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 #08: Honoring One’s *Rebbe***

***Hiddur* of a *Zaken***

For the past two weeks, we have been discussing the following central mitzva from *Parashat Kedoshim* (*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 elder (*zaken*) in question, as the Talmud explains, is not necessarily a senior citizen, but rather a Torah scholar. Even an unlearned senior is entitled to respect, but honoring the aged is different than honoring scholars. The former have lived lives and experienced enough to have a great insight into and appreciation of God's actions in the world; therefore, they deserve respect. However, their experience of Godliness is essentially passive; scholars, on the other hand, have actively acquired wisdom through the study of Torah, and therefore, they deserve a greater degree of veneration.

Indeed, honoring scholars leads one not only to appreciate wisdom; it inspires one to attain wisdom in a way that will develop into a greater connection with God. For this reason, as we saw last week, the Midrash states honoring a scholar can be a religious experience, as the verse concludes, “And you shall fear your God; I am God,” indicating that appreciating Torah scholarship will lead to greater reverence for and devotion to God.

The Alshikh explains that through honoring scholars, one may benefit from their good advice and moral teaching, improving one’s character and devotion, as the conclusion of this verse, "And you shall fear your God,” indicates. However, there is another verse which we must examine.

**The Need for a Second Mitzva**

The Torah commands:

You shall fear Lord your God, you shall serve Him, and by His name you shall swear. (*Devarim* 6:16)

The verse begins with the preposition *et*, which usually precedes direct objects but sometimes means “with.” One Tanna, Shimon the Imsonite, expounded very appearance of *et*, according to the Talmud (*Bava Kamma* 41b) explaining how the word always indicates that the verb should be applied not only to the direct object, but to something associated with it as well:

Shimon the Imsonite … used to expound every *et* in the Torah. However, when he reached the verse"You shall fear Lord your God,” he abstained. His disciples said to him: “Rabbi, what is to be done with all the expositions of *et* which you have already given?” He said to them: “Just as I have received reward for the previous expositions, so I shal receive reward for the present abstention.” So it was until Rabbi Akiva came and taught: “The word *et* in the verse ‘You shall fear Lord your God’ comes to include Torah scholars.”

Shimon the Imsonite demurs when his methodology suggest that there is another to be revered like God, but Rabbi Akiva rescues this approach by declaring that Torah scholars are actually deserving of the same treatment, worthy of *mora* — fear, reverence, awe. This indicates that a Torah scholar to some degree is viewed as a representative of God on this earth and should be treated accordingly.

However, this exegesis creates a problem; if this verse already mandates venerating scholars, what does the mitzva of *hiddur* for a *zaken* add? In fact, the language in the two verses bears a significant resemblance: fearing God is the conclusion of *Vayikra* 19:32 and the opening of *Devarim* 6:16. Indeed, this similarity might be what leads Rabbi Akiva to interpolate the *zaken* into the latter verse.

But why would we need two *mitzvot* that overlap? What is added by the mitzva of *hiddur* that is not required by the mitzva of *mora*?

**Distinguishing Between a Scholar and a *Rebbe***

Let us consider the Rambam’s view, especially as explicated by the Brisker Rav. These two *mitzvot* may actually speak about two different individuals, as one focuses on every Torah scholar, even one whom the individual has no personal relationship with, and the other speaks about one's personal teacher, one’s *rebbe*.

The distinction between these two individuals is already mentioned in the Talmud (*Kiddushin* 33a):

A Tanna taught: “What sort of rising constitutes veneration? I would say this is rising when the elder passes within four cubits.”

Abbayei clarifies this ruling:

Abbayei said: “This was not said except in regard to one's rabbi who is not his primary rabbi, but regarding his primary rabbi, one must rise as soon as he comes in sight.”

The Talmud goes on to say that Abbayei would stand as soon as he saw the ear of the donkey of his *rebbe*, Rav Yosef, as the tall ears were the first portion of the animal's body that Abbayei could see.

Why is there a difference between a scholar and one's *rebbe*?

The Ran explains that there is no real difference in obligation between the two; however, when standing for one's *rebbe,* it is apparent to all that even at a distance the student is standing for the teacher’s honor, yet nobody will realize that one is standing on behalf of another scholar's presence unless this other scholar is right next to him, at least within four cubits.

However, one might explain differently based on another Talmudic passage there (*Kiddushin* 31a-b):

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 Talmud presents a dispute as to whether a Torah scholar can waive the honor (*kavod*) due to him. Although Rav Yosef adduces proof from the story of the Exodus, in which God waives His honor by leading the Jewish people through the desert, Rava counters that nothing can be proven from God's behavior: even though the honor due to God for his actions is greater than that due to the scholar, God is Creator of everything. All is His, and therefore He can waive His honor, because the honor is actually due to Him. The Torah scholar, however, Rava reasons, is accorded honor because of the Torah he has studied and houses in his mind, and that Torah does not belong to him. Therefore, although the scholar is less deserving of honor than God, it is not his honor to waive. Nevertheless, Rava reverses his position:

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)."

Rava reconsiders his position, and actually affirms Rav Yosef's ruling that a Torah scholar can forgo his honor, based on a verse at the beginning of *Tehillim*, describing the paradigmatic righteous individual:

But his desire is in the Torah of God, and in his Torah he meditates day and night.

Rashi explains that before one studies Torah, as much as one desires to study it, it is the Torah of God. After one toils and attains the knowledge, the Torah actually becomes his. It is not only his Torah scholarship but his Torah as well, and therefore, he has the right to forgo his own honor.

According to this understanding, the Torah is the scholars, and therefore, it is his right to forgo that *kavod*. The Talmud continues by questioning if this is really true. It records an incident in which Rava poured wine for students of his at his son's wedding. This would seem to be an act of waiving one's honor, yet Rava got upset at two of his students who did not rise in front of him as he poured their glasses. The Talmud asks, if a Torah scholar may waive his honor, and Rava was doing so by pouring, then why should his students have had to stand up for him?

The Talmud answers with a few short words:

Nevertheless, they should have shown him veneration.

The Talmud states that even when a scholar forgoes his *kavod*, one must still show him *hiddur*. But why would this be? Isn't the whole obligation in the first place to give *hiddur* to a *zaken*?

Furthermore, the Talmud there also details a number of cases in which certain Torah scholars who were known to be very easygoing and humble got upset at their students for not standing for them. Why were they so indignant that a minimal amount of honor be shown to them?

**The Understanding of the Rambam**

The Rambam describes the honor due to a Torah scholar in two separate chapters of *Hilkhot Talmud Torah*. In chapter 5 he focuses on the honor due to one's *rebbe*, and in chapter 6 he discusses the honor due to every scholar. A comparison reveals some fine distinctions. In 5:1, he states:

Just as a person is commanded to honor his father and hold him in awe, so too, is he obligated to honor his teacher and hold him in awe. [Indeed, the measure of honor and awe] due one's teacher exceeds that due one's father. His father brings him into the life of this world, while his teacher, who teaches him wisdom, brings him into the life of the World to Come… There is no greater honor than that due a teacher, and no greater awe than that due a teacher. Our Sages declared: "Your fear of your teacher should be equivalent to your fear of Heaven." Therefore, they said: Whoever disputes the authority of his teacher is considered as if he revolts against the Divine Presence… Whoever engages in controversy with his teacher is considered as if he engaged in controversy with the Divine Presence… Whoever complains against his teacher is considered as if he complains against the Divine Presence… Whoever thinks disparagingly of his teacher is considered as if he thought disparagingly of the Divine Presence…

The Rambam continues to list the various forms of honor one must accord one's *rebbe*, including standing for him from the moment he sees him. In 5:11, he mentions the right of one's *rebbe* to waive his honor, with the additional comment that even in such a case, the student must still treat the *rebbe* with *hiddur*:

An outstanding teacher may, if he desires, waive his honor with regard to any or all of the above matters for any or all his students. Even though he waives [these honors], the student is obligated to respect him at the time that he does so.

The Rambam here does not quote the general obligation of *hiddur*; rather, he states that the honor due to one’s *rebbe* surpasses the honor due to one’s parent, bordering on the reverence due to God Himself.

In the following chapter regarding the honor due to a Torah scholar, the description is very different. The Rambam begins:

It is a mitzva to respect every Torah scholar, even if he is not one's teacher, as the Torah states: "You shall rise before the aged and show favor to an elder, and you shall fear your God; I am God.”

He then explains:

When is one obligated to stand before him? When he approaches within four cubits of him until he passes him

In this chapter there is no description of a Torah scholar being like one parents or God; there is merely an obligation to stand for him when he comes within four cubits.

Furthermore, in all of chapter 6, the Rambam never mentions that a Torah scholar has the right to forgo the honor due to him. What could explain the Rambam's sharp distinction between the two types of scholars?

The Brisker Rav points out a fascinating explanation. Though it does not accord with the standard halakhic ruling, it does put a new spin on the holiness involved in this mitzva.

He explains that according to the Rambam, there are essentially two separate obligations. The honor one must accord one's *rebbe* is not based on the verse in *Vayikra*, but rather the verse in *Devarim,* which Rabbi Akiva explains as likening the reverence due to a scholar to that due to God.

Because there are different sources for the halakhot, the ramifications are also different. One must stand for a Torah scholar only when he comes within four cubits for, as the Talmud says, that is the honor due to him because of *hiddur.* However, the source of honor for a *rebbe* is from the other verse, which calls not for *hiddur* but for *mora*; therefore, it requires standing from the moment the *rebbe* comes in sight.

The Brisker Rav adds that although Rava concludes that a Torah scholar's Torah is his own and therefore he can waive his honor, this only applies to the unique and special honor due to one's own *rebbe*. However, as the story in the Talmud shows, Rava got upset with his students when they failed to show him *hiddur* even though he had waived the honor due to him, because he wanted to teach his students that there is a distinction between the honor due to a scholar and that due to one's *rebbe*, and even if a *rebbe* waives the unique honor due to him as a *rebbe*, he may not forgo the honor due to him as a Torah scholar.

The implications of this fascinating explication are far-reaching. Although it reads beautifully in terms of the Talmudic text and the Rambam’s ruling, the Talmud notes a Torah scholar may forgo his honor because the Torah wisdom he has attained is his own. If so, why would there be a distinction, in terms of waiving *kavod*, between the average Torah scholar and one's *rebbe*?

**Housing Torah and Personifying Torah**

To understand this distinction, we must examine how Torah study transforms an individual and the way in which a *rebbe* causes his student to be born anew.

While the scholar has attained Torah knowledge as his own, the *hiddur* shown to him is due to the Torah within him, not his own personal Torah. Thus, one can understand why the Rambam (*Hilkhot Sefer Torah* 10:10) refers to *hiddur* in discussing the spot one designates for a Torah scroll:

There is a mitzva to specify a specific place for the Torah scroll and to honor it and to venerate it excessively, as the words of the Tablets of the Law are the words that are in each and every Torah scroll…

*Hiddur* is the veneration one shows to an ark, a physical structure that houses a Torah, or to a Torah scholar, who houses the Torah which he has studied. Therefore, under no circumstances can this *hiddur* be waived, as one venerates the Torah and not the person himself.

However, Torah knowledge is not only wisdom contained in one's mind; it is also a transformative experience. As one honors his *rebbe,* he glorifies the personal Torah, the Torah which can transform an individual. For this reason the *rebbe* is likened to a parent, as he births a new individual, one who has come to know the transformative effects of Torah study. Furthermore, as Rabbi Akiva teaches, a *rebbe* is likened to God, as he provides a direct connection between his student and the Divine.

Rav Soloveitchik adds that this understanding is rooted in the halakhic principle that a craftsman acquires the additional value of an object he works on. Just as a craftsman, such as a potter, acquires the additional value of the pot which he has created and transformed, the *rebbe* who shapes his student spiritually acquires a part of his personality; therefore, it is as if he actually has formed him and has born him.

In truth, every Jew has the potential to be a Torah scholar. The Talmud (*Nidda* 30b) teaches that every Jew is taught Torah in his mother's womb, a potential wisdom waiting to be actualized (see Year 1, Lesson 3):

Rabbi Simlai expounded… “The fetus in the womb is taught the entire Torah… Its gaze penetrates the mysteries of the entire universe. As it is born and emerges into the air of the world, an angel taps it on the mouth, causing it to forget all the Torah which it has learned.”

For this reason, all Jews are likened to a Torah scroll, as the Talmud (*Moed* *Katan* 25a) notes:

One who is present in a room when a Jew dies is obligated to rend his garments. What can this be compared to? It is like a Torah scroll being burnt, which obligates one to rend his garments.

The death of a Jew is likened to the destruction of a Torah scroll.

When one honors the Torah scholar, one essentially shows honor to the actualized Torah that every individual contains. The *zaken* who has acquired wisdom has done what all Jews can do. Yet when one honors his *rebbe*, he especially accords honor to the actualization that his *rebbe* accomplished for and within him; he becomes a walking *sefer Torah*. The ability of one to be a walking Torah through studying God’s word is expressed vividly by Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik in “Torah and Humility” (available at: <http://www.vbm-torah.org/archive/humility.htm>).

We have a written Torah and an oral Torah. The written Torah has its *kedusha* crystallized in the tangible, physical written word. What about the oral Torah? There the word is not objectified in a scriptical form. God, in His infinite wisdom, wanted the word to be interwoven in an abstract thought system, and not in a sign system alone, as in the written Torah. Can *Torah she-be'al peh*, the oral Torah, pass on *kedusha*? How does the unwritten word hallow, in the sense that *Torah she-bikhtav* sanctifies *tefillin*, *mezuza*, the Torah parchment, etc.? It would be folly to conclude that *Torah she-be'al peh* is inferior in this respect. The answer is that the oral Torah operates in a more subtle manner, transmitting sanctity through study and its relation to the mind of the student. Apparently, Torah study, aside from being an intellectual, educational endeavor, enlightening the student and providing him with the information needed to observe the law, is a redemptive cathartic process - it sanctifies the personality. It purges the mind of unworthy desires and irreverent thoughts, uncouth emotions and vulgar drives. The parchment of *talmud Torah* is the human mind, the human heart and personality. Indeed, a new dimension is added to human experience through the study of Torah: sanctity.

We have now discovered a new understanding of the term "writing" - it means not only the physical performance of drawing letters, but also the process of soul-arousal and heart-sensitizing. A scribe writes the Torah on parchment; the *rebbe*, the great teacher, writes the *Torah she-be'al peh* on the living mind, on the sensitive human heart. The old halakhic equation that every Jew is a *sefer Torah* (scroll) is, in this light, fully understandable. The living Jew is a *sefer Torah* of the *Torah she-be'al peh.*

When one meets a scholar, one must respect the Torah wisdom he has attained. One must realize that his act may lead to a greater reverence for God, as the conclusion of the verse states, “And you shall fear your God; I am God.”

However, when one honors one's own *rebbe,* one recognizes the transformative aspects of Torah, the Torah which has become his *rebbe*'s own, and therefore that *kavod* may be waived by the *rebbe*.

This, in turn, explains the distinction between the Holy Ark which requires *hiddur* and the *rebbe* who requires *mora* akin to a parent and God. The Holy Ark houses the Torah; it contains the words that were engraved on the Two Tablets. However, one's *rebbe* does not only hold Torah within him; he personifies it as a walking *sefer Torah*, as the words of Torah are engraved in his heart and personality. (See *Mishlei* 7:3.)

With this in mind, we can see that there is no better place to teach this mitzva than *Parashat Kedoshim*. This portion, which provides a pathway to holiness, not only lists one’s interpersonal duties but recognizes that one who has studied Torah houses the Torah of God. Such a person is a walking Holy Ark. The Ramban (*Shemot* 25:2) explains that the Ark of the Covenant stood in the center of the sanctuary because it sanctified the entire premises. When one honors a Torah scholar, one recognizes that Torah is the sanctifying element of life. By following this path, one may realize the conclusion of the verse: “And you shall fear your God; I am God.”