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Who is Wise?

Ben Zoma says: Who is wise? He who learns from all men, as it is said, "From all those who have taught me I have learned understanding, for your testimonies are my conversations" (*Tehillim* 119:99)...

(*Avot* 4:1)

In the above *Mishnah*, *Ben Zoma* defines for us four individuals, the wise, rich, powerful and honorable. At a cursory glance, the *Mishnah* seems strange. In the spirit of the *Zera Yitzchak's* question, if you want to know if someone is wise have them take an IQ test. In a similar vein, the media have no problem identifying the wealthy amongst us. Is this *Mishnah* a matter of semantics? Are we simply redefining terms? A closer analysis of one of these characters, the Wise, will shed much light on this highly important *Mishnah*.

The *Tiferet Yisrael* explain that *Ben Zoma* here encapsulates the four major endeavors of man – wisdom, wealth, power and honour. The tragedy however, is that many people's efforts to achieve these goal are counterproductive. For example, motivated by ambitions of pleasure, the aspiring Wealthy man will exert so much energy to that goal that he never has time to enjoy the fruits of his labour. Likewise, in wanting to appear intelligent, the aspiring Wise man will avoid heeding advice or learning from those that "appear" lower than the image he wishes to project. This however is detrimental. The *Tiferet Yisrael* explains that wisdom entail two components. The first is receipt of information and knowledge from previous generations. The second is the intellectual processing of that information by means of logic. When one engages in this second component alone without being tested and probed by anyone on any intellectual level it is of poor quality and subject to error.¹ *Ben Zoma* is therefore cautioning us and advising us on the correct path in which to fully realise these ambitions.

The *Bartenura* solves our original question by shifting the focus of the *Mishnah*. *Ben Zoma* is not asking who is a wise person, but rather who should be praised for his wisdom. The *Tosfot Yom Tov* explains citing the following *pasuk*: "...Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither the

might man glory in his might, nor the wealthy man in his wealth. But let him that glories glory in this, that he understands and knows Me..." (*Yirmiyahu* 9:22-23). These attributes alone are not to be celebrated. It is only when they are directed towards "that he understands and knows Me" that they are worthy of praise, for that is their purpose. As the *Bartenura* himself explains, when a wise person does not care about his own honour and is willing to learn from those more simple than himself, it is understood that he utilises his wisdom for the sake of heaven and not for personal aggrandizement. The *Zera Yitzchak* elaborates, that we learnt that at the time of birth it is decreed whether a person will be powerful, wise or wealthy. Consequently, it appears pointless for one to celebrate in his G-d given talent. What is not preordained is whether one is a righteous or wicked – one's *yir'at shamayim*. Therefore how one carries themselves with this talents – with humility and *yir'at shamayim* – is subject to his choices and therefore worthy of praise.

The framing of these traits in the context of *avodat Hashem* comes to the fore in a profound comment of the *Ba'al Shem Tov*. When *Ben Zoma* says that a wise person is one that learns from everyone, who is he including? The *Ba'al Shem Tov* explains that a wise person will even learn from the *Yetzer Ha'rah*. The *Yetzer Ha'rah* is commissioned by *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* to present challenges for person and move a person "off the path". He carries out his task with gusto, working twenty-four hours, seven days a week to this end – to fulfill the word of *Hashem*. The Wise will learn from him and likewise work twenty-four hours, seven days a week with great effort to fulfill the word of *Hashem*.

This *Mishnah* is therefore far more than a semantic analysis. It hits the very heart of man's aspirations and causes him to reflect. Why do I want wisdom or wealth? Put more accurately, why have I been given wisdom or wealth? Are these ends in themselves? If seen as such they are either self-defeating or nothing worthy of real praise. These highly rated attributes are to be understood as tools and utilised with humility in our *avodat Hashem*. At the heart of all of man's aspirations must be "that he understands and knows Me."

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¹ As it states: Why is *Torah* compared to fire? Just a small spark can kindle a large fire, so too can the small sharpen the giants. (*Taanit* 7a).

