YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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

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**Shiur #06: Respecting Elders and Scholars**

**The Placement of the Mitzva**

In our previous lessons, we discussed various issues related to the honor and reverence one must accord one's parents; in this lesson, we will take a look at what seems to be a parallel mitzva later in the same chapter of *Vayikra* (19), mandating similar treatment for elders and scholars.

In lesson two, we discussed the structure of this chapter, the first half of *Parashat Kedoshim*, and we noted that the chapter seems to be comprised of two parallel units, each of which is made up of three subsections. Both units begin with *mitzvot bein adam la-Makom* and conclude with *mitzvot bein adam le-chavero*, and a textual bridge between them discusses both kinds of *mitzvot* — namely, verse 32, which we will analyze in this lesson:

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

The root of *mora*, referring to reverence, awe or fear,appears four times in this chapter. Twice it refers to a mitzva to show reverence — towards one’s parents in v. 3 and towards the sanctuary in v. 30 — and twice it appears in the conclusion of the verse “And you shall fear your God; I am God” — here and in v. 14, regarding mistreatment of the blind or the deaf.

We discussed v. 30 in our second lesson this year, but v. 32 is also something of a parallel to the command of revering one’s parents: once again, we honor God by showing deference to our elders and teachers. A second fascinating parallel is the opening “Do not turn to [idolatry],”which appears twice in the chapter, in verses 4 and 31, immediately after the *mitzvot* of revering parents and of revering the sanctuary respectively. Furthermore, the fact that the phrase “and you shall fear your God*"* appears twice in the chapter, first regarding the physically handicapped and then regarding the elders and the scholars, indicates that God is very interested in the way we treat all members of society, from the most unfortunate to the most venerable.

Similarly, the Seforno notes that verses 33-34, which come after the mitzva of favoring the elderly, speak about the importance of treating converts fairly. He explains that this is an essential part of holiness.

After he commanded regarding the honor that must be accorded to the holy ones, he commanded that one must not scorn the weaker members of society.

What exactly does the verse mandate? “You shall rise before the aged and show favor to an elder” includes two actions: *kima*, rising to one’s feet, and *hiddur*, showing favor or veneration. Is there a difference between “the aged (*seiva*)” and “an elder (*zaken*)?”

**Defining Aged and Elderly**

Although both terms are used to refer to senior citizens, there may be a difference between the two. The Talmud (*Kiddushin* 32b) actually quotes three opinions in a *beraita* regarding the proper interpretation of the verse. The first opinion seems to state that both parts of the verse refer to an elder, as the word *zaken* indicates that one must only rise for an elder who is also a scholar.

The rabbis taught: "'You shall rise before the aged’ — I might think even a *zaken ashmai*, so the verse states, ‘an elder,' and ‘an elder’ means only a sage, as it states (*Bamidbar* 11:16): 'Gather Me seventy men of the elders of Israel.'"

Who is this *zaken ashmai*? Rashi (*ad loc.)* explains that it refers to a guilty old person, an evildoer. Tosafot, on the other hand, are unwilling to accept the notion that one could even entertain the possibility of standing for an evildoer, and therefore they explain the word *ashmai* to mean "empty," referring to an ignoramus.

The second opinion cited is as follows:

Rabbi Yosei the Galilean says: "A *zaken* is this one (*zeh*) who has acquired (*kana*) wisdom, as it states: 'God has acquired me at the beginning of His course' (*Mishlei* 8:22).”

The Talmud later explains that the distinction between these two opinions is the case of a youthful scholar: the first opinion would not require rising for such an individual, but Rabbi Yosei does.

The *beraita* concludes by citing a third opinion, that of Isi ben Yehuda, who understands the verse to be referring to two separate individuals*.*

Isi ben Yehuda says: “‘You shall rise before the aged’ — this includes all old people.”

The Rif understands that Isi ben Yehuda holds the only relevant factor to be old age, but Rashi disagrees, explaining that either old age or learnedness is sufficient to command respect. The Shulchan Arukh rules in accordance with Rashi, indicating that there are two relevant factors that call for special respect and honor: age and wisdom.

In the final analysis, we are left with three views that are quoted in the *beraita*. The first opinion mandates honor for an elder who has acquired wisdom while Rabbi Yosei the Galilean adds young scholars as well and Isi ben Yehuda requires one to stand for either an elder or a sage.

We must try to understand this third opinion, which the Talmud ratifies.

**What Does This Mitzva Entail?**

What exactly is *kima*, and what exactly is *hiddur*? The Talmud (*ibid*. 33a) cites a *beraita* indicating that *kima* requires rising in the presence of an elder once he gets within four cubits. Rashi, in his commentary on the Torah, explains that *hiddur* prohibits standing in an elder’splace or sitting in his seat*,* speaking in place of him or contradicting him.

Ostensibly, since the aged and the elder are two different people, we might apply *kima* only to the former and *hiddur* only to the latter; however, the Talmud understands that their juxtaposition indicates that there is a connection between the two of them, and one should practice *kima* and *hiddur* for both.

Interestingly, the Aramaic translations of the verse point in two different directions. Both Targum Onkelos and Targum Yonatan render “*seiva*” as “learned in Torah,” while “*zaken*” is explained as “an old person” by the former and “a sage” by the latter. The Ramban points out that the Talmud’s conclusion is that “*seiva*” includes any senior citizen, even an ignoramus, and even a young scholar is entitled to *hiddur.* Rabbeinu Bachya explains that according to Targum Yonatan, *seiva* includes all who have mastered the Written Torah, while a *zaken* is one who has mastered the Oral Torah.

Although according to Onkelos the verse still requires special treatment for both elders and scholars, he reverses the Talmudic definitions. The difference might be at what age one is deemed an elder.

The Mishna (*Avot* 5:21) states:

A sixty-year-old is elderly; a seventy-year-old is aged*.*

This would indicate that between sixty and seventy, the term *zaken* is applicable. The Shulchan Arukh (YD 244:1) rules in accordance with our passage, stating that one must stand only for a seventy-year-old. Obviously, one doesn't have to card an individual to prove his exact age before standing, certainly in light of the rule of being stringent when it comes to biblical law.

**The Connection and Distinction**

At the end of the day, all require one to stand for elders and scholars. Theoretically, these two obligations might be seen as two separate *mitzvot*, but most of the authorities who enumerate the 613 commandments regard them as one. Why is this?

Rabbi Yochanan rules like Isi ben Yehuda and requires standing for elderly non-Jews, indicating that the term *seiva* includes them as well; he remarks (*ibid*.): “How many experiences have befallen these elderly non-Jews in their lifetimes!" Rashi explains that they must have experienced numerous miracles throughout their lives, and this is reason enough to show them honor. The Talmud notes that others do not require rising for elderly non-Jews but do support according them extra respect, lending a helping hand directly or indirectly. These scholars seem to believe that there is reason to treat elderly non-Jews honorably, but it is not part of the mitzva *per se*.

Some Rishonim (e.g. Semag, 13) have a different version of the text indicating that even Rabbi Yochanan would not stand for elderly non-Jews out of a sense of obligation but rather because he feels it essential for maintaining peace with one’s non-Jewish neighbors.

The Rambam (*Hilkhot Talmud Torah* 6:9) rules that one must treat elderly non-Jews with additional honor, but there is no need to stand for them. The Kessef Mishneh explains that the Rambam understands this to be a biblical obligation; nevertheless, it is limited in scope, unlike the deference for Jewish elders which requires *kima* and *hiddur.*

Tosafot (32b *s.v. Mai*), however, disagree, seeing Rabbi Yochanan’s practice as non-biblical in nature. Most Rishonim seem to agree that there is no biblical obligation to stand for an elderly non-Jew, and some, like the Bach, explain the Rambam in the same way.

There is, however, another way to look at the picture. The Chinnukh explains the underlying theme in the mitzva in a way that unifies the two parts of the verse (Mitzva 257):

This reason lies at the root of the precept: the main point of man's existence in the world is for the sake of wisdom, so that he will become aware of his Creator. It is therefore fitting for one to honor those who have attained wisdom; other may thereby be moved to try to attain wisdom as well. For this reason Isi ben Yehuda rules that even an uneducated old man is included in this precept: it is right to honor him, because in his great number of years he has seen and recognized a bit of the workings of the Eternal Lord and His wonders…

Essentially, this is a mitzva to accord respect to those who have attained wisdom. Some may have attained wisdom through life experience, as Rabbi Yochanan explains regarding elderly non-Jews, and some may have done so even in their youth through acquiring the ultimate wisdom of the Torah. The Chinnukh adds that the old person still must not be a confirmed sinner, as "he has deprived himself of honor,” by showing that he has not acquired any of the wisdom that his life experience should have imparted. The mitzva calls for honoring wisdom by venerating those who are identified with it.

In fact, the Alshikh explains that the way in which one treats the elders and the aged is meant to have an impact on the individual, improving one’s character and level of devotion. The conclusion of the verse, "And you shall fear your God," is a necessary outgrowth of connecting with scholars and learning from their ways, as one who respects wisdom will want to acquire it.

**Distinguishing Between the Two Parts of the Mitzva**

Ultimately, though *hiddur* and *kima* apply to both seniors and scholars, the Or Ha-chayim says there is still a difference between them. Perhaps it may be enough to rise momentarily for the aged, but one must remain standing longer for wisdom, as spiritual maturity rates a degree of recognition greater than that accorded for mere physical old age.

Rav S.R. Hirsch, in his commentary on the verse, also seems to recognize this distinction, although he echoes the Chinnukh. Rav Hirsch notes that *seiva* refers to the white hair of old age, whereas a *zaken* shows maturity in wisdom and intellectual accomplishment, as seen in *Mishlei* 16:31.

He who honors *seiva* honors experience; he honors the natural human perception which matures through the repeated events of life and nature. He who honors elders honors wisdom; he honors the understanding of life and nature that is obtained through God's Word. For God's word reveals the Divine source and purpose of life and nature; this lends significance to our mission. We must pay tribute to both: the clear and circumspect human intellect, which matures through experience, and the spirit of God, which proceeds from the Torah. And whenever we find them, in the aged and in the wise, we are to show homage by honoring and rising.

This, he notes, stands in opposition to the previous verse, which forbids consulting soothsayers, who try to subjugate nature with dark forces. The path of *kedusha* is the path of wisdom and maturity.

Indeed, the Meshivat Nefesh, in his commentary on the Torah, notes the lack of symmetry: *seiva*, after all, is a general term, which does not seem to jibe with *zaken*, an individual elder. One might explain that that is the exact difference between a senior and a sage. The sage deserves honor personally, as he has toiled, and therefore his accomplishments, not his age, are the determining factor, proving his successful inculcation of Torah. On the other hand, a senior has experienced things by dint of surviving in the world. Achieving *seiva* is a passive experience, and therefore the honor one accords to a senior citizen does not redound to that individual’s credit but is attributable to the concept of *seiva* and the wisdom that old age brings.

This idea is stated explicitly by the Keli Yakar, who notes that the reason the Talmud sets aside the literal definition and defines *zaken* as a scholar, is because the obligation of *hiddur* for a *zaken* is greater than that of *kima* for an aged person*.* The only way to explain this is to understand that although both words are similar, the passive wisdom of the seniors cannot be compared to the accomplished wisdom of the scholars, which calls for extra special treatment.

In fact, one might argue that even though the honor due a scholar is greater, he would be able to forgo his honor, while a senior citizen would not be able to do so, as the honor accorded to the former is due to personal merit, while the honor due the latter is on account of the wisdom of *seiva* in general.

**Respecting Elders**

Although respecting seniors might be of secondary importance when compared to honoring scholars, but the Torah still accords it special significance. The Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 65:9) states:

Rabbi Yehuda ben Shimon said: “Avraham asked for old age, pleading before God, ‘Sovereign of the Universe, when a man and his son enter a town, people don't know whom to honor, but if You crown the father with the appearance of old age, they will know whom to honor.’ The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to him: ‘You have asked well, and it shall begin with you.’ From the beginning of the book until here, old age is not mentioned, but when Avraham arises, the appearance of old age is granted to him: ‘And Avraham was old, well advanced in years’ (*Bereishit* 24:1).”

The Or Ha-chayim notes that this request of Avraham may lie be at the heart of the obligation.

We may also take our cue from *Bereishit Rabba,* where we are told that Avraham asked to look old in order that he might be distinguished from his son Yitzchak, who resembled him greatly, as it says, “And Avraham was old.” This is why it says, “You shall rise before the aged” and in this way you will “show favor to” the Elder, i.e. Avraham, of whom it is written, “And Avraham was old,” because it was by his hand that this was made to happen.

Unfortunately, in modern society, the elderly are often looked upon as being hopelessly behind the times; they are often the last ones to be treated with respect. The Torah declares otherwise: a life of *kedusha* requires recognizing the wisdom of the elderly. We must learn from their experiences and their lessons of the past lest we be foolish enough to repeat their mistakes.

Although the simple understanding of the mitzva is essentially to rise for seniors, it would include showing respect to them by listening to their advice and respecting their life experiences. Indeed, it may encompass not using their first names unless asked to do so, as well as expressing willingness to help them in whatever they may require. Most importantly, it regards showing interest in their lives.

This verse should always be foremost in our minds when we encounter the elderly: “They shall still bear fruit even in old age; they shall be fresh and fragrant" (*Tehillim* 92:15). This is the greatest blessing, following in Avraham’s footsteps.

**The *Hiddur* of This Mitzva**

The religious import of this mitzva is expressed nicely in a fascinating incident recorded about Rabbi Aryeh Levin, known the *Tzaddik* of Jerusalem, in the book *Chavalim* by Chaim Be'er. The author recounts how he encountered Reb Aryeh as he was hurrying to purchase a beautiful *etrog* for the holiday of Sukkot. Reb Aryeh asked the seller if he had found him an *etrog,* and after being handed one, Reb Aryeh quickly took it, without even looking, and rushed out of the store. One of the onlookers, who had noticed this out of the corner of his eye, followed Reb Aryeh out of the store and asked him in disbelief.

"Can it be that every God-fearing Jew spends an extensive amount of time searching for the nicest *etrog* as if it were a precious jewel, but you just take the first one they give you just like that?"

Reb Aryeh smiled and said that the question was indeed a very good one. Nevertheless, he explained:

"There are only two *mitzvot* in the Torah concerning which the Torah speaks of *hiddur.* One is the mitzva of *etrog*, as the Torah says: “You shall take for yourselves the fruit of a favored tree” (*Vayikra* 23:40); the other is taking care of the needs of the elderly: “Show favor to an elder.” Most Jews go above and beyond the call of duty in the way they search for the *hiddur* of the *etrog*, but little old me — I decided to pursue *hiddur* in the mitzva of helping the elderly."

Reb Aryeh then apologized to his questioner, telling him that he would not be able to continue the conversation properly, as he was on his way to a seniors’ home to visit a childless old man who had no one to care for his needs.

The author mentions how he was left speechless by this man, small in physical height, but of enormous presence in moral greatness. Does the forgotten mitzva of *hiddur* of the elderly not deserve as much attention as the *hiddur* of the *etrog*?

In the next lesson, we will try to appreciate more of the precious nature of the honor due to Torah scholars.