

CHAPTER 4, MISHNA 1(B) : WALKING AWAY FROM WEALTH

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

Ben (the son of) Zoma said: Who is wise? He who learns from all people, as it is said: 'From all those who taught me I gained understanding' (Psalms 119:99). Who is strong? He who conquers his evil inclination, as it is said: 'Better is one slow to anger than a strong man, and one who rules over his spirit than a conqueror of a city' (Proverbs 16:32). Who is rich? He who is satisfied with his lot, as it is said: 'When you eat the toil of your hands you are fortunate and it is good for you' (Psalms 128:2). 'You are fortunate' -- in this world; 'and it is good for you' -- in the World to Come. Who is honored? He who honors others, as it is said: 'For those who honor Me will I honor, and those who scorn Me will be degraded' (I Samuel 2:30).

We discussed the first two statements of this mishna in the previous class.

"Who is rich? He who is satisfied with his lot:" This gem of rabbinical wisdom is so "obvious" to us all, yet we spend the bulk of our lives in frustrating pursuit of the much less accurate definition.

Ben Zoma's point in a word is that true satisfaction does not derive from having. Wealth does not ensure happiness. It is an important means towards many other things -- comfort, self-sufficiency, tranquility, peace of mind. But if we make it an ends -- if its pursuit consumes us and occupies all our waking hours -- we will find nothing but stress and anxiety.

King Solomon, wisest -- as well as wealthiest -- of all men, wrote, "...the satiety of the rich man does not let him sleep" (Koheles 5:11). We may have all the holdings, stock options, investments, assets etc. to make us blessed on paper (at least so sayeth the IRS), but are we truly blessed? Statistically, are the lives of the rich and famous more productive, prosperous, and just happier than that of the modest laborer? If anything, a few other choice remarks of the Rabbis come to mind: "One who has one hundred wants two hundred" (Koheles Rabbah 1:34); "One who loves money will not be satisfied with money" (Koheles 5:9); "One who increases possessions increases worry" (earlier, 2:8).

To quote R. Samson Raphael Hirsch, money must be viewed as a means, not an ends. It may make many of life's pleasures attainable, but it is useful only within its proper context. If one makes money his life's goal in and of itself, rather than serving as a means towards other joys, it will likely replace them.

(Parenthetically, the appropriateness of the verse ben Zoma quotes is not entirely apparent. "When you eat the toil of your hands you are fortunate..." is principally teaching us that it is better to support oneself than to live off of others. Rashi suggests that the fact that the verse calls such a person

fortunate implies that he is satisfied simply subsisting through the toil of his hands. And the fact that the Torah praises such a person implies that he is more blessed than the rich man who constantly seeks greater riches.)

All the above is easy to say for the have-nots (one reason I'm writing this class so cheerily) ;-), but has very little place in the lives of the haves or the hope-to-haves. It is so easy to moralize and find fault when one does not have anyway (conveniently making a virtue of necessity). (This in fact helps us appreciate how King Solomon stated the same from the vantage point of fabulous wealth.)

Yet regardless, we must take care that our careers not overwhelm our lives. My teacher [R. Yochanan Zweig](#) once commented that people who claim they are pursuing their careers so doggedly in order to provide comfortably for their families (much to the expense of the time spent with them) are generally deluding themselves. It is simply not true. They do it for themselves -- for their own fulfillment. The pursuit of wealth and career assumes a life of its own. Such people become consumed with a drive for prestige, achievement, fulfillment, or they don't even really know what. But career becomes their life goal in and of itself. With very few exceptions, after one has successfully "worked on" his first million, he will pursue his second with at least as much (if not greater) dogged determination.

Sir Moses Montefiore (1784-1885) was a London stockbroker who married into the famous Rothschild family and soon amassed his own fortune. At the age of 40, he retired from banking and devoted the remainder of his very long life to philanthropy and the furthering and supporting of Jewish causes worldwide. (He spearheaded the defense against the Damascus blood libel of 1840; he helped found and support some of the earliest Jewish settlements in Palestine.)

I digress to synopsise Montefiore's life not only because it itself is inspiring, but because he had the strength of spirit to walk away from a successful career at its height and to seek a higher calling. People who turn themselves around so dramatically are usually not only drawn **towards** something -- such as a richer spiritual life -- but are typically running **away** from something as well. How many people have I come across who became more religious only after their former lives began unraveling -- their marriage began to falter, health problems or loss of career provided them with both the time and motivation to begin reflecting on their lives. Certainly, G-d puts us through such difficult experiences to nudge us in the right direction. But it is a truly rare individual who will pick himself up on his own -- before the good L-rd finds need to prod him -- to find his path to greatness.

One final point is that being satisfied with one's lot is not only sound practical advice. It stems from an even more fundamental Jewish principle: faith. If a person believes in Divine providence -- that G-d provides just what he or she needs to fulfill his mission in life, then he is truly blessed. He will not spend all his time and energy attempting to increase his net worth or worrying about the market. He will accept that he has been granted his fair allotment and that G-d will provide him his due. He will be responsible about earning an honest income -- we do not rely on miracles -- but for the most

part he will recognize that his financial status is in G-d's capable Hands. Through that realization, he will be happy with his lot -- as the quoted verse stated, both in this world and in the next.

"Who is honored? He who honors others:" As we know, this is quite true in a practical sense. If we treat our friend or spouse with respect, he or she will likely behave towards us in kind. We have shown that the other is important in our eyes and deserves our regard, and our fellow will willingly reciprocate. By contrast, when a person puts his spouse down (typically (and ironically) to make himself feel **more** important), his spouse will be put on the defensive, and will make every effort to assert him/herself and create his/her own feeling of self-worth -- naturally, at the expense of the first partner. A vicious cycle of put-downs, fault-finding, criticism, and verbal abuse will ensue. And as we know all too well, you can prove to your spouse in 100 ways that you're right about everything under the sun -- the battle may be won, but the war is tragically long over.

But the Sages are not only providing us with practical wisdom and keen observation. Pirkei Avos is not Dale Carnegie. There is an eternal truth behind their words. The verse ben Zoma quotes refers to those who honor G-d, not those who honor man. If so, how is he demonstrating the importance of honoring one's fellow?

The answer is that in the most profound sense, we should not honor our fellow because of any noble acts he has done or in the interests of receiving the same courtesy in return. We should do so because all of humankind -- both Jew and Gentile, man and woman, white and black -- are created in G-d's image. A human being is important because a godly soul resides within him -- one of both potential and actual greatness. And when we exhibit such honor, when we respect others because of their divine nature, we are honoring ourselves as well. We are recognizing and demonstrating that the human soul is divine, and that all people -- of all races, stripes and walks of life -- are holy for I am holy says the L-rd (Leviticus 19:2).

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