



THE PERSON IN THE PARSHA

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I Get No Respect!

I love visiting residences for senior citizens. For one thing, being around truly older people invariably helps me feel young by comparison.

Recently, I was a weekend guest scholar at such a residence. I dispensed with my prepared lectures and instead tried to engage the residents of the facility, not one of whom was less than ninety years old, in a group discussion. This proved to be a very wise move on my part, because I learned a great deal about the experience of getting old. Or, as one wise man insisted, “You don’t get ‘old’—you get ‘older.’”

The question that I raised to provoke discussion was this: “What made you first realize that you were getting ‘older?’”

I was taken aback by the reactions of the group, because there were clearly two very different sets of responses.

One member of the group responded, “I knew I was getting older when people started to ignore me. I was no more than a piece of furniture to them. Worse, they no longer noticed me at all.”

About half of the group expressed their agreement with this person’s experience. They proceeded to describe various experiences that they had in being ignored. Some of those stories were quite poignant and powerful. One woman even described how she was present at the outbreak of a fire in a hotel lobby, and the rescue workers “simply did not see me sitting there. That is, until I started to scream!”

But then some of the others spoke up expressing quite different experiences. One gentleman said it for the rest of this second group: “I knew that I was getting older when passengers on the subway or bus stood up for me and gave me their seat.” That basic gesture of respect conveyed to the members of this group of senior citizens that they had indeed reached the age when they were not ignored, but rather the beneficiaries of acts of deference.

The discussion then entered another phase, as both groups agreed that, while they certainly did not want to be ignored, they also were resentful of these gestures of respect. The group unanimously supported the position articulated by the oldest person there, who said: “We don’t want gestures of respect. We want genuine respect.”

It seems that the entire group, although

לעילוי נשמת

יקותיאל זלמן הכהן ז"ל
on his 10th yearzeit - 29 Nisan

Sorely missed by his children,
grandchildren and great-grandchildren
with enduring love and gratitude

Helen and family

appreciative of those who relinquished seats on the subway for them, wanted something more. They wanted their opinions to be heard, their life experience to be appreciated, and their accumulated wisdom to be acknowledged. Symbolic gestures were insufficient, and sometimes were even experienced as demeaning.

This week's Torah portion, *Parshat Kedoshim* (Leviticus 19:1-20:27), contains the basic biblical commandment regarding treatment of the elderly: "You shall rise before the aged and show deference to the old; you shall fear your God: I am the Lord." (*ibid.* 19:32)

Rashi's comments on this verse indicate how sensitive he was to the subtle reactions expressed by the members of my little group. Here is what he says, paraphrasing the Talmudic Sages: "What is deference? It is refraining from sitting in his place, and not interrupting his words. Whereas one might think to simply close his eyes and pretend not to even see the old person, the verse cautions us to fear your God, for after all, he knows what is in the heart of man..."

Interestingly, not sitting in *his* seat means much more than just giving him a seat on the bus. It means recognizing that the elderly person has his own seat, his own well-earned place in society, which you, the younger person, dare not usurp. It is more than just a gesture. It is an acknowledgement of the valued place the elder has in society, a place which is his and his alone.

Similarly, not interrupting the older person's conversation is much more than an act of courtesy. It is awareness that this older person has something valuable to say, a message to which one must listen attentively.



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How well our Torah knows the deviousness of which we are all capable. We can easily pretend not to notice the older person. But He who reads our minds and knows what is in our hearts will be the judge of that. We must fear Him and not resort to self-justification and excuses. We must deal with the older person as a real person, whose presence cannot be ignored but must be taken into full account in our conversation.

Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin, in his commentary on this verse, refers us to

**Following the conclusion
of his Shloshim
in memory of much-loved
JOE KRYCER z"l
who was devoted to our people
and land, and Torah values
The Krycer family**

a passage in the *Midrash Rabbah* on the weekly portion of *Beha'alotcha* in the *Book of Numbers*, which understands the phrase “you shall fear your God” as being the consequence of your showing deference to the elderly. Thus, if you treat the elderly well you will attain the spiritual level of the God-fearing person. But if you refrain from showing the elderly that deference, you can never aspire to the title “God-fearing person” no matter how pious you are in other respects.

There is another entirely different perspective on our verse which provides a practical motive for honoring the elderly. It is to be found in the commentary of Abraham ibn Ezra, who explains the phrase “You shall fear your God” in the following way:

“The time will come when you will be old and frail and lonely. You will long for proper treatment at the hands of the young. But if you showed disrespect for the elderly when you were young, and did not “fear God,” God will not reward you with the treatment you desire in your own old age.”

As each of us strives to show genuine respect to our elders, we help construct a society in which the elderly have their proper place. That society will hopefully still be there when we become older, and then we will reap the benefits of our own youthful behavior.

Our Torah portion is entitled *Kedoshim*, which means “holy.” One of the major components of the holy society is the treatment it accords to every one of its members, especially those who are vulnerable. Treating the elderly with genuine respect, truly listening to them and valuing their contributions, is an essential part of what it means to be a “holy people.” ■

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