

Stumped

There is an incredible story that demonstrates this idea: The Yid Ha'Kodesh of Peshischa was once studying an intricate passage in the Talmud with his students. One of the students asked a profound question that literally stumped everyone - including the Rebbe. He became so totally engrossed in the subject that he lost perception of where he was. One of his metzuyanim, prized students, was an orphan who had lost his father. Food was a problem for most people in those days, and it certainly was an issue for a family who did not have a father to supply material support. This student was starved, not having eaten all day. Suspecting that the Rebbe would be involved in deep thought for some time, he decided that he would quickly run home to grab something to eat, so that he could better concentrate on his studies.

He ran home, ate quickly, and was almost out the door when his mother called him to give her a hand for a moment. If he could only climb up to the attic to bring down a sack of straw. Surprisingly, the young man turned to his mother and said, "I am late for shiur, I am afraid the Rebbe is ready to explain the answer. I cannot afford to be late." Recognizing her son's concern, the mother sighed and said to herself, "Fine, my son, go back to your learning. I really should not have asked your help. But what can I do? I am a widow who has no one at home but you."

The student ran back to the shiur. Suddenly it dawned on him that he had been neglectful of derech erez, respect, for his mother. Learning Torah is all-important, but it is also all encompassing. What benefit was his Torah learning if it did not bring to action? He quickly ran back home and apologized to his mother. After he brought down the sack of straw, he left. His mother called out to him, "I hope you did not miss your shiur."

As he walked through the door of his Rebbe's home, the Rebbe picked up his head and smiled at him, "What great mitzvah did you perform that you are worthy of such a dignified escort? Do you know who accompanied you here?" The young man, not knowing to what the Rebbe was referring, just stood there, shamefaced, wondering what it was that the Rebbe saw that he could not. The Rebbe continued speaking, "When you entered the room I noticed the great amora Abaye escorting you. He enlightened me by clarifying the Talmudic passage that had us stumped. Tell me, what is it that you did that made you worthy of such a distinguished escort?"

Apparently ashamed, the young man related to the Rebbe all that had occurred, how he had left shiur, refused to help his mother, and ultimately had returned because of his responsibility as a son. Hearing this, the holy Rebbe patted his student on the shoulder as he explained the following: "Abaye was an orphan from both his father and his mother. His tragic circumstance led to his being named Abaye, which is an abbreviation of asher b'cha yerucham yasom, for it is with You (Hashem) that an orphan finds pity (Hoshea 14:4). Abaye never had the opportunity to honor his parents. The beautiful mitzvah of Kibud Av v'Eim was taken from him. Since he died, his spirit pays tribute to those who go out of their way to fulfill the mitzvah that eluded him during his lifetime. It was Abaye who clarified the Talmudic passage to me." How much more meaning does this story give to the mitzvah of honoring our parents!