

Twenty Five Years in the Rabbinat: (Another) Five Values

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By: Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch

I mentioned on Rosh Hashanah that I have begun my 25<sup>th</sup> year as a rabbi and this is my tenth High Holy Days at Stephen Wise. I suggested that when we reach such milestones we have an opportunity to summarize our experiences and to share what we have learned along the way.

In deference to beginning our tenth year together I thought to share ten values that are at the center of Judaism: Five communal values on Rosh Hashanah; and - on this day dedicated to self-evaluation – five principles of a good life.

There is a well known statement in the Mishna: (Avot 4:1)

Ben Zoma asks four questions:

Who is intelligent?

Who is strong?

Who is honored?

Who is rich?

These are among the key questions of our lives. We all want to be smart; we all want to be powerful; we all want honor and respect; and we all want to be financially secure. And since Ben Zoma gives two responses for who is wealthy – together this talmudic teaching contains five Jewish lessons on living a good and meaningful life.

1. Who is Intelligent?

Ben Zoma responds: An intelligent person is one who learns from everyone.

At first glance, this response is surprising to us. We have come to understand intelligence as emanating from within. What we have is what we have: We cannot add to the genetic material we received from our parents. Who is intelligent? Our response today would likely be: “someone who has a high IQ.”

We believe that intelligence is destiny. So we give children a battery of examinations to tell us what is their aptitude.

Increasingly, it seems that the purpose of education is to narrow our focus on those areas of our highest aptitude. We live in an era of specialization and the earlier we can get on the straight and narrow the better – because our future competitors - who may still be in

diapers - are doing the same. Early on we can predict who will attend the Ivy League; who will play in the Major League; who will study legalese.

I remember the aptitude tests I received back in high school, in Israel. Now I had two issues as a teenager: First, since we had just made *aliyah*, it took me some time to learn high school Hebrew. I didn't know the Hebrew word for "triangle" until three months into ninth grade. I had less difficulty with other Hebrew words, like *Scandinavia* or *Anglia* – but you try to do geometry without knowing the word for "triangle."

Second, even if I had understood the Hebrew, I was much more interested in other things. I had much more fun outside than inside; I derived much more pleasure from the pool than the school; that's actually how I learned proper teenage Hebrew – from all my other friends who were studying soccer rather than Socrates.

So one evening, the vice principal calls my parents into his office. Now I wasn't there, so I heard about the discussion only second-hand from my freaked-out parents – but even accounting for parental exaggeration - apparently – he said to them – "We tested your son; the only thing that he has an aptitude for is geography; he has trouble with basic geometry, but it's an amazing thing: he can locate Scandinavia and England instantly on a map. So we, the faculty, met, and we decided to steer him towards cartography."

We have a tendency to steer children into areas where we think they show specific aptitude based upon standardized tests. Ben Zoma does not define intelligence in this way.

And more: because of our emphasis on tests, the high performance that is expected - requires us to spend considerable time alone. We read, we study, we write, we learn; we do homework – and most of the time we do it alone. We cannot really collaborate on a creative essay; writing is a solitary exercise.

I know – I do it all the time. It takes me two days of alone time to write a weekly d'var Torah, and more than a month to produce these High Holy Days sermons. I crave being alone. Like a student in school, or an attorney preparing a brief, or a scholar writing a thesis, or a scientist working on a hypothesis, or a musician practicing for a concert – I need to be alone with my books, my material and my thoughts.

But – you know – a person can go crazy being stuck alone inside his head. We lose a sense of proportion; we lose a sense of reality. What is so hard for us to figure out alone is often resolved by one passing observation of someone else. Has it ever happened to you? We could spend hours trying to figure out some nagging problem, and someone says something that unlocks the dilemma. They may not even know what they said.

And remember: we will never know enough anyway. It is ironic: now we have at our disposal all of the accumulated data of humanity; but the more we know, the more we know how little we know.

There is always more to know. It is why every tractate of the *Gemarah* begins on page two. There is no page one in the second part of the Talmud, to symbolize that knowledge has no beginning and no end. The great sage and talmudic scholar Eliezar said that while he learned much Torah, it was comparable only to what a dog laps from the lake. (Sanhedrin 68a)

Of course we need to learn the material, the sources, the principles of our craft, and while teachers help us, most of this we do alone. But in the end, we will never know enough. And in any case, what we seek in life is not the highest IQ score, or even the most knowledge. What we want is wisdom. And wisdom, we learn from other people; from their experiences; their perspectives, their successes, their mistakes and their failures.

If I look back at my near decade in this synagogue, I feel that I have learned a lot from all the time I spend alone. It is a unique and marvelous vocation: to read, study, think, write, reflect, preach, and to be supported by the community.

But – this is all theoretical knowledge – important – but limited. Ben Zoma was right: Of all the advanced learning that I have done through the years, from law school to rabbinical school until this very day, I have learned the most from you. Really: I'm not *schmeicheling* you.

I have learned the most from teenage bnai mitzvah students who sit in my office and come up with the most amazing insights. I have learned the most from adult bnai mitzvah students whose brilliance is exhilarating and deeply humbling. I have even learned from our nursery school toddlers who have incredible spiritual intuitions that we lose as we age.

I have learned the most about how to run a synagogue from our trustees. In rabbinical school, who thinks to teach rabbis how to actually organize synagogues? We teach them Bible, but not how to raise enough money to fund classes in Bible.

And more: I have been most inspired in my own faith from you. At times, when I have emptied the spiritual tank and am running on fumes, I might watch someone pray in our sanctuary; or I might visit someone struggling with an illness – and you restore me. All the books in the world don't teach as much about dignity and courage as parents struggling to overcome the death of their baby or a patient who fights the disease with everything she's got.

I have learned the most about endurance and perseverance from congregants who find the strength to carry on as their marriage and relationships unravel.

And that is why Ben Zoma says: Who is intelligent: one who learns from every person: One who realizes that learning never ends; that we are never too old to learn new things, never too smart to acquire new information, never too knowledgeable to perceive new insight; and never too cynical to be inspired anew.

## 2. Who is Strong?

Ben Zoma responds: One who masters one's impulses.

The word Ben Zoma uses is *yetzer*. Who is strong – *hakovesh et yitzro* – the one who conquers his *yetzer*.

The Hebrew word *yetzer* is almost impossible to translate. It is often understood as passions or impulses, or negative inclinations. The *yetzer* is that part of us that feels pangs of jealousy in the success of another. It is the part of the human creature that is self-absorbed or egotistical. It is those impulses that we know we should be able to control but we cannot: Politicians often exhibit these drives in public, but we all have them.

These inclinations may be so powerful as to destroy us. To master them requires enormous fortitude, self-control and self-discipline.

Ben Zoma does not say – as some other religious philosophies contend – eliminate the *yetzer* – suppress it; destroy it; it is sinful, it is our original sin – pride and arrogance and carnal drives. Rather, Ben Zoma says: control these impulses and channel them to productive purposes; be their master rather than their slave.

It is one of the central contentions of Judaism. The totality of the human creature is good; this is what we learn from the first chapter of the Bible. And even our negative drives can be good. Pride, ambition, competitiveness, ego – these are what push us to achieve, to excel, and to propel human progress. Carnal drives produce the next generation. The rabbis say that were it not for the *yetzer* – no one would write a book or build a house or have children.

Ben Zoma defines strength not as control over someone else; but control of ourselves. At first glance this response is surprising to us. We would have expected that strength is measured in proportion to our capacity to impose our will on others.

But Ben Zoma warns that even the most brilliant, the most gifted, the most talented human beings are often brought low and destroyed by their baser drives. “Logic and sermons never convince” (Whitman) when it comes to the *yetzer*.

Self-mastery is more important now than ever, in our era of widespread availability of every temptation under the sun. You used to need to work hard to defame someone; today, it's just a click of a button. You used to have to actually verbally or physically assault someone to bully them; today, it could be just an anonymous cyber-message.

We have this struggle going on inside of us. It is an unrelenting civil war between the *yetzer hatov* – the good impulse – and the *yetzer ha'ra* – the bad impulse.

But Judaism teaches that while we cannot eliminate these impulses entirely – nor do we even want to - we can increasingly master them. We can tame these impulses over time and control ourselves better.

Who is strong: One who is powerful on the inside; one who conquers oneself rather than another.

Rabbi Yisrael Kagan, better known as The Chafetz Chayim, lived to the ripe age of 95. When he was already very old, he was asked how he managed still to get up so early every day. The Chafetz Chayim responded: “When I wake up I tell myself that my *yetzer* is also very old – as old as I am – and he has already arisen, and so must I.”

### 3. Who is honored?

Ben Zoma responds: One who honors all people.

At first glance this response is surprising to us. We would have thought that Ben Zoma would list those attributes, characteristics and accomplishments that lead one to be recognized. For example, we honor people who are charitable; or brave; or innovative; or the best at what they do.

We like being honored. We like being the best. We like being first. We like attention. We like praise. We like other people saying nice things about us. One of the great satisfactions of being a rabbi is the many opportunities to say nice things about people; to honor their accomplishments, contributions and personality.

The desire for recognition pushes us to succeed. Jews are honest in this regard. We do not attempt to hide the reality of our ego. We were designed to be recognized. Babies come into this world yapping and shrieking for attention. They are attention-sucking machines. That’s who we are – from the very moment we enter this world.

But Ben Zoma asserts that the greatest tribute is not to receive, but to give honor. When we respect others, we are, ourselves, respected. The fundamental value is humility – the quality most prized in Jewish tradition. All of us were created in God’s image and therefore, to respect another human being is to respect God. Our lives must be about ourselves, but cannot be only about ourselves.

We have become too self-centered in this country. Something about contemporary life coarsens us to the concerns, the pain and the standing of others. We are too high and mighty.

One of the great passages in Jewish tradition involves Moses. He was the most accomplished Jew who ever lived. He spoke with God face-to-face.

But the Bible tells us that when Moses was up on the mountain receiving the Law – the people below made a Golden Calf and worshiped the idol. God said to Moses these immortal words:

*Lech red ki shichet amcha asher he'eleta me'eretz mitrayim*

*Lech* – get out of here; *red* – go down – for your people - the people that you took out of Egypt are sinning.

The rabbis explain: God said – get out of this elevated spot – go down from your glory; go down from your accomplishments; go down from your recognition – what good is it – if the people are sinning.

Get off the mountain; get off your high horse, and be with the people – for I have given you this high position only for their sake. According to the Sages, Moses was banished from Sinai through a decree of the heavenly court. (Rashi, Tanhuma)

#### 4. Who is rich?

Ben Zoma has two responses: The first: *hasameach bechelko* - a rich person is one who is happy with what he has.

At first glance this response is surprising to us. We measure wealth today by numbers: how much; how many; how big; how expensive.

Ben Zoma acknowledges that possessions are an important component of life. Financial security is critical to our well being. It is impossible to focus on higher thoughts when we are hungry, thirsty, homeless or in pain. Maimonides clarifies that the well being of the soul can only be obtained after the well being of the body has been secured. (Guide chapter 27)

And therefore, as I have mentioned to you on several occasions, Judaism is not conflicted about money. Jews do not aspire to deprivation nor do we feel guilty about financial success. Quite the contrary: We admire people who have become prosperous as a result of their own honest efforts.

A healthy bank account is preferable to counting pennies. Independence is better than dependence. Giving charity is better than receiving charity.

Jews are not attracted to poverty. We do not take oaths of poverty. There is nothing inherently noble in poverty. A poor person is not necessarily honorable and an honorable person is not necessarily poor. For the most part, Judaism considered poverty to be pointless suffering. Poverty leads to death, according to the Talmud (Nedarim 7b).

Recent studies confirm traditional Jewish wisdom. While all of us feel a certain amount of stress, and a stress-free life is not our goal anyway, there are different forms and different effects of stress. Researchers suggest that severe financial pressure is exceedingly detrimental to our health. It often leads to death.

I have come to realize that almost all of us feel financial stress. No matter how much we have, practically no one is so wealthy that they never stop and think about affordability. And almost all of us contemplate scenarios of running out of money or losing what we already have: especially now, during these difficult economic times.

But Ben Zoma urges us to think of money also in the context of what we have. He realizes that it is human nature to want more. We are never satisfied: “The eye never has its fill of seeing,” states Kohelet.

But how much is enough? Ben Zoma’s response is: enough is when you are happy with the blessings you have: family, friends, community, country; health. After all, even if we have everything we ever dreamed of, if we are not happy with what we have, what is the point of having it? As Maurice Sendak wrote: “There must be more to life than having everything.”

Money doesn’t solve every problem, nor does it necessarily improve every condition. There is a passage in the Talmud about a flute in the Temple that was delicate, smooth, fine, and made of simple reed that dated back to the days of Moses himself. The king issued an order to plate the flute with gold, and its sound was no longer pleasant. They then removed the gold and the sound was pleasant as it was before. (Arakhin 10b)

Sometimes in life the most beautiful things are the simplest things. Sometimes the most important things have nothing to do with money. And sometimes, gold only makes it worse.

The 18<sup>th</sup> century Hassidic Rabbi Simcha Bunim understood wealth in the following way: He took each of the four letters of the word *ashir* – the Hebrew word for rich, and he said:

*Ayin* – stands for the Hebrew word *einayim* – meaning eyes.

*Shin* – stands for the Hebrew word *shinayim* – meaning teeth.

*Yud* – stands for the Hebrew word *yadayim* – meaning hands.

*Resh* – stands for the Hebrew word *raglayim* – meaning legs.

When all these work – your eyes, your teeth, your hands and your legs – in other words – when you are in good health – Rabbi Bunim said – you are *ashir* – you are, indeed, exceedingly wealthy.

##### 5. Who is rich?

Ben Zoma’s second response is based on his interpretation of the biblical proof text he cited from the Psalms. Ben Zoma says: Be happy with what you have in this world, and may it be good for you in the world to come.

The Sage reminds us that intelligence is not enough; strength is not enough; honor is not enough; wealth is not enough.

That all of these attributes and accomplishments we seek – in and of themselves – and all together - they are not enough. We must also contemplate *olam ha-ba* – the world to come. Ben Zoma urges us to ask ourselves: What is existence: is it only what we see or is there more?

At first glance this response is surprising to us: Highly-educated people no longer believe in the world to come. Right?

It is the common wisdom of our 21<sup>st</sup> century prophets – those who know everything - that all we are – are biological machines. When we die, we die. There is no more. Get over it! All this talk of God and wonder, and mystery and spirituality – these are the child-like cries of desperate people who can't accept the truth of the “bitter hug of mortality.” “You don't want the truth. You can't handle the truth.”

Life is devoid of higher purpose, they say. There is no greater meaning to life, success, relationships, love, intelligence, strength, honor or wealth. It just is. Everything that goes beyond this stark reality – whether through poetry, prophecy or philosophy - is the veneer we pull over existence to shield us from its harsh insignificance. We are nothing.

And if so – why do we exist? What is our purpose? The existential frailty of the modern condition led philosophers like Albert Camus to write an entire book – *The Myth of Sisyphus* – around the question – if there is no God; if everything just is - why not kill ourselves? It is so French. If we are all going to die anyway, and there is nothing after death, why not kill ourselves now?

Our sages debated the same question: what is the meaning of life. The poet W.H. Auden said that one of his favorite examples of Jewish humor was the story of the great sage who, after a lifetime of contemplating human suffering, sighed: “Perhaps it would have been better not to have been born. But how many are so lucky: Not one in a thousand!”

The Talmud tells us that for two and a half years the schools of Hillel and Shammai really did debate that question: whether it would have been better had we not been born at all. (Eruvin 13b) In the end, they took a vote and the majority concluded that it would have been better had we had not been created – but since we were created – let us make the most of it by investigating the future.

Since we are alive, let us make the most of it and contemplate the future. Faith has always been difficult. According to the Sage Akiva, even Moses had moments of doubt and imperfect faith. (Heschel, *Heavenly Torah*, page 187; Tosefta Sotah 6:6)

Faith is more difficult now than ever. We have been raised on the disciplines of proof, facts, evidence, and certainty. But faith is about believing even when you cannot answer all the questions. It is faith in the future, even if we do not know where it leads. It is the faith of Abraham, who didn't even know where he was going. “Go forth to a land that I will show you.”



There is a mysterious passage in the Talmud that describes how a baby learns everything it needs to know while in its mother's womb. Upon the birth of the child, a heavenly presence descends from on high and plucks the baby above the lip, causing it to forget everything it learned during gestation. (Niddah 30b)

The point of the passage is that we already knew the answers to the questions that so trouble us in life. There is the prospect of finding our way back, to the place from whence we came, when all was clear and all was tranquil.

I seek to be wealthy in this way too. I hope one day – a long time from now - not in this world, but in the next, that I will know all that I need to know before I forgot it all; that all the answers will be revealed and the uncertainties resolved. I try to live life with this faith, even though our lives are filled with doubt and touched with despair.

And if I am wrong – and the modern prophets are right that there is nothing more – there is no there, there - I won't know the difference anyway.

People tell me often, even at the funeral of their loved ones, that they always assumed that Judaism only cares about this world and has no belief, no speculation nothing to say about the world to come.

During our time together I have tried to present our tradition's full approach: That to live a good life we must focus on this world and contribute what we can to its repair.

But Judaism also urges: Underlying it all; underlying intelligence, strength, honor and wealth – underlying everything we are – is faith: Hope. Hope that it will be well for us – in this world and in the next world.

In the words of Shimon Ben Zoma:

*Ashrecha ve'tov lecha; ashrecha ba'olam hazeh ve'tov lecha la'olam haba.*

May you be happy and may it be good for you: Happy in this world, and good for you in the world-to-come.