

# LOOK NOT AT THE VESSEL...

*by Rabbi Yaakov Menken*

*"...He made the sea dry land, and the waters were divided." [14:21]*

*"The sea saw and fled..." [Psalms 114:3]*

*What did the sea see? It saw the casket of Yosef. [Medrash]*

According to the Medrash, the sea parted because it saw the casket of Yosef. But the next question to be asked is, what was so special about the bones of Yosef? Why would the sea turn back simply because of his casket, and not because of Moshe, Aaron, and all of the Children of Israel?

The HaDrash VeHalyun answers that the sea didn't want to move, and not merely because of inertia. It claimed that "I am greater than man. I was created on the Third Day, and human beings were created only on the Sixth Day. I have seniority! Why must I be part of a miracle done for them?"

Then it saw the casket carrying Yosef. Yosef was younger than his brothers, but nonetheless he was the ruler over all of them -- to the point that they had to bow to him and to his will. Their descendents observed his word generations after his death, emerging with his casket according to his instructions. This proved that age isn't a necessary indicator of greatness. When the sea recognized this, it parted.

Having spoken about the importance of respect for elders last week, it is worthwhile to recall another statement of our Sages, in the Chapters of the Fathers: "Look not at the vessel, but at that which it contains. For there is a new vessel which contains aged [wine], and an old vessel which does not even contain new." [4:20]

Indeed, age is not everything. Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah became the Head of the Yeshiva at age 18, because he acquired greater wisdom than those many times his age. And as one subscriber pointed out correctly, it is certainly true that not every aged person behaves as if he or she has acquired wisdom over the years.

Age is a sign. It can indicate wisdom, and we must respect an aged person for his or her life experiences, but it is no guarantee. We also go by many other signs and titles, the "trappings" of knowledge and wisdom -- terms like Doctor, Professor, Rabbi -- and people automatically respect those who bear them. To a certain extent, this is appropriate, like the honor given a person of 70. Yet at the same time, we must heed the advice of the Sages, "look not at the vessel, but at that which it contains."

Several months ago, a friend of mine directed me to an article by a Professor of Talmud which was published on the Internet, which reached a surprising conclusion -- allegedly based upon a Talmudic passage. Upon reading it, I discovered an error so obvious that my friend, who has no background in Talmud, was able to perceive it as well when he looked up the sources in Soncino's translation.

My point here is not to focus upon this particular story, or to take aim at Professors of Talmud -- not at all. This only indicates the need for caution. People are starving for spiritual leadership. They want answers and guidance. And when someone is dying of thirst, even "brackish waters" seem like the pure waters of Torah. So it is very easy to take up the mantle today, and set up shop... not unlike the way Project Genesis did on the Internet several years ago.

"Caveat Emptor" -- let the buyer beware -- has never been more applicable than in the age of the Internet, when most anyone can set up a web site and promote himself or herself as the latest Jewish guru. With a few thousand more dollars, a physical site can be rented out for the latest spirit center.

Jewish learning has always involved questioning every detail. Don't take what anyone says at face value. Criticize. Examine. Question -- and see if the answers reflect knowledge or a facade. "Look not at the vessel, but at that which it contains."