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שמע ההן תניא תניא: חכם, חתן, נשיא - גדולה מכפרת.
קיביל עלייה ממניתיה.

They wanted to appoint Rabbi Ze'eira [to a position of authority] but he did not want to accept it. When he heard this teaching: "For a Sage, bridegroom or *nasi*—greatness atones", he accepted his appointment.

Rabbi Ze'eira didn't want the bother that an appointment would entail, so he declined the honor. But then he learnt a principle that "greatness atones"—as the Talmud goes on to explain—that when you are appointed as a Sage, you are in some way a new person with your sins wiped clean. Once he realised that it was in his self-interest to be appointed—who wouldn't want their sins wiped away?!—he accepted his new role.

This idea that "greatness atones" is still true today in a real way. How many times have you seen analysis of someone holding public office that withholds criticism of them *precisely because of that office*? This is based on the implicit assumption that someone who holds office in some way deserves that office.

But the question is deeper than this. The whole discussion of the Talmud assumes male office-holders, as you can see from the word "bridegroom" in the teaching Rabbi Ze'eira heard, and this is true even though we know for a fact that there were female synagogue officers. So the Talmud prompts us to ask further: Who gets the benefit of the doubt from the power invested in them and who does not?

Unfortunately, this conflict of wealth- vs. merit-based honor is only too real in our lives today, forcing us to ask again the fundamental question of this mitzvah: Who counts as an "elder" that we should stand before them? Who deserves our respect and why?

Let us use this verse and its discussion in the Talmud Yerushalmi to refocus us on these important questions, to honor those who deserve it, but to remind ourselves that it is God to whom ultimate honor is owed.

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To Whom is Honor Due?

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Who deserves our respect and why?

This vital question is encoded in the verse:

Before grey hair you should stand;
You should honor the face of an elder;
You should fear your God;
I am YHVH. (Lev. 19:32)

מפני שיבת תקום
והדרת פניו זקן
ויראת מא-להיך
אני ה':

This verse perhaps seems clear on the surface, but immediately raises many questions. Who counts as an "elder" or a "grey hair"? Is it just age or other criteria? (Note that "elder", even in English, has connotations of authority and respect beyond age.) What does the last part of the verse ("You should fear your God; I am YHVH") have to do with the first part? What is the connection between honoring elders and fearing God?

Overall, the reader is left puzzled about how to implement this mitzvah in their daily life.

A lengthy passage in the Talmud Yerushalmi (Bikkurim 3:3 / 65c-d) deals with these questions and brings the mitzvah to life in our Rabbis' own reality.* A few excerpts will illustrate this.

אמר רבי סימון: אמר הקב"ה " מפני שיבת תקום והדרת פניו זקן ויראת מא-להיך אני ה'" (ויקרא יט:לב), אני הוּא שקיימתי עמידת ז肯 תחילה.

* This passage is treated at length in Seth Schwartz, *Were the Jews a Mediterranean Society?* and, while my analysis differs slightly from his, I couldn't recommend a better book for the interested reader.

Said Rabbi Simon: “Before grey hair, you should stand, you should honor the face of an elder, you should fear your God, I, YHVH”—I am the One who put “standing before an elder” first.

So vital is honoring the elder that, according to Rabbi Simon, God puts the elder’s honor before God’s own. But (the earlier Sage) Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar understands the verse to mean something almost entirely contrary to Rabbi Simon’s interpretation:

תני: רבי שמעון בן אלעזר אומר: מניין לזקן שלא
יטריח? תלמוד לומר זקן ויראת מא-להיך אני ה”.

It is taught: Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar says: From where do we know that one doesn’t have to go to trouble for an elder? That’s why the verse says: “Elder! Fear your God, I am YHVH.”

He repunctuates the verse. While before we assumed that the verse was being directed at non-elders, Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar makes the elder the addressee so that God is telling *elders specifically* to fear God. In other words, the last part of the verse actually comes to temper the mitzvah: elders are only elders, they are not God. You should focus on honoring God, not on honoring human beings.

I would suggest that part of this disagreement may ultimately come down to who counts as an “elder.” While the Talmud does entertain the possibility that “elder” retains its literal meaning, the word is so bound up with authority that this interpretative question becomes fertile ground for exploring power conflicts between the multiple Jewish leaders who claimed that title (our Rabbis sometimes use the word *zaken* to be equivalent to *Rabbi*, but synagogue leaders are also often called “presbyter” in inscriptions, which is Greek for elder). It is this question of *who has rightful claim to the title “elder”* that occupies the Talmud:

רבי יוסי ביר' בון בשם ר' חונא בר חייא: בוא וראה
כמה גדול כוחן שלעוושימצוות. שמןין זקן אין עומדין.
ובפני עושימצוות עומדין.

Rabbi Yose bar Rabbi Bun in the name of Rabbi Huna bar Hiyya: Come and see how great is the strength of

those who do mitzvot, since before an elder they do not stand, but before those who do mitzvot they stand!

According to Rabbi Huna bar Hiyya, the people before whom you should stand are not elders per se, but those who do mitzvot—it is ethical merit that earns respect, not age. Having dealt with those who deserve honor, the Talmud moves onto those to who claim honor but do not deserve it:

רבי זעירא וחד מן רבנן הווון יתיבין, עבר חד מן אילין
דמיתמני בכספ. אמר יתיה דמן רבנן לרבי זעירא: נעביד
נפשין תנוי ולא ניקום לוון מן קמוני.

Rabbi Ze’era and one of the Rabbis were sitting [and learning]. One of those who was appointed for money passed by. That one of the Rabbis said to Rabbi Ze’era: “We shall occupy ourselves in our learning and not stand before him.”

“Those ones who are appointed for money,” who claim their respect only through their wealth, seems remarkably consonant with what we know of late antique synagogue structure. In order to get your position of authority in a synagogue—just like in most ancient Roman institutions—you would most likely have to donate a large amount of money (Rajak and Noy, “Archisynagogoi: Office, Title and Social Status in the Greco-Jewish Synagogue,” *The Journal of Roman Studies*, 83 [1993]). One needed no merit at all to claim respect, only wealth. Consequently, Rabbi Ze’era and his colleague, instead of showing honor to this so-called “elder,” continue their learning, showing honor to what matters—God’s Torah.

The ancient mitzvah is here dramatized by the Talmud in a contemporary conflict, between the Torah-based values of our Rabbis and the Roman-based values of synagogues that they didn’t control and, perhaps, only reluctantly attended (e.g. PT Bava Metzia 2:8/8d where Yehudah bar Rabbi, having had his shoes stolen in a synagogue, laments going there in the first place).

The most dangerous part of claiming honor is the belief that, because someone has a certain position of authority, that person deserves it, as raised in this (possibly humorous) anecdote: