YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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***Bein Adam Le-chavero:* Ethics of Interpersonal Conduct**

**By Rav Binyamin Zimmerman**

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This week’s *shiurim* are dedicated in memory of Israel Koschitzky *zt"l*, whose yahrzeit falls on the 19th of Kislev. May the worldwide dissemination of Torah through the VBM be a fitting tribute to a man whose lifetime achievements exemplified the love of *Eretz Yisrael* and *Torat Yisrael*.

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**Shiur #07: Honoring Torah Scholars**

**The Holy Message**

In last week's lesson, we began discussing the mitzva in *Parashat* *Kedoshim* of treating senior citizens and Torah scholars with utmost respect. The Torah states (*Vayikra* 19:32):

You shall rise before the aged and show favor to an elder, and you shall fear your God; I am God.

The verse calls for *kima,* rising in the presence of *seiva,* old age, and according *hiddur,* extra honor, favor or deference, to a *zaken*, an elder

We noted that the Talmud and Shulchan Arukh rule in accordance with the opinion of Isi ben Yehuda (*Kiddushin* 32b), who understands that this verse essentially states two obligations: rising for the aged and showing favor to the scholar. As the Chinnukh explains, the underlying principle is that we must show respect to those who possess wisdom.

The placement of this mitzva in *Parashat Kedoshim* demonstrates how proper interpersonal behavior enhances one’s *kedusha* (holiness). The Torah calls for us to recognize the knowledge of the aged and the learned. The proverbial little old lady who needs help crossing the street is not merely an individual in need, but a possessor of wisdom; thus, one must admire her while being thankful for the opportunity to assist her. Through internalizing the call to treat others with respect, one can develop a new perspective about people, esteeming their wisdom born of life experience and Torah study. Simultaneously, one may develop a newfound commitment to a way of life directed towards attaining greater enlightenment.

In fact, the second verb in the verse, *“Ve-hadarta,”* is quite significant. Ha-ketav Ve-hakabbala points out that the root, which appears in numerous verses throughout Tanakh, is very similar to its Aramaic cognate, *hadar*, which refers to retracing one's steps, retreating and reversing course out of fear. After proving this assertion from numerous sources, he states:

As to the instruction of the Torah, “*Ve*-*hadarta*,” the Talmud explains that *hiddur* is neither to sit in the chair of a venerable person nor to contradict what he says. At first glance, one may be inclined to ask the following question: what prompts the Sages to transmute a positive commandment into a negative commandment, telling us what not to do to a *zaken*? However, the reason the Sages do this is precisely because the meaning of the word “*Ve-hadarta*” is to retreat from something. Therefore, in line with this basic meaning, the Sages illustrated the practical meaning of the commandment by telling us what to refrain and retreat from, i.e. not to be forward enough to sit in his chair and not to be arrogant enough to contradict him.

As *Ha-ketav Ve-hakabbala* explains, *“Ve-hadarta”* means to take a step back. Now, *hiddur* also means glorification, but, the essence of the mitzva is not the outward action but the inner feeling. These prohibitions impress upon an individual the need not to be presumptuous. “Youth is wasted on the young,” according to the famous quote attributed to George Bernard Shaw, and impetuous young people often think that their elders are has-beens who find it difficult to keep up with the times.

The Torah tells us to withdraw a bit — to see age not as a sign of weakness, but as a sign of strength. If one takes a step back before mischaracterizing elders, one will also be able to take many steps forward and go out of his way to accord them the honor they deserve.

**The Scholar and His Calling**

It is here, however, where we must draw a distinction between the two types of individuals the verse calls to esteem. The aged must be appreciated and cherished; however, old age is not always attainable. Old age is a gift from God, which many of the greatest individuals in our history did not receive; nevertheless, it is their eternal life in the next world which ultimately counts. While we honor those who are elderly, appreciate their wisdom from experience and hope we will be given the same opportunity, we can only hope to be like the elderly when we grow old; we cannot emulate them now. The mitzva calls for appreciating individuals whose wisdom is a result of the length of their days and their life experience, which is born of circumstance.

The honor due the Torah scholar is different. One need not only sit, or in this case stand up for them, on the sidelines; one may try to be like them. While the Chinnukh notes the bond between these two groups, the Keli Yakar notes the difference between them. The honor that must be accorded the scholar is certainly greater, as it is honor due to him for his own personal achievements, not due to his age or other outside factors. This is the language of Rabbi Yosei the Galilean (*ibid*.): "A *zaken* is this one (*zeh*) who has acquired (*kana*) wisdom.” The *hiddur* is due not only to the level of scholarship, but to the toil in the act of its acquisition.

This distinction is echoed in a slightly different context in a responsum by Rav Moshe Feinstein (*Iggerot Moshe, OC* II, 34). He explains that the honor due to a Torah scholar is greater than that due to a *kohen* (priest), as the scholar’s status is the result of personal achievement, while being a *kohen* is the result of an accident of birth. Essentially, the honor due to a *kohen* is due to the priestly family of Aharon, rather than the individual.

In fact, the word *seiva* refers to the white hair of old age. However, sometimes those who dedicate their life towards attaining wisdom look much older than their years. According to the Mishna (*Berakhot* 1:5), which we recite from the Passover Haggada annually, Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya states: "Here I am like a seventy-year-old man." The Talmud explains (*Berakhot* 27b-28a) that he was only eighteen years old, but so that he might look distinguished among the elderly scholars, his hair turned as snowy white as if he were seventy.

Our discussion adds a twist. As we saw in the previous lesson, the Shulchan Arukh rules that “*seiva”* includes everyone from age seventy and up. A septuagenarian deserves honor for the wisdom of experience, but a young scholar, even one who is eighteen, deserves honor due to the wisdom he has acquired and toiled to attain, "like a seventy-year-old man." (See also the Keli Yakar’s commentary on our verse).

An old friend of mine studied under Rav Avraham Shapira *zt"l* (1914-2007; chief rabbi, 1983-1993) during the latter’s final years, and he related to me a story that I will now retell. (Though the specifics may not be accurate, the idea behind them remains valid.) One day my friend asked Rav Shapira which later commentaries one should study. Rav Shapira proceeded to ask him what he had studied already. When my friend could only list a couple of things he had read through partially, Rav Shapira said, “No I am asking you which ones you have read cover-to-cover.” Embarrassed, my friend had nothing to say. Rav Shapira continued and asked him: “How old are you?” “Twenty-one.” Rav Shapira said: "You are twenty-one and don't have a single gray hair on your head. How can that be? When I was your age I had a full head of gray hair, but I had also learned through many later commentaries cover-to-cover. Evidently, the two go hand-in-hand."

My friend, who later married into Rav Shapira's family, told me that at that moment a new realization came upon him. Rav Shapira was not the great man he was, the former chief rabbi of Israel and a celebrated *rosh yeshiva*, because of his brilliance, but rather because he worked hard to attain it. It wasn't because he knew which commentaries to study, but rather because he went and studied them, all of them, cover-to-cover. In the process he had gained the stature of a seventy-year-old man, towering above others with wisdom, and he even looked the part.

Not all will have prematurely gray hair, and some may even look young when old; nevertheless, the honor due to a scholar is the result of the arduous process of acquiring Torah wisdom.

**Fear and Reverence in This Mitzva**

Our verse concludes: "And you shall fear your God; I am God." What is the meaning of this statement?

The Midrash (*Bamidbar Rabba* 15:17) relates that Rav Abba Ha-Kohen bar Pappa would always avoid crowds, lest he trouble them by causing them to rise. When he mentions this to Rabbi Yosei be-Rabbi Zevida, the latter reprimands him, explaining that he would be doing them a great favor by having them rise before him, because this would lead them to the fear of God, as indicated by our verse.

The contact with a Torah scholar can be a life-changing moment, as the verse states: "Your eyes shall see your teachers" (*Yeshayahu* 30:20). Elisha transforms his life after coming into contact with Eliyahu (see *I Melakhim* 19:19-21 and the end of *The Lonely Man of Faith*). Reish Lakish gives up being a bandit in order to become a student of Rabbi Yochanan (*Bava Metzia* 84a). Jewish history abounds with numerous leaders who had no intention of being in a leadership position but were transformed, encouraged and inspired by contact with the great individuals in our nation.

Showing *hiddur* to a great scholar can be a transformative experience, and many individuals go out of their way to encounter the righteous scholars of the generation, even just to see them. With this in mind, it is understandable that the Or Ha-chayim, in his commentary on this verse, offers a number of explanations which interpret this mitzva as a call for one to attain his spiritual stature in the utmost. He cites the Talmudic teaching (*Yevamot* 50) that *koma,* akin to *kima* in the verse, refers to one's spiritual height. One merits living out the years allotted if one follow God's commands. Therefore, the verse essentially states: if you wish to reach a good old age, attain the spiritual height you are meant to attain. He continues:

The verse challenges us to develop to our full spiritual potential as much as it directs us to display honor for people who have attained old age… The way to head off the frequent side-effects of aging is *kima*, to rise to one's spiritual stature…

The words “And show favor to an elder”may even allude to one's own old age; our Sages (*Sukka* 53a) are on record as saying about themselves: "Hail to our youth which does not shame our old age." They referred to the kind of old age in which one can recall an exemplary life led, with no skeletons in one's closet. The Torah therefore advises youngsters to lead the kind of lives now that will never cause them to be ashamed in the future of their younger years.

We not only stand for the scholars and allow their characters to have an effect on us, we also realize that following their lead in the way we live our lives will allow us to be proud in our golden years of our youth.

The understanding that the honor due to a scholar is because of personal achievement would also seem to be the focus of the Talmud's discussion of whether a scholar can waive his honor (*Kiddushin* 32a).

Rav Yitzchak bar Shila quoted Rav Mattena in the name of Rav Chisda: “A father who has waived his honor, his honor is forgone. If, however, a rabbi waives the honor due to him, his honor is not forgone.”

Rav Yosef said: “Even a rabbi who waives his honor, his honor is forgone, as it is stated: ‘And God went before them by day’ (*Shemot* 13:21)."

Rava said: “This is not a valid comparison. The Holy One, Blessed be He, since the world is His and the Torah is His, may waive His honor. Here, however, in the case of a rabbi, is the Torah his that he can waive his honor?” Rava then reconsidered and said himself: “Yes, the rabbi’s Torah is his, as it is written: ‘And in his Torah he meditates day and night’ (*Tehillim* 1:2)."

The inference from this verse is explained by Rashi, in both his Talmudic and biblical commentaries (*ad loc.*). The entire verse, speaking about a praiseworthy individual, reads as follows: “"But his desire is in the Torah of God, and in his Torah he meditates day and night.” Rashi explains that at first the Torah is called the "Torah of God" but as he meditates in it day and night, it becomes "his Torah". Learning, studying, and toiling in the acquisition of Torah actually allows the Torah to become part and parcel of one's personality.

According to the first opinion and Rava's initial understanding, the honor due to a scholar is essentially the honor due to the Torah that he knows, and therefore, it is not the scholar's prerogative to waive this honor. The conclusion, however, seems to be that the honor does belong to the scholar, as the Torah which he learns becomes part and parcel of him, "his."

In some instances, the scholar must act to protect his honor with the understanding that it is essentially the Torah which is being honored through him (see Year 2, Lesson 30). However, the essential obligation of honoring the scholar is for the Torah he has acquired, so that others may follow his lead.

**Responsibility**

The element of fear of God involved in this mitzva creates added responsibility for all involved, both the scholar himself and the bystander who sees him. The Talmud deduces from this part of the verse the obligation to stand even when the scholar is unaware that others have noticed him and also that the scholar must not overburden others by making them stand in his presence. The Rambam formulates it as follows (*Hilkhot Talmud Torah* 6:2):

What is the source [which teaches that] a person should not divert his eyes from the sage so that he will not see him, lest he be required to stand before him? It is written, "And you shall fear your God." With regard to all matters dependent on one's conscience, the Torah states: "And you shall fear your God."

The fact that “And you shall fear your God*"* mandates rising for a sage who is not aware of having been seen indicates that this is not only an interpersonal mitzva, but a religious one as well. God wants us to be accustomed to honoring the Torah and those who represent it — not only for them but for what it can do to us.

The Rambam (*op. cit.* 11) continues:

It is a great sin to disgrace Torah sages or to hate them. Jerusalem was not destroyed until [its inhabitants] disgraced its sages, as it says: (*II* [*Divrei Ha-yamim* 36:16](http://www.chabad.org/16585#v16)): "And they would mock the messengers of God, despise His words and scoff at His prophets" — i.e., they would scorn those who taught His words. Similarly, the Torah's prophecy ([*Vayikra* 26:16](http://www.chabad.org/9927#v16)): "If you despise My statutes" [should be interpreted]: "If you despise the teachers of My statutes." Whoever disgraces the sages has no portion in the world to come and is included in the category of those who "scorn the word of God" (*Bamidbar* 15:31).

The scholar also has an obligation, as the Rambam rules (*op. cit.* 3):

It is not proper for a sage to trouble the people and position himself before them so that they will have to stand for him. Rather, he should take shortcuts and have the intent that they should not see him, so that he will not trouble them to stand. The Sages would take circuitous routes through the outskirts [of their cities], where people who recognized them would not be found, in order not to trouble them.

At first glance, this would seem to contradict the passage from *Bamidbar Rabba* which we saw above: isn’t it better for the scholar to encounter people, giving them the opportunity to express their fear of God?

The Benei Binyamin is quoted as explaining that everything depends on the scholar's intention. If he is not motivated by self-interest in any way, then he may appear before crowds. However, one concerned with his own pride should avoid them.

The scholar has the potential of modeling his commitment and his successful attainment of Torah knowledge as a mere expression of everyone's latent potential being actualized. All Jews are taught Torah in their mother's womb (*Nidda* 30b) and dedication to the cause can make anyone worthy of the same honor as the scholar. Not everyone may merit length of years and old age, but all can strive to attain length of days by maximizing one's time for spiritual growth and Torah scholarship.

This might have practical ramifications for a situation when it is unclear if the person is old enough or enough of a scholar to honor. (See *Yechaveh Daat* 3:70). Some authorities differentiate between a scholar and a senior, as they note that all people age while not everyone becomes a Torah scholar, and therefore one might have to stand when in doubt of another’s age, but unless known otherwise, one would not be obligated to stand for a putative scholar. However, if part of the mitzva is the recognition that there is latent potential in each of us to reach the milestone of being a real Torah scholar, then even in cases of doubt, one should treat the supposed scholar with respect.

**A Man of Good Deeds**

Before we conclude, it is important to point out that the scholar's greatness is not only based on the wisdom he knows, but on the way it causes him to act. The Talmud (*Kiddushin* 33b) relates that even scholars stood for Rav Yechezkel; although he was not a sage in his own right, Rav Yechezkel was a person of good deeds (*baal maasim*).

The Ran in his commentary on the Rif (*Kiddushin* 14b) explains that the real reason why one must stand before a learned person is that "wisdom brings to action." One does not honor what the scholar knows, but how he acts due to that knowledge. Generally speaking, the unlearned will not be able to act with such righteousness; however, a *baal maasim* should be treated the same way as a scholar, because part of the essence of the Torah's wisdom is to bring one to holy action. (See also *Torah Temima* on our verse, note 241.)

This verse’s mandate reflects not only the recognition of an individual’s scholarship, but the aspiration of each and every one of us to be holier. The latent Torah potential in all of us is waiting to be actualized and transformed into actions, as we recognize that good deeds are part and parcel of interpersonal holiness. Doing so will allow all to achieve the blessing recorded in the psalm for Shabbat (*Tehillim* 92:15):

They shall still bear fruit even in old age; they shall be fresh and fragrant.

Up to this point, we have discussed the honor one must accord a Torah sage even without a prior relationship. In next week's lesson, we will conclude the discussion of this verse by focusing on the honor due to one's own rabbi and teacher.