

Standing Up for a Talmid Chochom

Rabbi Yehuda Balsam

Our annual commemoration of Mattan Torah not only serves as a tribute to the past, it is also an opportunity for us to evaluate our relationship to that which we received. We should resolve to improve our diligence in Torah study, thereby bringing ourselves that much closer to understanding the d'var Hashem. Furthermore we must ask ourselves if we fully appreciate this great gift that God has imparted upon us. Do we show the proper respect for the Torah when we learn it, or do we approach its study as we would with any other discipline? Are we careful in our treatment of Torah scrolls and other sifrei kodesh? Perhaps even more important is to evaluate the level of respect that we show to talmidei chachamim and b'nei Torah. One who has studied and absorbed (or has dedicated himself to doing so) is certainly an individual worthy of our reverence. Furthermore, giving lomdei Torah the respect that they deserve serves to bolster our own sense of kavod haTorah and can inspire us to greater achievement in our own learning. With this in mind, let us explore one of the fundamental forms of kavod haTorah, standing up for a talmid chochom.

The Source

The Torah (Vayikrah 19:32) tells us: "mipnei seivah takum" (you shall stand before one who is satiated). In the Targum Unkelus it is explained that satiated refers to one who is learned in Torah. This is also the opinion of the the gemarah (kiddushin 32b). It is understood that this pasuk is teaching us a mitzvah min haTorah to stand in the presence of a talmid chochom, and it is recorded as such in the Shulchan Aruch (Y.D. 244:1). The Sefer Hachinuch (257) explains the rationale behind this mitzvah: because the main purpose for the creation of man is to serve and properly understand Hashem through his Torah, it is proper to show respect for one who has achieved this milestone. Through this one will also inspire others to similar accomplishments.

At this point one can ask: why did the Torah single out standing for a talmid chochom as a separate mitzvah? Don't we already have the pasuk (Devarim 6:13) "Es Hashem Elokechah Tirah" to which the gemara (Bava kamma 41b) explains that the word "es" includes talmidei chachamim. Thus we know that there is a general principle requiring respect for Torah scholars. What then is gained from this additional commandment? Tosfos (s.v. L'rabos) suggests that the requirement to fear Torah scholars only applies to one's own rebbi muvhak (a teacher from whom one has acquired the majority of his Torah knowledge), or to a gadol hador (whom the halachah considers to be similar to one's own rebbi), whereas the obligation to stand applies to all talmidei chachamim. The Chazon Ish (Y.D. 149:4) offers a different explanation. He claims that had the Torah not singled out standing up as a form of respect, we would have not known that it was necessary to rise before a Torah scholar. Therefore, standing was singled out. He differentiates between a chochom and a parent for whom no additional pasuk is needed, as the need to rise is implied in the concept of respect.

For whom must one stand?

The poskim discuss the actual qualifications for a talmid chochom as they relate to standing. The Mechaber (Y.D. 244:1) writes that one must stand for a scholar even if he is a young man. The Shach (s.k. 1) quotes the Shibalei Haleket who claims that this includes a boy who is still under bar mitzvah. The Sfas Emes (ibid) argues and claims that one who is not yet included in mitzvos cannot demand respect. Either way we see that the kavod which we afford a scholar is based strictly on his knowledge. The Mechaber and Rema explain further that this applies even if the individual is not your rebbi, but is greater than you in Torah knowledge and is one from whom it is worthy of you to learn. The Shach (s.k. 2) explains that this means he must be discernibly more knowledgeable than the average Jew.

The Shach (s.k.11) writes that nowadays people are lax in their observance of this mitzvah. They generally stand for a rosh yeshivah or an av beis din, but not for a normal talmid chochom. To explain this practice, Rav Yosef Rosen, the Rugatchover Gaon posits (see shu't Shalvat Yosef 1) that perhaps the chiyuv d'oraisah of standing for a chochom only applies to one who has smichah, and since no one living today has real smichah (which refers to rabbinic ordination bestowed by someone whose smichah can be traced directly back to Moshe Rabbeinu), there is no longer a biblical obligation to stand. However, this opinion is rejected by the vast majority of poskim (see shu't Yabia Omer 4, 16:2). They claim that laxity in standing for an average chochom came about because most of these Rabanim were mochel on their kavod and relieved the people of their obligation to stand for them. However, to differentiate between themselves and those of greater scholarship, they required the people to stand for those deemed to be in the upper echelon of Torah learning, thus showing these gedolim an even higher level of kavod. Along these lines, the sefer Pardes Yosef (246) quotes the Ksav Sofer who holds that there is a double chiyuv to stand for a talmid chochom who is also a zaken (over 70 years of age). This is because the second half of our pasuk teaches us "vehadarta p'nei zaken" that there is also a separate obligation to stand up for an elderly individual. Thus, one who stands for an elderly Torah scholar fulfills two mitzvos.

There is a dispute among the poskim concerning whether one must stand up for a talmid chochom who is blind. The Chidah (Birkei Yosef Y.D. 244:2) writes that even though he will not be seen by the scholar, he must still stand in his honor, while the Sfas Emes (ibid) and the Minchas Chinuch (257:5) write that one need not stand, although it is praiseworthy to do so. A simple analysis of this machlokes shows us that the question at hand is whether the purpose of standing is so that the chochom himself will receive the proper honor, or so that the Torah is honored through the respect that one shows for those who learn it. If our goal is to honor the Torah, surely it makes no difference whether the scholar sees us standing for him or not. On the other hand, if we mean to honor the chochom himself, then there's no point in standing for one who will take no notice.

The Minchas Chinuch (257:4) is of the opinion that one need not stand for a woman who is learned and knowledgeable in Torah. He explains that the laws pertaining to a talmid chochom can only apply to one who is commanded to acquire Torah

knowledge, not one who chooses to do so. Therefore, since a woman is not required to learn Torah (except for the halachos that pertain to her see Kiddushin 29b), she does not have the halachik status of a Torah scholar. However, the S'dei Chemed (1, s.v. eishet chaver) quotes other poskim who hold that since the Torah knowledge that a woman acquires brings her to a greater understanding of chochmas Hashem, it matters not that she is not obligated to learn and one should therefore rise in her presence. He recommends following this opinion because of safek d'oraisah l'chumrah.

From the perspective of the talmid chochom

The gemarah seems to give conflicting reports concerning how the chochom himself should behave toward those who must stand for him. In one place (Kiddushin 33a) records the statement of Abayei who claims that a scholar should go out of his way to insure that the people should not have to stand for him. He should avoid situations where his entrance will be easily noticed, thus saving the people the burden of rising from their seats. Elsewhere (Berachos 28 also see Medrash Rabbah, Parshas Behaloschah 15) the implication is that a chochom should pass in front of the people in order that they be given the opportunity to rise before him. Perhaps one can explain that although the scholar himself should not seek to bother others and should himself choose to run from such honor, he must also insure that the people display kavod haTorah for their own sake. If he were to completely shun such reverence, people might forget that to study the Torah is something worthy of respect. Thus he would be robbing people of an important fundamental of Judaism. Nevertheless, the Mechaber (s'if 6) paskens in accordance with the gemarah in Kiddushin.

When and how one should stand

The Mechaber (s'if 9) writes that one should stand when the chochom is within his 4 amos (approximately 6 feet). The Chidah (ibid:5) adds that he should not stand before this in order to make it clear that he is only standing because of the chochom's presence. He may sit again when the chochom leaves his 4 amos. According to the Me'iri (Kiddushin 32b) one must continue to stand every time the scholar passes through his 4 amos, even if it's 100 times a day, provided that he is not engaged in Torah study. However, the Rema (242:16) writes that one need only stand up twice a day. Since one is only obligated to say kriyas shema twice a day, which is tantamount to greeting the divine presence, he need not show greater respect to a talmid chochom (see Taz s.k. 12). The Rema notes that this is only when people are aware that you have already stood for him twice that day, but if people are not informed of this fact, one should stand up in their presence. The Shach (s.k. 37) concurs with the opinion of the Me'iri and argues that if one were privileged to greet the shechinah more than twice a day he would surely do so, so too if he sees a chochom more than twice a day he should stand for him.

Exceptions to the rule

In a case where a chochom enters the presence of his fellow scholar the Mechaber (s'if 8) writes that he need not stand. However, the Vilna Gaon (Biur Ha'gra s.k. 13 based on Bava Metzi'ah 32a) points out that if the two are colleagues and learn

Torah from one another than they should stand for each other. This does not apply to a Rav who is considered a gadol hador, who need not stand for one who is considered less knowledgeable than he.

The Mechaber (s'if 11) also points out that one who is learning Torah should still stand when in the presence of a scholar, but many poskim (see Sefer Mikneh, Kiddushin 33b) point out that this is only if standing up will not affect his learning. If he will be constantly bothered and unable to immediately resume his train of thought, he is not required to stand up. The Rema (376:1) adds that a sick person and a mourner need not stand even for a gadol hador. The poskim argue whether they are permitted to stand up if they wish. However, if at all possible, they should at least acknowledge the presence of such a distinguished individual. The Chidah (shu't Chaim Sha'al 1:71) writes that one who is sitting and holding a sefer Torah need not stand for a Torah scholar. Even if he wishes to do so, we should recommend that he remain seated.

Rebbi Muvhak

When it comes to one's rebbi muvhak, the halachos of standing differ slightly. (Note: I have heard from Rav Herschel Schachter that nowadays it is difficult for anyone to have a rebbi muvhak because so much of the learning that we do comes from sefarim that we read on our own, not what is told to us by our rebbi. However these halachos would presumably apply to all gedolei hador who, as mentioned above, have the status of one's rebbi muvhak.) One is obligated to stand from the moment the rebbi is within eyeshot to the moment he leaves that field of vision. This even applies if it is not recognizable that one is standing in order to give honor to his rebbi (Mechaber 9, and Shach 6). Furthermore, while an individual who stands for a chochom is allowed to lean against a support, one who stands for his rebbi must be careful to stand completely upright position, under his own power.

We should take great care to properly observe this mitzvah di'oraisah and through the zechus of having proper respect lehaTorah v'lomdehah, make we merit a complete and meaningful kabalas haTorah.