

# Awe and Freedom

Ephraim Meth

*Editor, the To-Go series*

Respect and awe for Torah scholars and teachers is a cornerstone of Judaism. The mitzvah to respect scholars is derived from the verse, “stand up for a *zaken*,” i.e. stand up for *zeh sheKamah chochmah*, one who has acquired Torah wisdom. (Kiddushin 32b) The mitzvah to be in awe of Torah teachers is derived from awe of parents; if we must be in awe of our parents, who are responsible for our life in this world, we must certainly be in awe of our teachers, who are responsible for our life in the world to come. (Rambam, Sefer haMitzvot, *aseh* 209)

Awe of our teachers has a superficial dimension that imposes demands on our actions, and an internal dimension that imposes demands on our emotions and intellect. The existence and interrelationship of these dimensions are uniquely reflected in the laws of reclining at the Pesach seder. By studying the intersection of *mora rabo* (awe of one’s teacher) and the laws of reclining, we can better appreciate and fulfill the mitzvah of holding our teachers in the highest esteem.

The Shulchan Aruch rules that everyone must recline at the Pesach seder, since reclining helps us reenact the transition from slavery to freedom. In Egypt, we ate sitting straight, like slaves. Now that we are free, we can recline while eating. Only women and students are exempt from reclining at the seder.

*One should recline as freedmen do ... a woman does not need reclining ... a student before his teacher does not need reclining.*

**Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 472:2-5**

ישב בהסיבה דרך חירות ... אשה אינה צריכה  
הסיבה ... תלמיד לפני רבו אינו צריך הסיבה.  
שלחן ערוך אורח חיים סי' תעב סעיפים ב-ה

**Q** Why are women and students exempt from reclining?

The Rashbam (Pesachim 108a) asserts that women need not recline at the seder because they usually possess an experiential awe of their husband. Similarly, students need not recline because they usually possess an experiential awe of their teacher. Experiential awe is an emotional and intellectual state that automatically translates into action. A student who possesses emotional awe of his or her teacher cannot leisurely recline in front of that teacher, and is compelled to sit straight. Halakhah declares that since women and students usually possess experiential awe, they cannot be obligated to recline.

In contrast, R. Achai Gaon (She’iltot, Vayikra 77) asserts that women are exempt from reclining because they do not usually recline. Experiential awe is insufficient justification for exempted reclining. Similarly, students need not recline because the Torah commands that they act in awe of their teachers. The mitzvah of awe for teachers conflicts with the mitzvah of reclining at the

seder, and halakhah instructs that awe takes priority over reclining. The experiential awe students are assumed to possess is insufficient to exempt them.

Both of these reasons are echoed in halakhah. Women are exempt from reclining even when they possess no experiential awe, e.g. when their husbands are not present. Yet students seem to be exempt from reclining even when there is no mitzvah to act in awe, e.g. when their teacher gives explicit permission to act leisurely in his or her presence. This is for the Rashbam's reason, that students usually possess experiential awe of their teachers. With this understanding, we can resolve a textual quandary.

*Abaye said, "when we were in the master's yeshiva we reclined on one another's knees. When we came to Rav Yosef's yeshiva, he said to us, 'you do not need [to recline, since] awe of teachers is like awe of heaven'."*

### **Pesachim 108a**

אמר אביי כי הוינן בי מר זגין  
אבירכי דהדדי כי אתינן לבי רב  
יוסף אמר לן לא צריכתו מורא רבך  
כמורא שמים.  
**פסחים קח.**

Rav Yosef's expression, "you do not need," implies that the students could choose to either recline or to not recline. Yet reclining is not a matter of permission; if the mitzvah of awe is stronger than the mitzvah to experience freedom, they should be obligated to not recline, to sit straight in awe of their teacher. If the mitzvah to experience freedom is stronger than awe, they should be obligated to recline. Either way, their conduct is not a matter of choice!

In light of the dual nature of students' exemption - exemption on account of the mitzvah to act in awe, and exemption on account of experiential awe - Rav Yosef's expression is eminently understandable. Vis-à-vis the act of awe, reclining is either mandatory (with the teacher's permission to act leisurely) or forbidden (without the teacher's permission); in the realm of action, we can assess all the variables and issue comprehensive legislation, leaving no room for choice. Yet vis-à-vis emotion, reclining is a matter of informed choice. If the student feels he possesses experiential awe, he must opt to sit straight. If he feels he does not possess experiential awe, he must opt to recline. In the realm of emotion, we cannot assess all the variables. We must leave assessment of presence or absence of experiential awe, and hence the decision of whether or not to recline, in the students' hands.

Two practical points emerge from this analysis. First, awe trumps freedom. The mitzvah of awe for teachers is stronger than the mitzvah of experiencing freedom at the seder. Similarly, our development as thinking religious individuals necessitates a balance between deference and independence. At times, our attempts to inculcate these seemingly contradictory traits lead to opposing imperatives; deference and awe demand obedience and self-effacement, while freedom and independence demand individualism and self-esteem. Within limits, the lesson of reclining at the seder is clear; deference is a more important character trait than independence.

Second, awe and deference should exist both in action and in emotion. Even one who feels no emotional awe for his or her teachers should act as if they possess that emotional awe. Only a teacher's explicit permission to act leisurely removes this requirement. Yet awe in action is not the ultimate goal of a Torah-true personality; idealists strive to translate superficial awe into

experiential awe, to shift the fulfillment of mitzvot from the realm of the transient body to the realm of the eternal soul.

May Hashem put His awe in our hearts this Pesach, and thereby strengthen our observance of His mitzvot and our study of His Torah.