

### **משנה מסכת אבות פרק ד משנה א**

בן זומא אומר:  
איזהו חכם? הלומד מכל אדם, שנאמר (תהלים קי"ט) "מכל מלמדי השכלתי";  
איזהו גבור? הכובש את יצרו, שנאמר (משלי טז) "טוב ארך אפים מגבור, ומושל ברוחו מלוכד עיר";  
איזהו עשיר? השמח בחלקו, שנאמר (תהלים קכ"ח) "יגיע כפיך כי תאכל אשריך וטוב לך" - אשריך בעולם  
הזה וטוב לך לעולם הבא;  
איזהו מכובד? המכבד את הבריות, שנאמר (שמואל א' ב') "כי מכבדי אכבד ובוזי יקלו".

### **ירמיהו פרק ט:כב-כג**

כה אמר ה':  
אל יתהלל חכם בחכמתו;  
ואל יתהלל הגבור בגבורתו;  
אל יתהלל עשיר בעשרו;  
כי אם בזאת יתהלל המתהלל - השכל וידע אותי! כי אני ה' עשה חסד משפט וצדקה בארץ, כי באלה חפצתי.  
נאם ה'.

### **ירמיהו פרק כב:טז**

דן דין עני ואביון אז טוב הלוא היא הדעת אתי נאם ה'

### **משלי פרק ב:ד-ה**

אם תבקשנה כספך, וכמטמונים תחפשנה - אז תבין יראת ה', ודעת אל-הים תמצא.

### **יהושע פרק א:ח**

לא ימוש ספר התורה הזה מפֶּיךָ והגית בו יומם ולילה למען תשמר לעשות ככל הכתוב בו כי אז תצליח את דרכך ואז תשכיל:

### **רבינו יונה אבות ד:א**

בן זומא אומר איזהו חכם הלומד מכל אדם –  
אמרו חכמי האומות כי היודע כל החכמות, אם אינו אוהב החכמה, אינו חכם, אלא טפש הוא, אחר שאינו אוהב החכמה, כי היא הדעת. אך האוהב אותה ומתאוה אליה, אע"פ שאינו יודע כלום, הרי זה נקרא חכם, שעל כל פנים תשיג אל החכמה האמיתית ודעת אל-הים תמצא.  
ועל זה אמר בן זומא "איזהו חכם? הלומד מכל אדם" - שכל כך אוהב החכמה ומתאוה אליה ששואל לכל אדם, ואף מי שאינו יודע כי אם דבר אחד ילמד ממנו, ואז יצליח דרכו ואז ישכיל. ועל זה נקרא חכם שנאמר [תהלים קי"ט צ"ט] "מכל מלמדי השכלתי, שכן אמר דוד ע"ה שלמד מכל אדם ולא היה אומר זה אינו יודע כמוני כי מכלם למד והשכיל.  
משל לאדם שהפסיד כלי קטן - והלא מכל אדם מבקש אותו!

...

ושלש המדות האלו סדרן בן זומא כסדר ירמיה הנביא עליו השלום החכמה והגבורה והעושר, כמו שנאמר "אל יתהלל חכם בחכמתו ואל יתהלל הגבור בגבורתו ואל יתהלל עשיר בעשרו" – הקדים החכמה לגבורה – מפני שהיא מעלה אמתית ובנפש השכלות ובגוף שוכנת, ולא כן הגבורה – שאיננה כי אם בגוף לבדו, אך כי היא מעולה מן העושר – שהגבורה היא בגופו דבר קיים כל ימי עודנו חי, והעושר חוץ לגוף והוא דבר הנאבד, כי יעשה עושר ובחצי ימיו יקחוהו אחרים.

ואף ע"פ שהנביא אמר לבל יתהלל אדם בג' מדות הללו, חלק בן זומא ואמר כי יש לאדם באלו המדות צד שיהיה לו בלא טורח ועמל ויתהלל בהן:

בחכמה – להיות למד [מכל] אדם, כי אז יבין יראת ה', ואין בזה טורח, כי חכמה היא ואינה מלאכה; בגבורה – לכבוש את יצרו, ולמחול מתוך הכעס, גם בזה יתהלל, כי מתוך היראה הוא עושה, וזהו שאמר שלמה ע"ה [משלי י"ט א'] "שכל אדם האריך אפו, ותפארתו עובר על פשע".

והשמח בחלקו – אחר שאין חפצו רק ללמוד ולקיים המצות, וכי יש לו כדי חיותו ופרנסתו, שמח ומכיר כי השאר הבל, הוא העשיר הזה יתהלל בעשרו;

כי בכל אלו הדברים הם ידיעת הבורא ית',

כמו שנא' "כי אם בזאת יתהלל המתהלל השכל וידע אותי כי אני ה' עשה חסד משפט וצדקה בארץ כי באלה חפצתי נאם ה'".

ועוד הוסיף בן זומא מדה רביעית ואמר: איזהו מכובד? המכבד את הבריות. והמכבד את חברו לעצמו הוא מכבד לא לחברו, ומה תועלת לאיש כי יעשו לו כבוד? אם נכבד הוא לא הוסיף במעלתו ובכבודו מפני הכבוד אשר עשו לו, ואם נקלה הוא לא יחזירוהו נכבד כי יכבדוהו, ולמכבדים הוא אבדון לכל נקלה כבוד כי אין מעלתו מוספת,

כמו שאמר שלמה ע"ה [משלי כ"ו ח'] "כצור אבן במרגמה כן נותן לכסיל כבוד",

כי הצור אבן במרגמה עושה שטות הוא ולא לאבן כבוד כי לא נתעלית בזה, וכן הנותן לכסיל כבוד שטות הוא.

נמצאת אומר כי כל כבוד אשר יעשה אדם לבריות לעצמו הוא מכבד, שגורם להם כי בעל כרחם יכבדוהו, ומתורת חיוב, שהוא הכבוד האמיתי,

ועל זה נאמר איזהו מכובד המכבד את הבריות,

שנא' [שמואל א' ב' ל'] "כי מכבדי אכבד ובוזי יקלו".

ראית זה הפסוק הוא מקל וחומר – אם הקב"ה, שכל בריותיו לא נבראו אלא לכבודו, שנאמר [ישעיה מ"ג ז'] "ולכבודי בראתיו",

והן חייבין בכבודו, ולא היה בדין להחזיק טובה להם כי לא נבראו לדבר אחר וזו היא מלאכתם ואין להם רשות לעשות אחרת, ואעפ"כ אמר כי מכבדי אכבד, כ"ש וכ"ש חבריו שאין הגבר [חייב] לכבדם, אם יעשה להם כי יכבדוהו ועל כפים ישאוהו.

וגם בזאת המדה אין בה טורח והיא נאה ומקובלת:

### **<sup>1</sup>Mishnah Avot 4:1**

Ben Zoma said:

Who is wise? One who learns from every person, as Scripture says . . .

Who is powerful? One who subdues his inclination, as Scripture says . . . ,

Who is wealthy? One who is happy with his lot, as Scripture says: “for those who give Me honor I will honor, but those who dishonor me will be made lighter”.

“

### **Yirmiyah 9:22-23**

Thus said Hashem:

Let the wise not himself for his wisdom;

Let the powerful not praise himself for his power;

Let the wealthy not praise himself for his wealth;

Rather, let for this let the self-praising one praise – comprehend and know Me! Because I Hashem do grace, justice, and equity in the land, for it is these that I have desired, declares Hashem.

### **Yirmiyah 22:16**

Judge the cases of the poor and indigent, then there will be good; this is the true knowledge of Me, declares Hashem.

### **Mishlei 2:4-5**

If you seek it like silver, and like buried treasure search for it – then you will understand awe of Hashem, and find knowledge of Divinity.

### **Yehoshua 1:5**

A scroll of this Torah must not move off your lips, and you must study it day and night, so that you will guard, to do all that is written in it, for then you will make your way prosper, and then you will successfully comprehend.

### **Rabbeinu Yonah 4:1**

Ben Zoma says: Who is wise? One who learns from every person.

The Sages of the Gentiles said that one who knows all the disciplines of wisdom, if he is not a lover of wisdom (a philo-sopher), is not wise, but rather a fool, since he does not love wisdom, *ki hi hada'at*. But one who loves her and is drawn by appetite toward her, even if he knows nothing, he is called wise, because regardless he will achieve the true wisdom and find *da'at Elo-him*.

About this Ben Zoma said: “Who is wise? One who learns from every person”, meaning that he so loves wisdom and is so drawn by appetite toward it that he asks every person, and even someone who knows nothing but one thing – he will learn from him, and thus his path will be successful and then he will comprehend. For this he is called wise, as Scripture says “From all who taught me I have learned”, as King David meant thereby that he had learned from every person, and that he would not say “This one does not have knowledge comparable to mine”, but rather from all of them he learned and comprehended.

This can be analogized to a person who lost a small utensil – does he not seek it from every person?

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<sup>1</sup> The translations this week are extremely rough – please do not cite them.

Ben Zoma arranged these traits in correspondence with the arrangement of the prophet Yirmiyah, peace be upon him: wisdom, power, and wealth.

as Scripture says:

Thus said Hashem:

Let the wise not himself for his wisdom;

Let the powerful not praise themselves for his power;

Let the wealthy not praise themselves for his wealth.

He put wisdom before power, because it is a true virtue, which rests in the intellectual spirit which dwells in the body.

Power is not like this, for the power of his body will last while you are alive.

but still it is above wealth, because power will survive in his body as long as he lives, whereas wealth is external to the body and can be lost, as he may amass wealth and others will take it before half his life has passed.

Now while the prophet said that a person should not praise himself for these three characteristics, Ben Zoma distinguished, saying that a person can find within these characteristics an aspect that he can have without effort and work, and he can praise himself for them.

In wisdom – to learn [from every] person, for then he will internalize awe of Hashem, and this does not involve effort, because it is wisdom/skill rather than labor<sup>2</sup>.

In power – to conquer his inclination, and to forgive even when angry – this also legitimates praise, because he is acting out of awe,

and this is what Shlomoh said: “A person acts in accordance with reason when he is slow to anger, but his glory is to ignore injury”.

One who is happy with his portion – Since his only desire is to learn and fulfill mitzvot, so that as long he has enough to live and support himself, he is happy and recognizes that all else is vanity – this is the rich person who can self-praise about his wealth.

Because in all these things they are knowledge of the Blessed Creator,

as Shlomoh said: “Rather, let for this let the self-praising one praise – comprehend and know Me!

Because I Hashem do grace, justice, and equity in the land, for it is these that I have desired, declares Hashem.”

Ben Zoma further added a fourth characteristic, saying: “Who is given honor? One who gives honor to people?

because one who gives honor to his fellow is actually giving honor to himself and not to his fellow, as what purpose is there for a person if they give him honor? If he is worthy of honor, nothing is added to high level and honor because they give him honor, and if he is a lightweight, he will not become worthy of honor because they honor him, and it is a waste for honorers to give honor to lightweights because it does not lift him up,

as Shlomoh said: “Like storing a rock in a purse, so too giving honor to a fool”,

because one who stores a rock in a person is engaging in idiocy, not honoring the rock, because it is not thereby raised up, and so too one who gives honor to a fool is engaging in idiocy.

So it turns out that all honor that a person gives to people is really giving honor to himself, as it causes them to give him honor regardless of their will, out of obligation, which is the true honor,

and regarding this it is said: “Who is given honor? One who gives honor to people”,

as Scripture says: “for those who give Me honor I will honor, but those who dishonor me will be made lighter”.

This verse is evidence via *kal vachomer* – if The Holy Blessed One, all of Whose creations were created solely for the sake of His honor,

as Scripture says: “and for My honor I created him”,

and they are obligated to honor him, so it does not follow that He would be grateful to them, as they were created for no other purpose, this is their task and they have no authority to do anything else, but nonetheless He says “for those who give Me honor I will honor”, how much more so and more so his fellows, whom a person is not obligated to honor, if he gives them honor, they will give him honor, and carry him on their hands.

This characteristic too does not require effort, and it is pleasant and popularly admired.

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<sup>2</sup> This is a pun on the halakhic explanation of why blowing shofar and *rediat hapat* are not forbidden Shabbat-labor

My dear friend Rabbi Yitzchak Blau has a fine post [here](#) on this Mishnah and Rabbeinu Yonah's comments thereupon, and I will therefore indulge myself, kedarki bakodesh, by introducing a certain level of irony and perhaps excessive analytic rigor.

The statement that the truly wise learn from everyone seems to require the assumptions that

- a) every human being has something to teach, and that
- b) one should be willing to accept truth from any person.

The second of these assumptions, Jewishly often traced to Rambam's introduction to Avot, is clearly in tension with halakhic rules about learning from apostates et al. But I want to begin our interpretive journey from the first.

Rabbeinu Yonah begins his comments on "Who is wise? One who learns from every person" with what I have to believe is a self-conscious citation of "The Sages of the Nations"<sup>3</sup>; in other words, he tries to model learning from all persons. The reference appears to be to Socrates, although I have not found the precise quote. That failing, it is unclear to me exactly where the citation ends. The paragraph has two separable components:

- a) that knowledge of all the disciplines of wisdom, absent love of wisdom, does not make a person wise, and
- b) that a person who loves wisdom is called wise even if that person knows nothing.

It should be evident that b) does not follow from a) – one might argue that wisdom requires *both* love and knowledge. Furthermore, b) is justified not by the claim that love of wisdom *constitutes* wisdom, but rather by the claim that it *leads to* wisdom (thus the ignorant lover is "*called* wise", but may not yet actually *be* wise). What constitutes true wisdom is *da'at Elo-him*. But what is *da'at Elo-him*, and why is love of wisdom necessary for its acquisition?

These questions should, I contend, be approached exegetically rather than analytically. Rabbinic literature is very often a self-conscious pastiche of quotes that can be understood only by reference to their original context. So here, Mishlei 2:4-5 tells us that *da'at Elo-him* can be found by those who seek it as treasureseekers do – this is the basis for Rabbeinu Yonah's claim that those who yearn for wisdom will achieve it. But that still leaves *da'at Elo-him* undefined.

A peculiar phrase in Rabbeinu Yonah's first sentence comes to our aid. "The Sages of the Gentiles said that one who knows all the disciplines of wisdom, if he is not a lover of wisdom (a philo-sopher), is not wise, but rather a fool, since he does not love wisdom, *ki hi hada'at*." What is the meaning of *ki hi hada'at*? Some online citations translate "which is knowledge", or "which is the knowledge", which are literally correct and utterly meaningless. Rabbi Blau translates "which truly constitutes knowledge", and translates the earlier phrase *yodeia kol hachokhmot* as "knows alot", thereby setting up an opposition between knowledge and wisdom. But it seems to me that the contrast here is between knowledge and love, not between knowledge and understanding. I therefore suggest instead that Rabbeinu Yonah is quoting from Yirmiyah 22:16, which identifies *hi hada'at Oti* as the administration of justice. But what inspires him to see that verse as the definition of wisdom=*chokhmah* in the context of our Mishnah?

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<sup>3</sup> so far as I can tell the only such citation in this work, although he cites the חכמי הטבע=scientists/natural philosophers on occasion

After explaining each of our Mishnah's four stanzas individually, Rabbeinu Yonah explains that Ben Zoma modeled the whole on Yirmiyah 9:22-23, which invidiously contrasts *chokhmah*, *gevurah*, and *ashirut* with "*haskel veyadoa Oti*". Rabbeinu Yonah reasonably contends that we should see 22:16's statement "that is *hada'at Oti*" as defining 9:22-23's instruction "*yadoa Oti*". Note that 9:23 continues "because/that I Hashem do *chesed*, *mishpat*, and *tzedakah* in the land, because it is those that I desire". One who fulfills this will naturally find *da'at Elo-him*.

It emerges, then, that the contentions of the first paragraph are that

- true wisdom is the administration of justice – not the understanding of justice! – but that love of wisdom is the sine qua non for the administration of justice, and
- Knowledge, even deep understanding, of other disciplines, for example politics and rhetoric, may be helpful but is certainly not sufficient and may not be necessary. Why should these be so?

Perhaps the key is that true wisdom is knowledge of G-d – *chokhmah*=*da'at Oti*=*da'at Elo-him*. Knowledge of G-d cannot in the end be obtained through intellection – that can only give us knowledge about G-d. But love and desire can drive us to seek the experience of being like G-d - which we can have best through the experience of administering justice in the manner of the Judge of all the land.

We may now understand Rabbeinu Yonah's underlying theology. What we have not dealt with, however, is his exegesis – how does he use his theology to explain Ben Zoma? More simply and specifically, why and how is "learning from every person" connected to imitatio dei via the administration of justice?

Here we must return to the very beginning of Rabbeinu Yonah's comments, i.e. to Socrates. Socrates is famously told by the Delphic Oracle that he is the wisest of all men. He attempts to disprove this by asking questions from men who have knowledge of specific disciplines, as he believes himself to possess no wisdom at all; however, it turns out that none of these men have true wisdom at all. In other words, Socrates is called wise by the Oracle even though he possesses no specific knowledge, because he does possess the desire for wisdom. But having the desire for wisdom requires the recognition of one's ignorance – therefore Socrates has what his interlocutors do not, which is the recognition that their knowledge is not wisdom. Therefore Socrates begins with superior knowledge about wisdom. It may also be fair to say that Rabbeinu Yonah explains Ben Zoma's critiques of standard conceptions of bravery and wealth in Socratic terms.

Rabbeinu Yonah contends that Ben Zoma diverges from Yirmiyah 9 by adding *kavod* to the three terms discussed there. Furthermore, while the first three terms, as he explains Ben Zoma, all relate directly to knowledge of G-d, the fourth apparently makes a practical claim. Why then does Ben Zoma add it? Let's take a look at Rabbeinu Yonah's fascinating explanation of the fourth stanza.

As I understand him, Rabbeinu Yonah argues that giving *kavod* to another can never be for the sake of the other, as a person's status=inherent *kavod* cannot be affected by someone else's decisions. Therefore the only purpose for giving *kavod* is to become more worthy of *kavod* oneself. But becoming more *kavod*-worthy will in fact lead to receiving *kavod*, as how can human beings not reciprocate when given something they are not entitled to?

Rabbeinu Yonah does not explain how this connects to knowledge of G-d, but I suggest the following. Why does giving *kavod* to others make one more worthy of

*kavod*? The ultimate act of respect is to see another as having something to teach you, and so if learning from anyone is essential to wisdom, giving *kavod* to others is entailed. We can now ask again why learning from everyone is essential to wisdom=*da'at Elohim*.

Recall that Rabbeinu Yonah defines true wisdom as the experience of the administration of justice. Perhaps justice requires knowledge of people in their particularity, and thus every human being by definition has a lesson to teach.

Now it is valuable to recall that Socrates does not achieve general honor. Perhaps, according to Rabbeinu Yonah, this is because Socrates fails to learn anything from most of the people he interviews – he is willing to, in principle, but in the end cannot believe that those who are not wise – who are not themselves philosophers, lovers of wisdom – have anything to teach him. In terms of Rabbeinu Yonah's analogy, he seeks his utensil from everyone, but fails to recognize it when they offer it to him. This mishnah thus emerges as a critique of Socrates, who is more interested in learning about justice than in administering it.<sup>4</sup>

We have yet one more peculiarity to deal with. Rabbeinu Yonah contends that Ben Zoma's list is not merely one of virtues, but rather of virtues that are achievable without great effort. What does he mean by this, and what motivated him to say it? To this I have no answer yet, but I encourage readers to look at Mishlei 20:14.

Shabbat shalom

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<sup>4</sup> I confess that I have no idea of whether Rabbeinu Yonah read Plato, but would love responses with evidence. He famously repented for attacking the Guide, but I don't know whether his repentance changed his reading habits, or if for that matter he attacked it before or after reading it. I apologize for not having the time to see if the quote and/or discussion here correspond directly with a Platonic text, and it is also entirely possible that I have misidentified the referent entirely. I have not found any mediating reference that could have been Rabbeinu Yonah's source. Finally, after writing I found that Rabbeinu Yonah's reference to Mishlei 2:4-5 is noted by Rashbatz in his **Magen Avot**.