

From the Rabbi's Desk
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Mishnah with a Twist [23]

Who is Wise? Who is Mighty? Who is Rich? Who is He That is Honored?

Insights into Mishna Avot 4:1



Background to Our Story

Ben Zoma

◆ AI Overview

Ben Zoma (also known as Shimon Ben Zoma) was a prominent Jewish scholar and *Tanna* (sage) of the early 2nd century CE. He is most famous for his ethical teachings in the Pirkei Avot (Ethics of the Fathers) and for his role in the mystical legend of the Pardes.

The Text: Mishna Avot 4:1

בן זומא אומר, איזהו חכם, הלומד מכל אדם, שנאמר (תהלים קיט) מכל מלמדי השפילתי פי עדותיך שיחה לי. איזהו גבור, הכובש את יצרו, שנאמר (משלי טז) טוב ארץ אפים מגבור ומשל ברוחו מלכד עיר. איזהו עשיר, השמת בחלקו, שנאמר (תהלים קכח) יגיע פפיה כי תאכל אשריה וטוב לך. אשריה, בעולם הזה. וטוב לך, לעולם הבא. איזהו מכבד, המכבד את הבריות, שנאמר (שמואל א ב) כי מכבדי אכבד ובזי וקלו:

Ben Zoma said: Who is wise? He who learns from every man, as it is said: "From all who taught me have I gained understanding" (Psalms 119:99).

Who is mighty? He who subdues his [evil] inclination, as it is said: "He that is slow to anger is better than the mighty; and he that rules his spirit than he that takes a city" (Proverbs 16:32).

Who is rich? He who rejoices in his lot, as it is said: "You shall enjoy the fruit of your labors, you shall be happy and you shall prosper" (Psalms 128:2) "You shall be happy" in this world, "and you shall prosper" in the world to come.


Who is he that is honored? He who honors his fellow human beings as it is said: "For I honor those that honor Me, but those who spurn Me shall be dishonored" (I Samuel 2:30).



Explaining the Text

What's going on here? (The sequence of events)

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

Extra Bonus  What do the four teachings of Ben Zoma have in common?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Answer 4 _____

? Why does Ben Zoma bring proof texts (as it is said...) to justify his teachings?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____


? What is the difference between being right, being smart, being intelligent, and being wise? Can you be "one" without the "other"?


Extra Bonus **?** Why can you be "happy" in this world, but "prosper" in the world to come? What is the difference between happiness and prosperity?


Extra Bonus **?** Ben Zoma maintains that a mighty person is one who subdues his or her [evil] inclination. However, the original Hebrew text doesn't have the word [evil], but just the word *inclination*. *Can you imagine a situation in which you have to be mighty to subdue your "regular" inclination?*


Extra Bonus **?** What is counterintuitive about being honored by honoring others?


? How does it make sense being honored by honoring others?


If you wish to share...  When have you felt wise? When have you felt in need of greater wisdom?


If you wish to share...  When have you felt mighty, heroic? When did you wish you were more heroic?

If you wish to share...  Have you ever felt heroic by saying “yes,” by answering the call? Have you ever felt heroic by saying “no”?

If you wish to share...  Can you imagine a situation in which someone is heroic and still loses?

If you wish to share...  “You shall enjoy the fruit of your labors...” What would you change in your life to be able to enjoy more “the fruit of your labors”?

If you wish to share...  Why do you think it is difficult for many of us to “rejoice in our lot”?

If you wish to share...  Why do you think honor is important to people?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Answer 4 _____

“The Twist” – Or the Lessons We Can Learn from This Text

- ! Ben Zoma’s counterintuitive “to do list” to work on our character traits.



- Being wise and being right is not the same (with appreciation to Isaac Gurfinkel).
- Being caring and compassionate is not the same as saying “yes.”
- Occasionally, the act of heroism is being able to say “no.”
- Heroism is not the same as winning. You can be heroic and still lose.
- You are a hero if you are able (literally) to conquer your inclination, to change the way you do things.