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Ben Zoma says: Who is wise? He who learns from everyone, as it says: “From all my teachers I gained wisdom” (*Tehillim* 119:9). Who is mighty? He who overcomes his natural inclinations, as it says: “He who is slow to anger is better than a mighty man, and he who exercises self-control is better than one who conquers a city” (*Mishlei* 16:32). Who is wealthy? He who is happy with his lot, as it says: “When you eat the work of your hands you are fortunate and it is well with you” (*Tehillim* 128:2). “You are fortunate” — in this world; “and it is well with you” — in the World to Come. Who is honored? He who honors others, as it says: “To those who honor Me I will give honor and those who despise Me shall be cursed” (*Shmuel I* 2:30).

MISHNAH 1

Consider the following questions: ¹

1. Why does Ben Zoma specifically define these four terms (*wise, mighty, rich, and honored*)? If his purpose is to define the prerequisites for the attainment of prophecy,² he should have defined the term “humble” instead of the term “honored.”
2. The definition of *wise* as “one who learns from everyone” requires explanation. It would seemingly be more

1. The Alshich discusses this Mishnah in his commentary to *Vayikra* 21:8.
2. The Gemara (*Nedarim* 38a) lists four prerequisites for prophecy: being wise, mighty, wealthy, and humble.



בן זומא אומר: איזהו חכם? הלומד מכל אדם, שנאמר (תהלים קיט, צט): מכל מלמדי השכלתי פי עדותיך שיחה לי. איזהו גבור? הכובש את יצרו, שנאמר (משלי טז, לב): טוב ארך אפים מגבור ומשל ברוחו מלכד עיר. איזהו עשיר? השמח בחלקו, שנאמר (תהלים קכח, ב): יגיע כפיה כי תאכל אשריך וטוב לך אשריך - בעולם הזה. וטוב לך - לעולם הבא. איזהו מכבד? המכבד את הבריות, שנאמר (שמואל א ב, ל): כי מכבדי אכבד ובזי יקלו.

fitting for a person who learns from everyone to be called a “student” rather than “wise.”

3. Why does our Tanna not define *wise* as “one who foresees the consequences of an action” — as the Sages do in *Tamid* 32a?
4. The *pasuk* cited to prove that a person who learns from everyone is called *wise* does not seem to prove this, for the statement, *From all my teachers I “gained wisdom”* (השכלתי), does not tell us that the speaker was called a חכם.³
5. The *pasuk* cited to prove that a person who overcomes his natural inclinations is called *mighty* doesn’t seem to prove this at all: *He who is slow to anger is better than a mighty man* indicates that the person who is slow to anger is **not** called *mighty* but rather is **better** than mighty.

3. For gaining some knowledge is not the same thing as being a חכם (a wise person).

6. The *pasuk* cited to prove that a person who is happy with his lot is called *wealthy* states, *When you eat the work of your hands you are fortunate and it is well with you*. The proof requires explanation, for the *pasuk* does not use the word “wealthy.”
7. In any case, who told the Tanna that the person described in this *pasuk* who *eats the work of his hands* is *happy with his lot*? Perhaps he is eating in misery!
8. Why is it necessary for the Tanna to expound on the meaning of the phrases, *you are fortunate* and *it is well with you*? After all, he doesn’t expound on the other proof-texts!
9. The Mishnah’s statement that the definition of *honored* is *one who honors others* requires clarification, for the person usually understood as “honored” is one who **receives** honor.
10. The words *To those who honor Me I will give honor* are stated by Hashem. This proves only that one who honors **God** is honored. How does it prove that one who honors mere **human beings** is honored as well?
11. Why does our Mishnah quote the end of that verse, *and those who despise Me shall be cursed*? Not only does it seem irrelevant, it is adding an **opposite** theme to the Mishnah’s text.

✎ *Correcting Misconceptions* ✎

BEN ZOMA’S INTENTION in this Mishnah is to correct people’s misconceptions. He concludes that there are four adjectives that people use in ways that are actually opposite to their true mean-

ing. If you were to request of a person who is wise in his own eyes, “Please tell me the definition of a wise man,” he would certainly answer you, “Why, a man who teaches everyone.” If you ask him, “What is the definition of a mighty man?” he would answer, “Someone who can overpower his adversary and knock him to the ground.” “A wealthy man?” “Someone who has a lot of money.” “And an honored man?” “Someone whom people honor.”

To counter these misconceptions and teach the truth, Ben Zoma explains the true meanings of these words. The **wise** person is the one who learns from everyone. The **mighty** person is one who overcomes his natural inclinations — even if he is physically the weakest of the weak. The **wealthy** person is one who is happy with his lot, not one who has a lot of money — for to the contrary, *the more possessions, the more anxiety* (*Avos* 2:7). And the **honored** man is the one who honors others.⁴ [This is one answer to Question 1.]

One
answer to
question 1

≡ The Prerequisites of Prophecy ≡

ANOTHER APPROACH MAY be as follows: Ben Zoma is speaking here of the prerequisites for prophecy listed in *Nedarim* 38a: wise, mighty, wealthy, and humble. And just as being humble is a quality of character, dependent on Man’s free-willed choices,⁵ so too the first three prerequisites are to be understood as quali-

4. But Ben Zoma does not define “humble” because (according to this explanation) his teaching has nothing to do with the prerequisites for prophecy.

5. Ben Zoma does not feel the need to define “humble” here because its meaning is obvious and not liable to be misunderstood.

ties of character, qualities that result from a person's conscious efforts at self-improvement.⁶

As to why Ben Zoma defines *who is honored* (which, after all, is not one of the prerequisites of prophecy), we may explain that he does so to prevent the following misunderstanding: The Gemara in *Kiddushin* 49b states that if a man betrothes a woman “on condition that I am wealthy,” it is not required that the man be the richest person in the country; it is sufficient that his means are such that people honor him because of his wealth. Now, if wealth can be defined in terms of honor, one may draw the conclusion that honor can be defined in terms of wealth; in other words, one might say, “Who is honored? One who is wealthy.” To prevent this misunderstanding, Ben Zoma also defines the term “honored” and says: *Who is honored? He who honors others.* [This is another answer to Question 1.]

Answer to
question 1

⚡ Analyzing the Four Attributes ⚡

NOW THAT WE understand why Ben Zoma speaks about those four specific attributes, let us analyze what he says, one at a time:

6. In defining the first three prerequisites in this manner, the Alshich writes: Ben Zoma differs from those commentators who understood all four traits literally. Ben Zoma does not consider it logical that a man can be perfectly righteous, upright, and faithful, yet God would withhold the benefits of prophecy just because he is physically weak, or because he is poor. It appears strange indeed to disqualify a prophet based on things that are dependent on nature, or on *mazal*!

[The Alshich then quotes parts of the passage in *Nedarim* that appear to contradict his thesis, and explains how they can be reconciled.]

Wise

Who is wise? He who learns from everyone. He does not say “one who discerns future developments,” as the Sages do in *Tamid* 32a, because the Gemara there is discussing a different type of wisdom, namely knowledge of the right way to act. In contrast, our Mishnah is discussing what will enable a person to permanently acquire the appellation “wise.” [This answers Question 3.] The Mishnah’s answer conveys a most important principle: A person will not give his heart and soul to acquire the Torah’s wisdom until he appreciates the Torah’s tremendous value. It is then that he will “kill himself” for its sake,⁷ and the Torah will make itself available and impart its knowledge to him (for Torah, unlike secular areas of knowledge, is a living entity that has this power). Now, how can one tell if a person truly appreciates the value of Torah? By seeing if he is willing to learn from everyone (see Question 2). If he is unwilling to hear a new Torah idea from someone who is younger than himself, or who lacks his status, it shows that he lacks this appreciation, for he is throwing away a pearl of inestimable value just for the sake of his honor. [It can generally be assumed that] such a person will continue to act this way his whole life, and he will lose the treasure of Torah.⁸ However, a person who is prepared to

Answer to
question 3

7. That is, he will sacrifice all unnecessary physical comforts (see the Maharsha, *Gittin* 57b) and devote himself single-mindedly to the study of Torah.

8. The Alshich adds that this happened with the Tanna, R’ Elazar ben Arach. As recorded in *Shabbos* 147b, R’ Elazar ben Arach went to live in a distant location, expecting his colleagues to accord him honor by coming to learn Torah with him rather than he having to go to them. Eventually, he lost his Torah knowledge, to the point that instead of reading the *pasuk*: הַחֲדֹשׁ הַזֶּה

put aside his honor and learn from anyone — even from a young child — [is indeed called “wise” and] will undoubtedly strive unceasingly to acquire Torah until he becomes a true Torah scholar.⁹ [This answers Question 2.] How sweet indeed are the words of our Sages, who taught: “Why is Torah compared to water (see *Yeshayahu* 55:1)? Just as a large body of water is not embarrassed to say to a small one, ‘Give me water to drink,’ so too in regard to Torah, a great man is not embarrassed to say to a less learned one, ‘Teach me a chapter or a law.’”¹⁰

Ben Zoma proves this teaching from *Tehillim* 119:99, which states: מִכָּל מְלַמְדֵי הַשְּׂכֵלֹתַי (translated above: *From all my teachers I gained wisdom*). [We may resolve our difficulty with this proof by noting an anomaly in this *pasuk*:] Since it is ostensibly talking about what King David (the speaker in *Tehillim*) gained from his מְלַמְדֵי (his teachers), it should say: מִכָּל מְלַמְדֵי לְמַדְתִּי, “*From all my teachers I learned.*” And there is a further anomaly: The continuation of the *pasuk* (not cited in our Mishnah) reads: כִּי עֲדוּתֶיךָ שִׁיחָה לִּי, *for Your testimonies are a conversation for me*. How is this connected to the first half of the *pasuk*?

Evidently, the *pasuk* is **not** talking about what the speaker gained from his teachers. Rather, it is to be understood as follows: מִכָּל — I was prepared to learn from **everyone**; מְלַמְדֵי — I

הַחֲרַשׁ לְכֶם, *this month shall be for you [the beginning of the months]*, he read it הָיָה לָבֶם, *their heart was silent*.

9. The term “student” is indeed apt for someone who learns from established “teachers.” However, the Mishnah describes as “wise” the person who views anyone and everyone, even a young child, as someone from whom he can and should learn.

10. See *Midrash Tanchuma, Vayakhel* 8.

did not disdain any teacher, be he great or small. And thus, *הִשְׁכַּלְתִּי* — I became a *מְשַׁכֵּיל* (i.e., a *chacham*, a wise person).¹¹ [This answers Question 4.] And how did I come to have this approach? *כִּי עֲדוּתֶיךָ שִׁיחָה לִי*, *For Your testimonies are a conversation for me*. Which means: I never thought that the person teaching me was actually the one talking — which would not be fitting for my honor, since I am the king and the leading sage of the Sanhedrin. Rather, I thought of it as *Your testimonies* (i.e., the Torah itself) being the one conversing with me — and as such what difference does it make to me if those words of Torah are spoken by a great person or a lesser one?

Mighty

Ben Zoma continues: *Who is mighty? He who overcomes his natural inclinations, as it says (Mishlei 16:32): “He who is slow to anger is better than a mighty man, and he who exercises self-control is better than one who conquers a city.”* There are different levels of “mighty.” A mighty man has physical prowess, but a conqueror of a city is mightier still; and the epitome of true might is one who masters his nature. The proof of this is not from the first half of this *pasuk* but from the second, for *he who exercises self-control* is the same as *he who overcomes his natural inclinations*. The *pasuk* is thus to be understood as follows: *He who is slow to anger* (when wronged by his fellow) *is better than a [physically] mighty man* who gets angry and takes revenge. But this person who is *slow to anger* has not reached the highest level of the one *who exercises self-control*, for he does not control

11. The verse is thus stating exactly what Ben Zoma said: that one who learns from everyone is called a *חָכָם*.

his emotions and his temperament in other areas besides anger. It is the person *who exercises self-control* completely — i.e., at all times and in all areas — who is *better than one who conquers a city*. [This answers Question 5.]¹²

Wealthy

Ben Zoma continues: *Who is wealthy? He who is happy with his lot*. And he cites as proof the *pasuk* from *Tehillim* 128:2: *When*

12. The question of the Mishnah can be rephrased as “Who is the mightiest man of all?” Thus, Question 5 is answered, for the verse proves that one who overcomes his natural inclination is truly the mightiest.

The Alshich goes on to discuss three ways in which one who “overcomes his natural inclinations” and “exercises self-control” — his *yetzer hatov* conquering his *yetzer hara* — is comparable to one who “conquers a city”:

(a) The one who conquers a city is an individual who is fighting against many. Similarly, the *yetzer hatov* is battling against the many limbs of the body which, being physical, are drawn to the *yetzer hara* and work with it to accomplish its goals.

(b) The people who live in the city grew up there and know the terrain, far better than the person who seeks to conquer it. Similarly, the *yetzer hara* and all the limbs of the body “grew up” with the person, having been part of him since the day he was born; it “knows the terrain” far better than the *yetzer hatov*, which only becomes part of a person at the age when he or she becomes obligated in mitzvos.

(c) A person who conquers a city is not seeking to destroy it and kill all its inhabitants; he is seeking only to rule over them and to have them serve him. He thus treats them with an element of mercy. By contrast, the people of the city want to kill the attacker, and will show him no mercy. Similarly, the *yetzer hatov* does not seek to destroy the *yetzer hara* and the physical body, for they are necessary in order serve Hashem. By contrast, the *yetzer hara* seeks to completely destroy the *yetzer hatov*.

The Alshich then explains our Mishnah as teaching that despite these similarities, mastering one’s nature is greater than conquering a city, for the former must do battle internally, so to speak; the enemy is within — indeed, is part of — oneself. This is in contrast to the latter case, where a city is being invaded by external enemies, from the outside.

you eat the work of your hands you are fortunate and it is well with you. The *pasuk* does not state explicitly that it is speaking of someone who is happy with his lot or that this person is called wealthy. But both statements can be proven to be the case: that the person is happy can be seen from the continuation of Ben Zoma's teaching, while the context of the *pasuk* shows that he is considered wealthy.

Ben Zoma explains the double wording in the *pasuk* (*you are fortunate, it is well with you*): “*You are fortunate*” — *in this world*; “*and it is well with you*” — *in the World to Come*. Now, if the person who is “eating from the work of his hands” were not happy with what he had, but rather was upset about all the hard work he had to do, it would make no sense to say about him, *You are fortunate in this world*. It must rather be that he is at peace with his situation (*happy with his lot*).¹³ [This answers Questions 7 and 8.] And that the *pasuk* is speaking of a person who is called wealthy is evident from its context: The verse that precedes it (*Tehillim* 128:1 — not quoted in our Mishnah) states: *Fortunate is every person who fears Hashem, who walks in His ways*. The continuation of that chapter then expresses the three-fold reward given in this world to the God-fearing person mentioned in verse 1: children, long life, and sustenance. The very first reward mentioned — in the verse

Answer to
questions
7–8

13. Ben Zoma needs to explain these phrases in this way so that one wouldn't think that the *pasuk* is speaking only of reward in the World to Come (cf. the Alshich to *Koheles* 3:22).

Question 6 is answered, for although the man who is happy with his lot may not appear to be wealthy according to general standards, the fact that sufficient sustenance is considered the greatest of material rewards tells us that this is true wealth.

cited by our Mishnah (verse 2) — is sustenance: *When you eat the work of your hands you are fortunate*. It is thus evident that the person discussed in our verse has all the sustenance he needs — and such a person is truly wealthy. [This answers Question 6.]¹⁴

Honored

Ben Zoma's next statement is: *Who is honored? He who honors others*. In other words, **don't** consider someone "honored" just because other people show him great respect. (According to that way of thinking, any rich person, for example, would be considered "honored" because everyone honors him. Then there would be no difference between "rich" and "honored," which is clearly **not** what the Mishnah means.) Rather, who is "honored"? He who honors others — for this is a good character trait that the person has acquired and made into part of his nature. It is not a benefit or acquisition that is dependent on the actions of others.¹⁵ Moreover, in Ben Zoma's opinion a person can only be called "honored" if he receives honor from the *Melech HaKavod* (King

14. *Tehillim* 128:3 then states: *Your wife will be like a fruitful vine ... your children will be like olive shoots surrounding your table* — this being the reward of having children. And the chapter concludes (128:6): *And you will see children [born] to your children* — thereby expressing the reward of longevity.

15. In other words, the person who honors others is intrinsically honorable — even if no one actually gives him homage — because he has developed such excellence of character.

The Alshich adds similarly that Ben Zoma did not define "wealthy" as "having a lot of money," for this is external to oneself and can be lost [as well as gained]. (Furthermore, as quoted above, *the more possessions, the more anxiety*.) Instead, Ben Zoma said that the wealthy person is one who is happy with what he has — another character trait that the person has made part of his nature.

of honor) Himself — and it is when a person honors others that he receives honor from God.¹⁶ [This answers Question 9.]

As proof, Ben Zoma cites the verse, *To those who honor Me I will give honor*. Now, although this *pasuk* is speaking about those who honor **God** being honored by God, it still serves to prove Ben Zoma's teaching that those who honor **people** are honored by Him. How? Through a *kal vachomer*, as we shall explain: Ben Zoma also cites the end of the verse, *and those who despise Me shall be cursed*. On the surface, there is no reason to cite this. But the Sages have taught that God cares more about the honor of human beings than about His own honor. Thus, the *Zohar*¹⁷ points out that when Yerov'am offered a sacrifice on the altar to an idol, Hashem did not smite him;¹⁸ but when he stretched forth his hand to harm a prophet, immediately *his hand dried up*.¹⁹ Similarly, the Midrash²⁰ points out that God told Avraham, "*I will curse those who curse you*" — i.e., God will **actively** deliver a curse when the honor of a *tzaddik* is at stake. In contrast, our verse from *Shmuel* quotes Hashem as saying, "*Those who despise Me shall be cursed*" — i.e., when it is only Hashem's honor at stake, the perpetrator will be punished **passively**; the curse will come on its own. It is to teach this lesson that Ben Zoma cites the end of the verse.

And now that we know that God cares more about the honor

16. That is, Ben Zoma is coming to explain who is honored by God, not who is honored by people (as assumed heretofore). See further.

17. *Zohar*, *Beshalach* 64a.

18. See *Melachim II* 13:1.

19. See *ibid.*, v. 4.

20. *Bereishis Rabbah* 39:12.