

Honoring Elders as Sacred Obligation

- RABBI KARA TAV



SEIVAH
SACRED AGING



This resource explores the Jewish obligation of *kibud zaken*, honoring elders, through Torah, Talmud, and lived experience, reframing aging as a sacred stage of life rather than a decline. It invites individuals, families, and organizations to cultivate a culture of dignity, reverence, and responsibility across generations.



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Seivah: Promoting Sacred Aging

Honoring Elders as Sacred Obligation

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Too often, our world treats aging as a problem to be managed. Elders are more likely to appear in pharmaceutical ads than in positions of influence. In a culture that glorifies youth, productivity, and speed, aging is frequently met with discomfort, avoidance, or even contempt. But Judaism offers a radically different vision.

What kind of society might we build if aging were treated as a sacred and vital stage of life, marked by dignity, wisdom, and leadership?

Jewish tradition does not treat the honoring of elders as optional. It frames this act as a moral and spiritual obligation, not because our elders are perfect but because they are sacred. And if we are lucky, one day, we too will be the ones for whom others are commanded to rise.

Now we are left facing the real challenge: *the struggle of responsibility.*

What does it mean to honor someone simply because they are older than we are?

As a Palliative Care Chaplain, and as both the parent of an adult child and the child of an aging mother, I live daily in generational tension. I crave respect for my hard-won wisdom and the humility to ask a simple question, even as I bristle at repeating an answer yet again. When my daughter says, "Why don't you just Google it?" or my mother once more asks how to send a birthday check, I feel the press of time, the weight of repetition, and the love threaded through it all. Honoring my mother in those moments, even when that love stretches me, deepens both relationships. It transforms the ordinary into sacred practice. It models respect not based on merit or capacity but on presence and dignity. It reminds me that the Torah doesn't just ask us to show respect—it asks us to transform ourselves.

In the hospital, I see this same dynamic play out again and again. Patients and families struggle to find their words, to be heard, to feel seen. Doctors, pressed for time, may miss the person behind the symptoms. They are trained to diagnose and treat but not always to pause, to wonder, or to listen. And yet, in quiet moments, they carry the ache of knowing that honoring elders is not about sentiment—it's about presence. They remember, sometimes too late, that they were speaking to someone's grandmother -- a teacher, a builder, a storyteller -- who deserved more than efficiency; she deserved curiosity and care.

When they ask me how to make space for that reverence, I offer a question in return:

What does it mean to offer respect not only when we feel it but when we must summon it out of principle?

Jewish Text & Discussion Questions

The Jewish value of *kibud zaken* (honoring elders) is far from simple. It's not just about patience or politeness. It is about confronting a deeper set of obligations that challenge our assumptions about age, authority, and dignity. Below are three text studies and corresponding discussion questions to help examine how our tradition commands us to rise, show deference, and cultivate reverence for the elderly.

Text 1: Leviticus 19:32

The inclusion of the commandment to honor the elderly within the Holiness Code of Leviticus reflects an ancient awareness of a deeply modern issue: the marginalization of older adults. Leviticus 19 outlines a moral framework for a just society that transcends time and place. It demands care for the poor, protection against exploitation, kindness to the stranger, honesty, and fair treatment of workers. Among these core ethical imperatives is the clear directive: respecting elders is woven into the very fabric of communal holiness.

מִפְנֵי שִׁיבָה תִּלְוֹם וְהִדְרַת פָּנֵי זָקֵן וְיִרְאַת מֵאֻלְקֵיךָ אֲנִי ה'

"You shall rise before the aged and show deference to the old;
you shall fear your God: I am the Lord" (Leviticus 19:32).

The first question the rabbis of the Talmud ask about this mitzvah is:

Who exactly are the elders we are commanded to honor? Are they defined by age, by wisdom, or by an inherent wisdom conferred on them by their age?

Discussion Questions

1. The text says honoring our elders is an obligation, a mitzvah. Can a value be an obligation? Is it possible to honor someone just because we're commanded to?
2. What might obeying this commandment look like?
3. What happens when this commandment is ignored? How does it show up in our behavior or attitudes?
4. How would you describe the experience of not being honored or respected?

Text 2: Talmud Kiddushin 32b

Building on Leviticus 19:32, which commands us to honor the aged, the rabbis of the Talmud take up a key question: *What qualifies someone as worthy of this mitzvah?* In the Babylonian Talmud, tractate Kiddushin, the rabbis delve into a rich debate about whether honor is due because of age, wisdom, or both. Their answers boil the debate down to three basic opinions.

Source 1: Tanna Kamma, the anonymous voice of the Talmud

תנו רבנן: "מִפְּנֵי שִׂיבָה תִּקְוִים" – יָכוֹל אֶפִּילוּ מִפְּנֵי זָקֵן אֲשַׁמַּאי
תִּלְמִיד לֹמֵר: "זָקֵן", וְאֵין זָקֵן אֶלָּא חָכָם, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: "אֶסְפָּה לִּי שִׁבְעִים אִישׁ מִזִּקְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל".

*The Sages taught with regard to the verse: "Before the grey head you shall stand and you shall revere the face of an elder, and you shall fear your God" (Leviticus 19:32): One **might** have thought that it is obligatory to stand **before a simple [ashmai] elder**. Therefore, **the verse states: "elder," and an "elder" means nothing other than a wise man, as it is stated: "Gather unto Me seventy men of the Elders of Israel, whom you know to be the Elders of the people" (Numbers 11:16).***

The Tanna Kamma teaches that the obligation to stand before an elder applies only to someone who is wise (*zaken*), not just to someone who is old. This is based on the use of the word *zaken* in Numbers 11:16, which clearly refers to elders distinguished for their wisdom.

Source 2: Rabbi Yosei HaGelili

רבי יוסי הגלילי אומר: אין זקן אלא מי שקנה חכמה, שנאמר: "ה' קנני ראשית דרכו".

*An "elder [zaken]" means **nothing other than one who has acquired wisdom**. He interprets the word *zaken* as a contraction of the phrase *zeh kanna*, meaning: **This one has acquired**. Elsewhere the word *kanna* is used in reference to wisdom, **as it is stated that wisdom says: "The Lord acquired me [kanani] at the beginning of His way"** (Proverbs 8:22).*

Rabbi Yosei HaGelili takes a broader view. He distinguishes between *seivah* (old age) and *zaken* (wisdom), arguing that each deserves honor in its own right. According to him, one must stand both for an elderly person, regardless of their knowledge, and for a young Torah scholar because of their wisdom.

Source 3: Isi ben Yehuda

איסי בן יהודה אומר: "מפני שיבה תקום" – אפילו כל שיבה במשמע.

*"Before the grey head you shall stand," indicates that even **any person with a grey head is included in this mitzvah**, not only a Sage.*

Isi ben Yehuda goes further, stating that the mitzvah applies to any elderly person, no matter their level of wisdom. His interpretation highlights the importance of honoring age itself, recognizing the value of lived experience and the challenges of aging.

Together, these views reveal a central tension: Is honor owed because of age (*seivah*) or because of wisdom (*zaken*)? Some sages even try to expand the category of honor to include young scholars, emphasizing that wisdom also merits respect.

Ultimately, Jewish law follows the opinion of Isi ben Yehuda and affirms that the obligation to rise before an elder is rooted in honoring age alone, regardless of wisdom or merit. This signals that the mitzvah is about cultivating a spiritual discipline: the practice of humility, restraint, and reverence in the face of growing older.

Discussion Questions

1. The Tanna Kamma teaches that only those who are wise are included in the mitzvah to honor elders. Why do you think wisdom is emphasized in this interpretation?
2. Rabbi Yosei HaGelili distinguishes between age and wisdom, suggesting both deserve honor. How do you understand the difference between honoring someone for age versus for wisdom? Can you think of situations where honoring one without the other might be challenging?
3. Isi ben Yehuda says age alone is enough reason to stand. What does this say about the value of lived experience? How does this resonate with your own experience of growing older?

Text 3: Berakhot 8b:7

The final text is also from the Babylonian Talmud, this time from Tractate Berachot. This tractate is generally about blessings, prayers, and synagogue matters. This teaching in this text refers to the story of the golden calf, when Moses was so furious upon seeing the people praying to this false idol that he smashed the tablets with the Ten Commandments that God had written. Moses then goes back up Mount Sinai and receives a second set of tablets. Both sets were placed in the Ark of the Covenant.

Having explored the debate in Kiddushin about who qualifies as an elder worthy of honor, whether through age, wisdom, or both, this source explores the spiritual and symbolic power of honoring elders. If Leviticus framed the mitzvah as a personal obligation, this teaching sanctifies it and places it at the heart of our covenantal tradition.

הַזִּקְרָה בְּזִקְנָן שֶׁשָּׂכַח תַּלְמוּדוֹ מִחֻמַּת אוֹנָסוֹ. דְּאִמְרִינָן: לוֹחוֹת וְשִׁבְרֵי לוֹחוֹת מוֹנְחוֹת בְּאֶרֶץ.

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi further advised: And be careful to (continue to) respect an elder who has forgotten his Torah knowledge due to circumstances beyond his control. (Even though he is no longer a Torah scholar, he must still be respected for the Torah that he once possessed). As we say: both the tablets of the Covenant and the broken tablets are placed in the Ark of the Covenant in the Temple. (Even though the first tablets were broken, their sanctity obligates one not to treat them with contempt. An elder who forgot the Torah knowledge he once possessed is likened to these broken tablets).

Discussion Questions

1. What do you notice about the metaphor comparing the elder to the broken tablets? How does this make you feel? How do our communities handle broken things?
2. "Circumstances beyond their control" sounds like it is referring to the physical or cognitive losses that can accompany aging. How does the text frame these losses? What other types of losses accompany aging?
3. The text may appear to view elders through the lens of their losses. What are your thoughts on this?
4. Take note of the phrase "use caution." What might this mean?
5. How does this text relate to the previous two texts in honoring our elders as an obligation?

The Jewish value of *kibud zaken* (honoring elders) is far from simple. It's not just about patience or politeness. It is about confronting a deeper set of obligations that challenge our assumptions about age, authority, and dignity.

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