



How Should We Treat the Elderly?

In the Torah, we find the statement,

מפני שיבה תקום והדרת פני זקן

'You shall rise before the gray headed and honor the presence of an old man, and fear your God: I am the Lord. (Leviticus 19:32)

Think about this: We are commanded to do two things- stand in the presence of one who is old and honor them. Let's look at these two and see how they are connected.

1) To begin with, we are not commanded to **respect** or **like** the elderly, but to show them deference by standing up in their presence. **In this statement, is the Torah concerned about how we feel or about what we do?**

2) **In the same light, how do we understand the commandment to "honor" the presence of the elderly?** For a hint, let's look at one of the most well-know yet misunderstood commandments in the Torah.

In Exodus, we read,

"Honor your father and mother" (Exodus 20:11).

People generally think that this means living your life or making critical decisions along the lines of parents' wishes. Jewish tradition rejects this approach and promotes one which places parents at the focus of our love and care. Check out this passage from the Tosefta (3rd century, Palestine):

"What is honor? Giving food, drink, dressing, covering, leading out and bringing in, and washing face, hands and feet." (Tosefta Kiddushin 1:11).

How is honor defined? Is it associated with an internal feeling or an active behavior? Is it about what our parents teach us or about how we care for them?

What, then, do these passages teach us about how Judaism sees honoring the elderly?

A powerful memory: my teacher is one of the most brilliant and sophisticated Talmudic scholars in the world, yet he impressed me most when I watched him walk his aging father, who was nearly deaf, to the synagogue in our neighborhood in Jerusalem. He would stand next to his father and shout, with tremendous energy and love – and absolutely no self-consciousness – guiding him through the service. The pure devotion he demonstrated spoke volumes about what we teach and how we regard those who have taught us.

We learn that, the Torah does not command us about how we should think or feel about the elderly (or even our parents, for that matter!). Instead, Judaism places an emphasis on **outward** expressions of respect and care. It is not what we think that matters the most, it is how we behave. Feeling love and respect is only the first step- without concrete action, it does not fulfill the requirements of the Torah and of core Jewish values.

Sulam: The Center for Jewish Service Learning

Bureau of Jewish Education of Greater Los Angeles, 6505 Wilshire Blvd., Suite 300, Los Angeles, CA 90035
Office: (323)761-8607 Fax: (323)761-8640 Email: dgold@bjela.org