

Forever Young: Torah is Joy

Rabbi Reuven Mann

We read in the Hagadda: “Rabbi Eliezer Ben Azaria said, I am as a seventy year old and did not understand why we mention the Exodus every night until Ben Zoma explained etc.”

The main subject of this paragraph is the Talmudic debate regarding the proper interpretation of “All the days of your life” which pertain to the recitation of the Shema. We may ask; what is the purpose of introducing a *Halachic* discussion with Rabbi Eliezer’s revelation about his age? Of what significance is it that he did not learn the reason for a certain observance until he was seventy?

The world of Torah constitutes a universe unto itself, distinct from any other field of intellectual endeavor. The objective of the secular scholar is to achieve a certain level of expertise which enables him to reap the practical benefits of being regarded as an “authority”.

He is therefore at his most creative in his *younger* years. His energies are directed toward innovative and progressive approaches. However at a certain point he ceases to investigate and begins to disseminate. His ideas assume a fixed form. The desire to learn new things is replaced by the complacent feeling that “there is no reason to study what you already know.”

Complacency is antithetical to Torah. The *Talmid Chacham* never loses his youthful inquisitiveness and delights in discovering new insights. This goes together with a certain intellectual humbleness.

Torah is so vast and profound that even a genius at an advanced age can be stumped on a basic point. This is what Rabbi Eliezer wanted to convey. He was a great Talmid Chacham and was already seventy. Yet he had not lost his youthful desire for knowledge and openness to the ideas of others. Thus, he wanted to express his excitement upon learning the drasha of Ben Zoma.

This lesson is very relevant to the holiday of Shavuot. It reminds us that the greatest gift G-d has bestowed on us is the Torah. Judaism is more than a body of rules and regulations that govern every aspect of personal and communal life. It is a system of concepts, a body of knowledge and a method of analysis which enables us to access the most significant truth that enlighten our existence.

We must, therefore, cultivate the proper attitude toward Torah. Laziness must be overcome. Effort, consistency and steadfastness are required. Age should never be an issue. Rabbi Akiva was an ignorant shepherd until the age of forty.

He went on to become one of the greatest Sages of our history. He exemplifies the principle that at any point in one's life enormous and unimaginable gain can be derived from Talmud Torah. Rabbi Eliezer Ben Azaria was a great scholar whose love of learning only increased with age.

These role models demonstrate that Judaism, unlike any other religion, is not only about duty, responsibility and sacrifice. It is about the profound joy of perceiving the wonders of G-d's Torah and becoming a partner with the Almighty in fulfilling His plan for the Jewish people and all mankind. The true student of Torah who appreciates its sublime beauty never really ages he remains forever young.

May you have a Chag Sameach