

**For What Does the Soul Hunger?**

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This being the Jewish High Holy Days, I want to share with you a story that was told to me by a Rabbi friend of mine. For 30 years, Molly Levine had a condition that left her completely deaf in both ears. In spite of her substantial wealth and willingness to volunteer in experimental trials, none of her doctors had been able to find a cure. Now, well into her nineties, she had just about given up all hope when she receives an encouraging call from a doctor who thinks he can really help her. So she immediately makes an appointment.

The doctor has a new hearing aid that he thinks will greatly improve Molly's life. It's small enough that no one can see it, but also powerful enough to correct the problem from which she has suffered for decades.

"Come back in a week," instructs the doctor, "and let me know if it works as well as I suspect it will." Molly then leaves and, as directed, returns in one week's time.

"So, Molly," says the doctor, "did it work?"

"Perfectly," said Molly. "It's a miracle! It has completely changed my life!"

"You must be so happy," said the doctor. "I bet your children are just ecstatic!"

"Well," replies Molly. "I haven't told them."

"You haven't told them?" the doctor asks. "How do they know that you are now listening to them?"

"They don't," Molly says, "and in the last seven days I've changed my will twice!"

There is nothing quite like Jewish humor to make one think about life. I suppose you could say that Molly was deceitful with her children, *and*, you could say **shame on her children** who portray themselves one way but speak of her differently when they think she cannot hear them.

Now, I realize that this was a joke, but let's pretend that it wasn't. Both mother and children, in one fashion or another, were pretending to be someone on the outside that they were not on the inside. And that is a dilemma with which we, human beings, struggle all the time. To live authentically is to consciously reconcile the outer and inner life. To speak the truth in love, to confront the challenges, frustrations, and disappointments honestly with compassion and integrity, to forgive ourselves and others our iniquities...is that not the path of personal growth, the journey from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur?

### **Where do we begin this transformative exploration of the soul?**

In the *Sayings of the Sages* (4:1), the 2nd century Palestinian sage Ben Zoma asks us to consider four questions:

*Who is wise?*

*Who is strong?*

*Who is rich?*

*Who is respected?*

Ben Zoma's answers to these four questions are the opposite of what we, in our culture might expect.

We might presume that the wise person is the smartest one in the room, blessed with a high IQ and much book learning and education. We do, after all, live in the Mecca of higher learning. [Oops, wrong tradition!] Ben Zoma says that the wise person is the one who's humble enough, curious enough, open-hearted enough, and willing enough to learn something from every human encounter regardless of the other person's intelligence, achievements, worldliness, station, occupation. It's as if he is saying that high intelligence isn't necessarily destiny, nor are the highest scores on the SAT, GRE, LSAT, or MCAT determinative, nor are the graduates of the Ivy Leagues necessarily wiser than the individual who couldn't get in or afford college and had to go to work at a young age.

Ben Zoma said that **a wise person hears and absorbs the truths that come only from others**. The well-educated person who close-mindedly, arrogantly and hard-heartedly dismisses the thoughts, experiences and opinions of all people, is actually, according to Jewish values, the opposite of wise—a fool.

[I once heard this story when I was doing my Clinical Pastoral Training at the New England Deaconess Hospital to become a hospital chaplain.] Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, who was a Hospice pioneer, said that in her work with dying patients she had become distressed because she didn't feel she was really reaching the patients she cared so much about. One evening she returned to visit a man dying of cancer, and as she approached his room, she overheard him pouring out his heart to someone Kubler-Ross couldn't see from where she stood outside in the hall.

She was stunned because this man had opened up in a way she'd not been able to get him to do with her. She waited for the conversation to conclude and for this remarkable counselor, whoever she was, to come out so Kubler-Ross could discover what techniques she had used in successfully enabling this man to communicate so freely. Moments later, Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross was surprised to see the cleaning lady walk out into the hall.

“How did you get this man to talk so freely,” she asked.

*“Honey, I didn't do a thing,”* said the woman. *“I guess he just knew I was willing to listen. And when he started to talk I just sat there, held his and listened to him. The good Lord did all the rest.”* [Acts of Loving-Kindness: A Training Manual for Bikkur Holim, by Rabbis Amy Eilberg, Janet Offel and Nancy Flam, Bay Area Jewish Healing Center, 1992, pp19-20.]

The wise person listens, respects and honors the person standing before her...is patient, empathic and non-judgmental. The wise person knows he has nothing to prove.

Of course, education gained from experts and books is important for so many reasons. We need to learn from great thinkers and teachers, scientists, historians, and writers so we can gain from their insights and knowledge and grow, and we have to acquire the skills necessary to do well whatever our

particular calling demands of us. The frustration for the wise is that the more one knows the more one knows how little one knows.

Ben Zoma's second question is—**Who is strong or heroic?** The answer, again, is the opposite of what we might expect. The strong or heroic person isn't the one with the most intellectual heft, physical prowess, or emotional obstinacy. Though the warrior, the 300-pound lineman (like the great Gronkowski), the powerful business executive, the intimidating litigator, the winning politician, or the acclaimed celebrity may have used effectively their requisite physical, intellectual and emotional attributes to win the day, but our 2nd century sage, Ben Zoma, wasn't concerned with how much of those forceful and intimidating qualities a person can muster as determinative of strength. Rather, Ben Zoma's idea of strength and heroism was of a different kind. It is the one who controls his or her *yetzer*.

*Yetzer* is a Yiddish word which is difficult to define, but it involves our impulses, passions and drives, jealousies, pride and envy, anger, rage, and ambition, competitiveness, need to acquire things and sexual appetite. **Each of these, when not controlled, can be destructive to us and hurtful to others.** We see it happen to people all the time and often it's the most talented, gifted and brilliant among us who bring themselves down through their unmanaged base drives.

When it comes to *yetzer*, Walt Whitman said that, "*Logic and sermons never convince.*" [That might help us better understand our President.] It's as though we're riding a charging elephant barreling through the forest, tearing down everything in its path.

Rabbi Amy Eilber put it well when she wrote that Ben Zoma "*defines strength and heroism as an inside job. The hero is one who attains a measure of success in learning his own interior landscape deeply enough to resist the powerful pull of long-practiced destructive habits.*" ["From Enemy to Friend: Jewish Wisdom and the Pursuit of Peace," p. 152]

Real strength is about our taking control of those impulses, passions and drives that demean us and others, and transforming that unchecked energy that fuels the *yetzer* towards positive ends. It is the constant battle between our higher and lesser natures...between our good angels and those that have gone rogue.

Ben Zoma's third question is—**Who is rich?** And like the first two answers, our sage's response isn't what we might have anticipated. I imagine that most of us think of wealth in terms of measuring things quantitatively, by the numbers. How much money do I have in the bank? How expensive is my house or car? Is my portfolio big enough?

There is certainly nothing wrong with wealth. Financial security and comfort are things we all want and need. Maimonides says that *the well-being of the soul is obtained only after the well-being of the body is secure*. [“Guide for the Perplexed,” chapter 27]. But, in contrast to certain ascetic religious traditions, Judaism holds no great attraction to poverty. Though sufficient money enables us to do things we otherwise would never be able to do, and gives us a measure of independence and latitude in our choices, it can't fill a hole in our hearts and souls that can only be filled by love, friendship, meaningful work, engagement in worthy pursuits, and faith.

Ben Zoma taught that real wealth has nothing at all to do with material things. The wealthy person, he said, is happy and grateful for whatever he or she does have, whether it be much or little. Judaism teaches that the measure of “wealth” is taken not relative to any external standard, but relative to our inner virtues of humility, compassion, generosity and gratitude.

The fourth and last question by our 2nd century sage is—**Who is respected?** Again, the answer is not what we would expect. He says the respected person isn't necessarily the most successful with the most lucrative position. Ben Zoma said the most respected and honorable person is the one who respects others regardless of their accomplishments, title, station, wealth, power, and fame. The most honorable person looks past distinctions and treats every human being with kindness and respect.

Ben Zoma's insight into and attitudes about wisdom, strength, wealth, and respect are key to our attaining greater meaning, satisfaction, fulfillment, and even happiness in our lives. They are the touchstones on the path toward personal growth and fulfillment.

As *Yom Kippur* approaches, the holiest day in Judaism, each individual is asked:

\* What do you really want?

- \* What is it that your soul craves most dearly?
- \* What do you really seek in your life?
- \* On this night of nights, what is the deepest purpose for which you have come into this world?

Jewish tradition teaches that God cares not about the dollars and material goods we've accumulated, nor the number of people over whom we preside, nor even the deserved awards we've earned or been given.

What matters is what we have learned on this journey, how we have reconciled our inner and outer lives. What matters are the individuals we have helped to become their best selves, whom we have taught, nurtured, forgiven, strengthened, comforted, and loved.

Rabbi Harold Kushner, in his book *Living a Life That Matters*, says:

*Our souls are not hungry for fame, comfort, wealth, or power. Our souls are hungry for meaning, for the sense that we have figured out how to live so that our lives matter, so that the world will be at least a little bit better for our having passed through it.*

May this New Year fill us with real wisdom, strength, wealth, and respect. May we learn to speak the truth in love, to confront our challenges, frustrations, and disappointments honestly with compassion and integrity, to forgive ourselves and others our iniquities. And may this be a time of discovery, a time for clarity of purpose, a time for unconditional giving and receiving of love.

Amen and Blessed Be