

Should a Torah Scholar Demand Respect?

Rambam, Mishnah Torah, Hilchos Talmud Torah, Perek VII

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Halacha XIII

“...And so was the way of the early pious ones, they would hear their disgrace and wouldn't respond, furthermore, they would forgive those who said disparaging things...and this is the appropriate path for Torah scholars to take. This is only the case when they were disgraced privately, but a Torah scholar who was disgraced publicly is prohibited from forgiving his honor, and if he does so he is punished, for this is a disgrace of the Torah, rather he must strike back like a snake until the offender asks of him forgiveness and he forgives him.”

This is a very striking halacha. First the Rambam writes that a scholar should be forgiving of disparaging conduct, then he presents the prohibition of the scholar to forgive his honor. How do these two statements coexist? Yes, the Rambam explains the difference as lying in the surrounding circumstances, but from what does he draw the reasoning to create such a distinction? An even more basic question is why the latter statement should be so. Is not our image of the classic pious man of the Torah far more in step with being a forgiving, gracious person? Why is it really necessary to be so demanding of others in the first place?

The concept of the Torah scholar insisting he be treated appropriately stems from a discussion in Meseches Yoma, 22b. Rav Yehuda teaches in the name of Rav that Shaul's ultimate downfall was retribution from Heaven for not standing up for his honor when immoral individuals publicly questioned his appropriateness as a leader. It was incumbent upon him, as King of Israel, to insist that he be spoken of with respect. The next statement, by Rebbe Yochanan in the name of Rebbe Shimon ben Yehotzadak, is that any Torah scholar who does not take vengeance for his own honor like a snake is not a true Torah scholar¹. The commentaries learn from this juxtaposition that the need for the scholar to demand respect is akin to the lesson learned from Shaul. Just as Shaul needed to appreciate that the honor of his position must be held up higher than he might have held his personal honor, so too the Torah scholar must understand that the honor of the Torah which he represents must be held higher than he might raise his personal honor.

If the responsibility of the Torah scholar to hold up his honor is so great, why the encouragement from the Rambam to overlook slights to his honor? The Kesef Mishna explains that there is a seeming contradiction between gemoras. The Talmud Yerushalmi, in the third perek of Moed Katan, cites a story involving Rebbe Yehoshua ben Levi, who summoned an individual three times and still did not receive a visit. He told the person that he had every right to excommunicate him for his conduct, but was not going to do so, being that he had never excommunicated anyone before. The clear implication of the gemora is that this was a virtuous practice. On the other hand, we have the quote from Yoma which we have already noted. How are we to resolve this seeming contradiction? The Rambam's approach is to assume that the reason the degradation of the talmid chacham in Yoma is so severe is because the Torah has been publicly disgraced², whereas the disgrace in the Yerushalmi is in a private context.

1 See the gemora in Yoma for an exchange as to why this practice is not covered by the prohibition of taking revenge.

2 Regarding the definition of a public disgrace, the Bach (Yoreh Deah, 334) writes that if a scholar was disgraced in front of one person it would still count as a private disgrace for these purposes, being that the report of one witness is generally insignificant in a bais din.

The Ran (Rosh Hashanah, 4b bedapai haRif) proposes a different approach. He discusses the gemora in Megillah, 28a, in which it is said that Mar Zutraah would have the daily practice before going to sleep of forgiving all those who had pained him that day. That would imply it is appropriate for a scholar to be forgiving, even if he did not sense any remorse. How can that be reconciled with the gemora in Yoma? The Ran suggests that the gemora in Megillah refers to people who caused a scholar pain³, as opposed to actively disgracing him, which is the context of the gemora in Yoma.

It should be noted that the conclusion of the gemora in Yoma is that it would be inappropriate for the scholar to act against the individual who disgraced him, as we are taught the great value in hearing disgraceful words said about one's self and not responding. What, then, is the intent of the scholar taking revenge for his disgrace? The gemora concludes that the intent is he should not object when others act to punish the person who disgraced the scholar, though it would be inappropriate for him to personally respond⁴. The gemora further establishes the context of this quote as being that the offending party did not ask forgiveness for his deed⁵. If, however, he asked forgiveness it would be completely appropriate for the scholar to graciously accept⁶.

One more point along the lines of this discussion is that of the Rivash in the name of the Raavad, cited by the Kesef Mishna. The gemora in Meseches Kiddushin, 32a, states that a Torah teacher may forgive his honor. If that is the case, what is the meaning of the gemora in Yoma? The Raavad answers there is a difference between forgiving the appropriate honor (*kavod*) due one's self and the appropriate reverence (*yirah*) due one's self. As is discussed in the context of honor for one's parents, a parent may forgive positive acts of honor but may not forgive acts of disrespect. So too here, a scholar may not give others permission to degrade his honor, for such acts are a lack of honor to the Torah itself.

It is fitting that we reflect on this topic as we complete the learning project in memory of Harav Gedaliah Anemer, zt"l. One of the issues about which he was most passionate was that of the honor of the Torah and those who held positions representing its standards. There are numerous accounts within our community about episodes in which he was not particular about his personal honor. Even so, the moment he perceived a lack of honor to his position, he saw it as his duty to uphold the honor of the Torah.

3 One could understand the Yerushalmi in Moed Katan along similar lines.

4 See Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah, 334 for a separate discussion about a Torah scholar putting others in excommunication for their disrespectful conduct.

5 It should be noted that the language of the gemora is that one is to be forgiving when he has been asked forgiveness and *has been mollified*. This implies that a scholar need not forgive the disgracing party if he doesn't feel the apology is sincere.

6 This is implied in the words of our passage of the Rambam, as the concluding words are "until he asks him forgiveness *and he forgives him*," implying it's the scholar's duty to do so.