

TALMUD TORAH 6:9

by Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom

9. One should stand in the presence of an extremely old person, even if he is not a scholar. Even a young scholar stands up in the presence of an extremely old person; however, he is not obligated to stand up to his full height, rather [enough] to show deference. We even show deference to an old non-Jew, with [kind] words and a helping hand, as it says: "You shall rise before the aged..." (Vayyiqra [Leviticus] 19:32) - any sort of aged [person] is implied.

Q1: Why does the young scholar stand for the old non-scholar? Shouldn't the priority be the inverse?

YW (Yitz Etshalom) : How would you know if someone was a scholar or not? Therefore perhaps we should offer respect to any older person, and anyone who you KNOW is a scholar.

YE: Derekh Eretz! (Proper behavior/"mentschlichkeit") - plus, the young scholar may still have something to learn from this old person - even though he is not a proper scholar.

Q2: If the young scholar must stand for the older person, why only minimal deference and not full "standing"?

YE: Valuable though life experience may be, it does not compare to the acquisition of wisdom through the rigorous methods of study - especially in Talmud Torah. In order to distinguish between the two, we set up "minimal" honor for life-experience ("osmotic" wisdom) and greater honor for acquired wisdom. This reflects a value system which doesn't negate the value of any person nor his experiences - yet emphasizes directed study and its value.

Q3: Does this rule (only deference, not full standing) apply to anyone honoring an old person - or just if it is a scholar doing the "standing"?

YE: Without access to secondary sources, it would seem that it should apply to everyone. Isn't the scholar just as obligated in honor as the rest of us? If the honor he shows is minimal deference, that should apply to all of us.

Q4: Why does R need to teach us that we also stand for a non-Jewish senior citizen? Why would we think to distinguish?

YE: Many of the interpersonal laws, especially those presented in Parashat Kedoshim (where this Mitzvah appears) only apply to "your fellow", "your brother" etc. - specifically members of our nation. We might have reasonably thought that all interpersonal customs of honor, concern etc. only apply

within the nation. Therefore, R adds the non-Jewish senior citizen to those we must honor. The reason, following the Hinuch's presentation, seems clear - we value the wisdom and learning which anyone has acquired - and, since we are adjured to learn from every person (Avot 4:1), this non-Jewish older person is also a source of information and wisdom.

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