

# ROSH HASHANAH



## מלך הכבוד The King of Glory

Let us begin with a Mishna in Tractate Avot, also known as Pirkei Avot, Chapters or Ethics of the Fathers. Avot is a part of the Talmud that deals with developing positive character traits and forming a Jewish worldview based on Torah values. It is therefore surprising to find, at the beginning of its Chapter Four, a series of questions dealing with “external” traits such as strength and wealth: “Who is wise? Who is mighty? Who is rich? ...” What do these traits have to do with developing one’s character?

The Mishna’s answers to these questions, however, do return us to the world of good *midot* and character traits:

**Ben-Zoma says: Who is wise? One who learns from all men... Who is mighty? One who conquers his evil inclination... Who is rich? One who is happy with his lot... (Avot 4,1)**

Learning from others, inner joy, overcoming urges – these are definitely traits we should strive to achieve. But there is still something disquieting about this Mishna. Are these the only definitions we can think of for these traits? Are there not others that are more straightforward? For instance, a man who is knowledgeable in science and other disciplines - should he not be called wise? One who shows great courage and valor on the battlefield, shouldn’t he be termed mighty? And one who owns treasures of wealth and real estate, is he not rich? Why, then, does the Mishna give those specific definitions for wisdom, might and richness, when there are others as well?

To answer this question, let us take a look at this verse:

... אֵל יִתְהַלֵּל חָכָם בְּחָכְמָתוֹ וְאֵל יִתְהַלֵּל הַגִּבּוֹר בְּגִבּוֹרָתוֹ  
אֵל יִתְהַלֵּל עֲשִׂיר בְּעֲשָׂרוֹ.

*Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom,  
and let not the mighty man glory in his might,  
and let not the rich man glory in his riches.* (Jeremiah 9,22)

Why not? Why shouldn't they take pride in their achievements?

The Prophet wishes to emphasize that all these traits - wisdom, might and richness - are gifts, or are acquired via gifts, that G-d gave us. Business acumen, intelligence, and valor are, of course, traits that can be developed and expanded, but their basic essence is inborn. They are passed down by inheritance, monetarily or genetically, from one's parents and grandparents. We must learn that whatever is not the result of personal effort and hard work on one's character, is not the type of achievement that should be bragged about.

But the next verse in this prophecy tells us something in which we *can* take pride:

כִּי אִם בְּזֵאת יִתְהַלֵּל הַמֵּתְהַלֵּל: הַשֵּׂכֵל וְיָדַע אוֹתִי ...

*The praiseworthy can be praised only in this:  
that he understands and knows Me ...*

To reach knowledge of G-d is nothing more nor less than pure hard work on oneself. There is nothing here that is inherited or passed down through birth.

Ben-Zoma, in asking and answering these questions in the Mishna, teaches us this same idea regarding other traits as well: There can also be wisdom, strength and wealth that are dependent exclusively on how much effort one expends towards them - and if one's achievements are of that type, *then* he can take pride and be praised for them.

Let us now explain the Mishna in this light:

**Ben-Zoma says: Who is wise? [That is, who deserves to take pride in his wisdom?] One who learns from all men, as is written, "From all my teachers I gained wisdom."** (Psalms 119,99)

The willingness to learn from everyone is an expression of real humility. To truly recognize that everyone has something unique that others do not, is

a genuine aspect of modesty and submission. This trait is acquired by hard work on one's character, and one who achieves wisdom of this type has acquired something truly praiseworthy.

The Mishna's next question is, "Who is mighty? Who deserves to take pride in his might?" The answer is:

**One who conquers his evil inclination, as is written, "He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who controls his will is better than the one who conquers a city." (Proverbs 16,32)**

The capacity for self-restraint and anger-control is a form of heroism that one acquires only through much hard work. It is certainly not something one is born with, and its achievement can be a source of satisfaction.

Further in the Mishna: "Who is rich? Who can take pride in his wealth?" The answer:

**One who is happy with his lot, as is written, "When you enjoy the work of your hands, you will be happy and it will be well with you." (Psalms 128,2)**

One who can see the good in what he has, no matter how much or how little, and can be happy with whatever he has – is truly a rich person. He has genuine wealth that he can be proud of. The ability to be happy with one's lot is something that does not appear in any gene, but is rather something one works hard to acquire.

We now see that the Mishna's questions, "Who is wise? Who is rich? etc.," teach us that even gifts from Heaven can be "personalized" by one's sincere efforts. The questions should actually be understood as follows: "How can we make our own personal mark on the treasures given us by the Creator of the world?" And the answer is: "With hard work on our character."

## ■ The King of Glory

The Mishna concludes with a fourth question-and-answer, which seems to be out of place relative to the other three. Ben-Zoma asks:

**Who is worthy of honor? He who honors his fellow man, as is written, "Those who honor Me, I will honor, and those who despise Me, I will hold in contempt." (Samuel I 2,30)**

Is “honor” a gift from G-d, like wisdom, might and wealth? Glory and honor are generally not considered positive traits; can there be something positive about “honor,” and if so, what is it?

The answer to the second question is straightforward: **Honor is a positive trait when we grant it, not when we take it.** One who respects and gives honor to others is worthy of the title “honored.” This understanding helps us explain a verse that appears frequently in our Rosh HaShanah prayers:

שָׂאוּ שְׁעָרִים רְאֵשֵׁיכֶם וּשְׂאוּ פִתְחֵי עוֹלָם וַיָּבֵא מֶלֶךְ הַכְּבוֹד.  
*Lift your heads, o gates, and lift up, you everlasting portals,  
 so that the King of Glory may enter.* (Psalms 24,9)

As mentioned, we generally do not regard glory and honor as particularly positive traits for those who seek to refine their character. Is “King of Glory” an appropriate term by which to describe Hashem?

Now that we understand, however, that honor comes from granting it, it follows that G-d is truly the **King** of Glory, for there is no one in the world who grants honor and glory to man more than He. How so?

Man is less than a speck of dust in comparison with the entire universe, and certainly in comparison to G-d – and yet He has granted man of His wisdom, dignity and honor. The very fact that we can walk upright and proudly, with freedom of opinion and choice, with developed sensitivity and clear thought – all this is a manifestation of the honor that G-d has given mortal man.

A passage that expresses this most clearly is found in another chapter of King David’s Psalms:

מָה אָנוּשׁ כִּי תִזְכְּרֶנּוּ... וַתַּחֲסֶרְהוּ מֵעַט מֵאַ-לֵהִים וְכָבוֹד וְהָדָר תַּעֲטֶרְהוּ.  
*What is mortal man that You should remember him,  
 or a human being that You should count him? Yet You have  
 made him only a little lower than angels, and You crown him  
 with glory and honor.* (Psalms 8,5-6)

From here we see clearly that the phrase “King of Glory” refers to the pinnacle of glory and greatness that Hashem grants to mortal man.

But we have still not satisfactorily explained the juxtaposition between the fourth question – “Who is honored?” – and the other three, all of which appear in the above-quoted verse, “*Let not the wise man glory in his*

*wisdom, and let not the mighty man glory in his might, and let not the rich man glory in his riches.”*

In addition, the verse cited by the Mishna to answer “Who is worthy of honor?” is not easily understood:

**Who is worthy of honor? He who honors his fellow man, as is written,  
“Those who honor Me, I will honor, and those who despise Me, I will  
hold in contempt.”** (Samuel I 2,30)

Apparently, the Mishna understands the verse to mean that just like those who honor G-d are honored by Him, so too, those who give honor to others will be worthy of respect by them. But, assuming this explanation can be acceptable vis-à-vis people, how can we apply it to Hashem? Does He really need us to honor Him in order for Him to show us honor?

### ■ **Appreciation**

These difficulties – the inclusion of this fourth trait in the Mishna, and the verse used to explain it – lead us to a totally new interpretation of the Mishna.

When the Mishna asks, “Who is wise?” it does not mean, “Who has wisdom?” Nor does “Who is wealthy/mighty?” mean “Who has wealth or strength?” Rather, the Mishna is asking what characteristics these people have: What actually makes a person wise, wealthy, and strong?

And it answers: One who knows how to appreciate the wisdom that he has, he is truly wise. One who appreciates his own strength is strong, and one who is happy with his financial assets is truly a wealthy individual. **But one who has something and does not appreciate it, he is as if totally lacking it.**

If one is willing to learn from others, this signals that he recognizes the value of wisdom; it does not matter to him from whom or where he gains it. Similarly, one who knows how to restrain himself, apparently knows the true value of his strength and does not wish to use it in an uncontrolled manner. And of course, one who is happy with his lot thus shows that he knows and appreciates what he has. A financially wealthy man who is not happy with what he has, or who is jealous that someone else has more, is in his own eyes a poor person. Wanting more and more is the surest sign of poverty.

Let us continue this line of thought regarding the fourth trait: “Who is honored?” We will now understand this to mean not, “Who receives honor from others?,” but rather, “Who, in his very essence, is truly worthy of being honored?” And the Mishna answers: “He who honors others,” meaning, one who recognizes the value of the honor being shown him. If he does not, it means that he is worthless in his own eyes. One who “respects others” is one who appreciates the honor and respect they show him.

We can now understand the verse cited by the Mishna to prove this point: *“Those who honor Me, I will honor, and those who despise Me, I will hold in contempt.”* G-d is saying:

“I have granted tremendous honor to mortal man. I crowned him with My own crown as the pinnacle of Creation. I granted him the image of G-d, as well as wisdom, understanding, and free will. If he appreciates what he has received, behaves in accordance with his high stature, and does not descend to the level of an animal, I will continue to grant him more of this honor. But if he degrades his Divine image and acts like a beast, why should I bestow My honor upon him?”

Why did the Mishna include this fourth clause regarding honor? Let us return to the above-quoted verses:

אל יתהלל חכם בחכמתו ...

*Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom,  
and let not the mighty man glory in his might,  
and let not the rich man glory in his riches.*

כי אם בזאת יתהלל המתהלל: השכל וידע אותי...

*The praiseworthy can be praised only in this:  
that he understands and knows Me.* (Jeremiah 9,22-23)

This last phrase includes the recognition that wisdom, might and wealth come from Hashem. That is to say: Do not praise your wisdom as if it were your own creation, but rather recognize the honor shown you by G-d in that He grants you of His wisdom. And the same is true for wealth and might.

This is why the Mishna adds this fourth clause, which deals with one who is respected in that he recognizes the value of the honor that is granted him.

## ■ Happy With His Lot

This approach will also help solve another apparent difficulty in the Mishna: What is so praiseworthy about being “happy with one’s lot?”

Is there not value and importance in striving to improve oneself and the world? After all, King Solomon wrote: *“I have seen all the toil and all the excellence of work, which is a man’s envy of his friend”* (Kohelet 4,4) – a clear indication that competition is a way of making positive use of one’s physical urges and inclinations to improve the world. If everyone makes do only with what he has, how will the world develop and advance?

The answer lies in a correct understanding of the words “one’s lot.” They mean the abilities, talents and traits that G-d gave each person at birth. One must be happy with what he has been given in order to fulfill his mission in the world. He must not be jealous of the skills that he does not have, or of the mission someone else was assigned; he would be better advised to make his best efforts to use what he has to their fullest potential.

“Happy with his lot” means that he does not compare himself to others and feel jealous if they have more than he does. Rather, he is encouraged to say: “G-d gave me skills and abilities, and I will try harder to use them better!”

## ■ Kindness, Law and Justice

The above passage in Yirmiyahu continues as follows:

... כִּי אֲנִי ה' עֹשֶׂה חֶסֶד מִשְׁפָּט וְצִדְקָה בְּאֶרֶץ כִּי בְּאֵלֶּה חֲפֹצְתֵי נַאֲם ה'.

*For I am G-d, Who performs kindness,  
law and justice in the land, for these I desire, says G-d... (9,23)*

Hashem, highest of the high, ruler over the entire infinite universe from the vast expanses of the galaxies down to the smallest quarks of protons and neutrons, takes interest in something in our world. What is this thing in which He takes interest? What does He want of it?

The answer is given in this verse: He would like *kindness, law and justice in the land*. These include both aspects of law: the letter of the law, i.e., justice, and also “beyond the letter of the law,” that is, kindness and compassion. Hashem is very interested in the compassion and kindness that people do for one another, as well as the efforts they make, via courts of justice, to stay away from injustice.

Let us compare this to another verse:

הגיד לך אדם מה טוב ומה ה' דורש ממך,  
כי אם עשות משפט ואהבת חסד והצנע לכת עם אלהיך.

*G-d has told you, O man, what is good, and what Hashem demands of you: only to do justice, and love kindness, and walk humbly with your G-d.* (Micha 6,8)

Hashem Himself performs kindness and justice, and He wants us to do the same. But His request to us includes an extra element: the trait of humility. We must not be proud and arrogant, but rather simple and modest. *“Walk humbly with G-d.”*

But here an imbalance appears: G-d asks of us three things - kindness, justice and humility - yet the above verse from Jeremiah says only that He *“performs kindness, law and justice in the land.”* Where is G-d’s corresponding humility?

The answer is found in the very fact that Hashem “takes leave,” so to speak, of the entire infinite universe and instead shows great interest in our actions on this little Earth. This is precisely His humility and modesty. And we must learn from Him and adopt His traits, including His humility, as our own.

Humility of this sort leads us to several things:

1. To learn from everyone
2. To control our urges
3. To be happy with whatever we have
4. To respect and honor everyone

These are precisely the four traits that appear in the Mishna in Pirkei Avot with which we began.

### ■ **G-d’s Greatness and Humility**

The Talmud teaches (B'rachot 32a) that one must first recite praises of G-d before making requests. This is why the Amidah prayer, the Sh'moneh Esreh, begins with three blessings that are full of praise: *“The great, valiant and awesome... the Supreme G-d... Who makes the wind blow and brings down rain... revives the dead... the Holy G-d...”* Only afterwards do we begin the series of requests, for Wisdom, Repentance, Forgiveness, Health, and all the rest.

The question is always asked: Why does Hashem need our praise? What does He gain if we say words of praise? It cannot be that we are trying to “flatter” Him!

The answer is this: The true praise of G-d is of His humility: Despite His tremendous and unapproachable greatness, He still hears our prayers and requests. The fact that we begin our prayers with such praise of G-d's greatness is not simply to list His great traits, but rather to declare that *despite* all this greatness, He gives total attention to us mere mortals, and is willing to hear our requests. With this, we then continue with the other blessings/requests.

We thus do not praise Hashem only for the sake of praise, but also to teach us that His way is the proper path to take. We must walk in the ways of G-d and be modest, generous, and happy with our lot.

This is the sublime concept expressed by Rav Yochanan in the Talmud:

**Wherever you find G-d's greatness, there you also find His humility.**  
(Megillah 31a)

Rav Yochanan is directing our attention to a fascinating phenomenon in the Torah: wherever in the Tanach there is a mention of G-d's greatness, there is also a mention of His providence over poor mortal human beings. A prime example is found in the Torah, in the source for the first blessing of the Sh'moneh Esreh:

... הָאֵל־הַגָּדֹל הַגִּבּוֹר וְהַנּוֹרָא אֲשֶׁר לֹא יִשָּׂא פָנִים וְלֹא יִקַּח שֹׁחַד,  
עֹשֶׂה מִשְׁפָּט יְתוּם וְאֶלְמָנָה וְאֹהֵב גֵּר לִתְתּוֹ לֹו לֶחֶם וְשִׂמְלָה.  
*The great, valiant and heroic G-d Who will  
not play favorites and will not take bribes,  
He performs justice for orphans and widows,  
and loves the stranger to give him bread and clothing.*

(D'varim 10,17-18)

It is precisely this tremendous contrast between G-d's greatness and His attention to the suffering of the weak that is the highest of the highest level of humility. This makes even more clear why the title “King of Glory” is so appropriate for G-d – for He epitomizes the granting of glory, honor and respect to mortal man.

