

# PIRKEI AVOS: TRUE RICHES

*by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein*

## True Riches<sup>1</sup>

Who is rich? He who is happy with his lot, as it is said, "When you eat of the labor of your hands, you are praiseworthy and all is well with you."<sup>2</sup> You are praiseworthy in this world, and all is well in the world to come.<sup>3</sup>

Some questions shouldn't be asked. A question for which everyone has the answer is no question. Do we have any doubt about who is rich? Possessing much money makes a person rich, end of story!

True, remarks Maharal. Money may make a person rich, but money comes and goes. The Mishnah questions whether a person can be essentially rich, rich by his nature, not by dint of something that may evaporate the next day. (Moreover, having money does not seem to slake a person's thirst for more. Chazal point out that to the contrary, the more a person has, the more he wants. People we routinely call rich, then, are some of the neediest people around.)

More importantly, what a man possesses does not make the man. Looking for person whose essence is rich - a person who never finds himself lacking - is a more daunting task. This is what the Mishnah sets out to do, and finds him in the person who always finds joy and happiness in his portion.

The benefits of such a mind-set are greater than initially apparent. The Sava Kadisha cautioned against seeing this attitude as an isolated midah. To the contrary, he taught, finding happiness in one's lot an all- embracing principle. It produces a cascade of benefits. It brings wondrous change to the heart of a man, and can lead him to teshuvah mei-ahavah. The life of a proper Jew depends on it.

We have to be puzzled about this attitude. Many people lead what objectively looks like lives of travail and sorrow. What is there to be happy about? We can suggest a number of approaches.

The first owes to the Noam Elimelech, who parses the conclusion of the Mishnah's thought in a novel way. "You are praiseworthy in this world, and all is well in the world to come" can be taken to mean that a person is praiseworthy in this world when he translates all experiences and opportunities into their value in gaining Olam Habo. In other words, a person can be happy with his lot, if he has no expectation - and no interest - in any temporal benefit, but stays focused entirely on

acquiring his place in the world to come.

The value in this is not simply ascetically shunning all pleasure in this world, but something more subtle. The gemara<sup>4</sup> tells us that before a child is formed, it is ordained whether he will be rich or poor, wise or foolish. The point is that no two people are identical. Hashem gives each individual a unique set of challenges - the best way for him to gain his portion in Olam Habo. For some, the challenge comes from dealing with wealth; for others, the task is dealing with poverty. It would do a person no good at all to switch circumstances with another, because those circumstances are not going to help him gain eternal life. Everyone can be happy in this world because his own peculiar conditions and circumstances will lead to it being well in the world to come.

A different approach dovetails with a teaching of Toras Avos. When a Jew joyfully accepts the way Hashem conducts his life, then Shomayim reacts the same way to him. Measure for measure, the Heavenly courts look upon him kindly; they are happy with him, regardless of the details of his behavior.

Acceptance of the manner in which Hashem shepherds him is hinted at in the Shema. The phrase *u-ve-chol me'odecha*/with all your might can be seen<sup>5</sup> as "with all your me'ods. In other words, thank Him exceedingly well. With all your"very much," your meod meod, acknowledge Hashem fully and enthusiastically in each and every measure that He measures out for you.

This approach comes from a different place. It is a tributary of a person's *ahavas Hashem*. A person who truly loves Hashem will be happy with anything that flows from Him, regardless of whether he understands it or whether it brings him immediate pleasure. (This explains the link between finding joy in one's lot and *teshuvah me-ahavah*. It is the *ahavah* itself that allows one to find joy in one's situation, regardless of the circumstances.)

Yet another approach to being *mesame'ach bechelko* is hinted at in the verse, "Hashem's portion is His people."<sup>6</sup> If we assume the *chelko* of our Mishnah to mean Hashem's portion, rather than ours, we have a very different reading. Who is rich? The person who understands that he himself is a part of Hashem Above. A person who appreciates that his *neshamah* comes from a "place" under the *kisei ha-kavod*, the Throne of Glory, will never surrender to depression or melancholy. Recognizing the sanctity of his *neshamah*, nothing will disturb him other than a sense of distance from Hashem, and nothing will delight him more than his feeling of closeness and attachment to Him. He will always, however, find satisfaction in knowing the elevated source of his *neshamah*, the most personal and precious part of himself.

We have shown that finding joy in one's lot is not a simple slogan or aphorism. It includes many wonderful consequences, and takes significant spiritual accomplishment to get there. People who are not quite there find this disconcerting. The key here - as is true of other high levels of *ruchniyus* that Chazal teach about, like *ahavas Hashem* - is to realize that it is not the preserve of a privileged

few. Everyone can have some portion of it. We are asked to take the first steps; HKBH will help us get as far as we can.

---

1. Based on Nesivos Shalom, Pirkei Avos pgs. 220-222
  2. Tehilim 128:2
  3. Avos 4:1
  4. Nidah 16B
  5. Berachos 54A
  6. Devarim 32:9
- 

Text Copyright © 2009 by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein and **Torah.org**