmael's harsh rebuke of his colleague?

The explanation is as follows: R. Yishmael knew that there was only one Torah scholar in the world – the renowned Rabbi Akiva – who could derive such a unique teaching, namely, that the mitzvah to fear G-d includes fearing Torah scholars. However, R. Yishmael knew that in order to do so, R. Akiva had to start similarly analyzing the word *et* from the very beginning of the Torah. R. Yishmael therefore tried to start him off with the first verse in B'reshit – but R. Akiva delicately refrained from taking this path, by making a lukewarm “derivation.” R. Yishmael felt that his great colleague was making a grave mistake and missing a critical opportunity. This is why he rebuked him harshly - precisely because of his greatness.

Let us conclude with these words from the Gemara in Tractate Shabbat (23b), taught by the great Sage, Rava:

Whoever loves Torah scholars, will merit having sons who are Torah scholars.

Whoever honors Torah scholars, will merit having sons-in-law who are Torah scholars.

Whoever fears and is in awe of Torah scholars, he himself will merit to become a Torah scholar. But if he is not capable of this, his words will be heard as if they were those of a Torah scholar.

