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Revering Torah Scholars

Rabbenu Ha-Rav Tzvi Yehudah taught us to revere all Torah scholars. Once, one of his students disparaged Charedi Rabbis and accused them of being responsible for Jews dying in the Holocaust. Ha-Rav Tzvi Yehudah castigated him: "Before all else, you must learn the meaning of treating Torah scholars with respect!" He devoted several hours to explaining this concept to him.

Why go to such lengths? Because "Moshe received the Torah from Sinai, passed it down to Yeshoshua, Yehoshua to the elders and the elders to the prophets, and they in turn passed it down to the Men of the Great Assembly" (Avot 1:1). Without those who handed down the Torah, there is no Torah.

Everything rests on the way we relate to those who learn Torah. “Torah scholars increase peace in the world” (Berachot 64a). That is their essence.

Consider how Rabbenu Tam honored Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra. With enormous humility he wrote: “I am the servant of Avraham, and I prostrate myself before him.” And see the adoration with which Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra responded: “Is it proper for a knight of the People, mighty and thundering, to lower his head in a letter to a simple individual?”

If you say that the Rabbis of our own generation are not as great as those of previous generations, you are not speaking from wisdom. Our Sages taught us: “Gidon in his generation was like Moshe in his generation, and Yiftach in his generation was like Shmuel in his generation...” as it says (Devarim 17:9), ‘Approach the Cohanim and Levi’im and the judge who will be in your times’” (Rosh Hashanah 25b).

Do not cast aspersions on the Rabbis of the generation if you find a shortcoming. A person is judged according to his overall deeds, and a great Rabbi’s shortcomings surely make up only a negligible minority of his total: less than a sixtieth, perhaps less than a thousandth. Our Sages did not refrain

from pointing out that even the greatest Jewish personalities - the Patriarchs, the kings and the prophets - had shortcomings. That does not mean, however, that we are allowed to criticize them. An irrevocable pre-condition for criticizing them, says Maran Ha-Rav Kook, is that we ourselves must be learned, saintly, pure, and free of all blemish (Ein Aya, Berachot 83, page 97, Ot 29).

Moreover, writes Radbaz, even if it is revealed that a great Rabbi has expressed himself heretically, there is no reason to ridicule him. After all, even after Rabbi Hillel said to the Jewish People that there shall be no Messiah, the other Rabbis continued to quote him (Shut Radbaz 4:187). Also, Rav Kook wrote that if we set out to create a fence to protect Jewish law from harm, we mustn't as a result cause even greater destruction by disgracing a Torah scholar (Ma'amarei Ha-Re'eiyah, p. 56).

Controversy between scholars is legitimate. It is good to ask questions of the great Rabbis of the generation, our spiritual leaders. Having faith in the sages doesn't mean playing the fool. It is permissible to ask. Yet it is forbidden to disgrace them! In any case, it is impossible to follow all of the sages at once.

There are controversies among them. Therefore, one must “find a Rabbi” (Avot 1:6), but at the same time honor all other Rabbis.

The rule is this: Love and revere those who dedicate their lives to Torah day and night, for their devotion earns them divine assistance. The Rabbis said:

Whoever loves Torah scholars will have a son who is a Torah scholar.

Whoever is deferential to Torah scholars will have a son-in-law who is a Torah scholar. Whoever reveres Torah scholars will himself become a Torah scholar (Shabbat 23b).

We can learn from Yehoshafat, King of Judea. Whenever he saw a Torah scholar, he would rise from his throne and hug and kiss him and say to him, “Rebbe! Rebbe! Master! Master!” (Ketuvot 103b). Rabbi Zeira, when in need of a break from his studies, would sit at the entrance to the house of study in order to be able to fulfill the Mitzvah of rising before Torah scholars (Berachot 28a; quoted in Mesilat Yesharim, Chapter 19). How fortunate we are that we have Torah scholars! How fortunate we are that we love, honor and revere them!