

***What Happened to Wisdom?***  
**Second Day of Rosh Hashanah 5772**  
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You've heard of Chelm, of course, and its many wise people. "It is said that after God made the world, God filled it with people. So two angels were sent off with sacks, one full of wisdom and one full of foolishness. The second sack was of course much heavier. So after a time it started to drag. Soon it got caught on a mountaintop and so all the foolishness spilled out and fell into Chelm." But the people of Chelm knew that they were really wise. It was just that foolish things kept happening to them.

One day, the wise men of Chelm were sitting around thinking, trying to come up with a plan to show the rest of the world how wise they were. They thought and thought, for most of the morning, when Hershel the miller jumped up and said, "I know. Let's name the wisest person in our town the Chief Sage of Chelm. It'll be great for publicity."

They thought that was a great idea. They clapped Hershel on the back in appreciation. "But who is the wisest person in Chelm?"

"Hmmm." They thought for another hour. Finally, they decided. "Moishe the tailor."

"Moishe... Hmmm... Yes... Why Moishe? Why not?"

Then Moishe, a little bit embarrassed, stammered, "but, but, how will everyone know that I am the chief sage?"

The wise men of Chelm saw Moishe's point. "How wise. How wise," they thought. So they put their heads together, and after two more hours, they decided. "We will make him a pair of golden shoes, so that everywhere he walks, people will know he is special." So they did.

Brilliant! Unfortunately, the streets of Chelm are not paved. When Moishe took his first steps outside with his golden shoes, what do you know? He stepped in a mud puddle. The shoes were covered. Nobody could recognize him as the Chief Sage.

"This is terrible," Moishe, declared, "I can't be the Chief Sage. I resign."

"No, no, no," the other wise men declared. "We'll find a solution." And they did. They made a pair of leather shoes to put over the gold shoes so they would not get dirty.

Well, I don't need to say what happened.

"Everybody's ignoring me," Moishe said, "this is not a good situation for a Chief Sage."

Moishe, and the wise men, were despondent. Finally, Shmerl the woodcutter suggested an

answer. When they heard his plan, all of the wise men of Chelm slapped themselves in the forehead, as they cried in giddy delight. "What a brilliant solution. Why didn't we think of that sooner?" And they quickly put it into action.

From that day forward, the people of Chelm always recognized their Chief Sage when he walked out in the streets. They felt proud that the wisdom of Chelm could now travel far and wide because of Moishe the Tailor, with his leather shoes on his feet, and his golden shoes, shining and spotless... on his hands.

We are not quite so wise as the good people from Chelm. We do not recognize wisdom quite so easily. But it is possible for us to recognize it.

Picture in your mind, for a moment, an image of a wise woman or man. Think of the face, the clothing, posture.

I am going to guess that the image in your mind is of someone old. Perhaps it is a wrinkled woman wrapped in a shawl, or a bearded hermit up on the top of a mountain.

I am aware of that image of the wise person every time I meet someone and hear the words, "but you are too young to be a Rabbi."

"Everybody's got to start somewhere," is my usual response. But I know that the image of a Rabbi in the person's mind is of an old man, slightly stooped, with a long white beard. I have the same image in my mind.

We have an understanding that wisdom is something that one acquires through life experience. A medieval kabbalist, Judah Barzeloni, said, "Wisdom does not come to a person at once. It only comes after struggles, quest, anguish, and effort."<sup>1</sup>

So part of me feels woefully inadequate to comfort someone more than twice my age who has lost a spouse, or to advise parents about the difficulties of raising teen-agers. But I also recognize that it is impossible for me to have that kind of wisdom. I haven't earned it yet. All I can really do is try to open my heart.

What is wisdom?

Well, it is difficult to define, but here is an oversimplification: The pursuit of wisdom is the search for that which is of ultimate value.

There is a big difference between wisdom and intelligence. Not all knowledge is worth knowing. The wise person knows the limits of what she can know. She is open to the whims of chance and accepts that the complicated forces governing the universe will sometimes produce

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1. *Creating an Ethical Life*, Sherwin and Cohen, p. 97 (*Peirush Sefer Yetzirah*).

outcomes that, to us, may seem good or bad, but to the universe, just are.

A wise person feels great empathy for others. He loves all people and all things unconditionally and knows he is obligated to humanity.

Wisdom also has something to do with judgment and decision-making. A wise person strives to act ethically in all circumstances, while knowing that ethics are uncertain.

It seems that nowadays, as a society, we do not value wisdom.

You may have seen the recent David Brooks article, in which he reported on a study of 18-23 year olds and their answers to questions about their moral lives. Two thirds of those asked were either unable to define a moral dilemma that they had ever faced, or answered about something that had nothing to do with morality, like whether they could afford to rent an apartment or whether they had enough coins to feed the parking meter.

Most of them could identify the obvious moral no-no's, like murder and rape. But they tended to characterize moral decisions as totally relative. "It's personal. It's up to the individual. Who am I to say?"

One respondent said, "I guess what makes something right is how I feel about it. But different people feel different ways, so I couldn't speak on behalf of anyone else as to what's right and wrong."

I hear this all the time. People talking about doing what feels right to them. Without any grounding in ethics, communal norms, religious norms. But things are not right because a person feels so in their heart. Judaism does not stand for this. Nor does common sense. The comedian and satirist Stephen Colbert, a few years ago, coined a new word: "truthiness." If it feels true in your gut, regardless of what the facts say, it is.

This is not one of those "kids these days" sermons. It is not just 18-23 year olds who embrace truthiness. Our culture is so impatient. It discourages spending serious time exploring the inner world. And it deals with incredibly complicated moral issues with sound-bytes and shouting. This non-awareness of morality points to the tremendous dearth of wisdom in contemporary life.

A midrash teaches that "if a person is wise he will therefore learn morality. But, if a person is not wise, he will be incapable of learning morality."<sup>2</sup> Plato taught similarly, "Wisdom is the essence of virtue."<sup>3</sup>

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2. Ibid. 98 (*Yalkut Shimoni*, "Proverbs" para.929)

3. Ibid.

There was a time, not so long ago, that when a respected person, someone considered wise, walked into the room, people would stand up. No longer.

A Sage was once asked, "Who are greater, the wise or the rich?" He replied, "the wise." It was then objected, "If so, how is it that there are more wise men at the doors of the rich than rich men at the doors of the wise?" He replied, "Because the wise appreciate the advantage of wealth, but the rich do not appreciate the advantage of wisdom."

Which door does our society knock on? That of the wise, or of the rich? Our society is obsessed with more. More wealth, more space, more energy, more efficiency, more megabytes, more information. Despite the recession, humanity is getting more of all of these things.

But we have become so distracted by the pursuit of more, we ignore the question of what matters. Life seems more directionless than ever.

Ironically, our era has been dubbed the "information age." Human knowledge is growing at an unheard of rate. We no longer look things up in books. The combination of wikipedia and smartphones has literally put the answer to almost any question at our fingertips.

Almost any question. You won't find the answer to this one: How do I live a meaningful life?

I typed those exact words into google and got one and a half billion search results. But not one of them will actually make me wise.

How does a person become wise? Wisdom is not something that can be achieved online, or for that matter, even in books. It can only be gotten through experience. Wisdom does require training, however. And as a society, we have not sought out that training for ourselves, much less provided it to our children.

But training exists. Judaism has always valued wisdom.

Today, we celebrate the creation of the world. The book of Proverbs describes how God did it. Before making the universe, God's first act was to make *chokhmah*. Wisdom. *Chokhmah*, personified, declares: "The Lord created me at the beginning of His course as the first of His works of old. In the distant past I was created, at the beginning, at the origin of the earth." (Pr. 8:22-23) Wisdom is the tool which God used to make us.

As Jews, we believe that there is a purpose to Creation. Our lives have meaning. The only way to discover what that meaning is, is to pursue wisdom. *Chokhmah* declares, "the one who finds me finds life and obtains favor from the Lord." The way to truly live, to maximize our potential, to live a life that matters, is by reorienting our lives to the pursuit of that which is of utmost value.

Look around the room. It is filled with people who are engaged in that pursuit. That's why we are all here. Taking time off of work, and school. Saying "those things don't matter today." We come to shul on Rosh Hashanah to reflect on the year that has passed and reflect on our lives. But not in a hurried, impatient manner. We spend a month getting ready. Our services go on for hours, and we never get bored. These are behaviors of the person who strives to become wise. Our challenge is to stay engaged in this pursuit after Rosh Hashanah.

Our tradition gives us so many ways to stay engaged. How we spend our time, through Shabbat. What we eat, through kashrut. How we conduct business. How we share our blessings. How we support our community. Judaism teaches that a life dedicated to mitzvot can, if we open our hearts and exercise some patience, lead us to wisdom.

But sometimes stories do a better job of making a point.

Once there was a boy who asked questions. He began asking about small things. And as he grew older, his questions grew bigger. So by the time he was a young man, he sought the biggest answers of all.

"You must go and see the rebbe," his father told him. "He will help you find your answers."

The boy arrived in the rebbe's town and found his way to the rebbe's school.

"Great Rebbe, please teach me about God!" the boy pleaded. "I want to learn the secrets of God."

The rebbe stared at the boy's face for some time and at last responded, "I will teach you. But tell me, do you have a place to stay?"

"A place to stay? I don't need a place to stay! I want to master the secrets of God!"

"Yes, of course. But first go and find a place to stay. Then you'll learn the secrets."

The boy left the rebbe's presence. He wasn't happy about the delay, but he knew he must obey the rebbe.

He scoured the town. No one had a room to spare. He would have to build a place for himself. So he found a good-hearted carpenter, who offered to share his skills and lend his tools. And the boy set to work.

It wasn't easy. Each time he put up a wall, it fell down. And each time he covered the roof, it fell in. But he persisted. Finally the walls stayed up. And the roof stayed up. And the windows and doors opened and shut. And the boy realized that he had built himself a home! It wasn't big. It wasn't pretty. But it was cozy and warm, and it was his!

"Rebbe, I built myself a home. I would never have believed I could do such a thing, but I mastered the skills, and now I have a home. Now, please, teach me the secrets of God!"

The rebbe looked into the boy's face for some time. Finally he said, "Of course. But first, tell me, do you have a job?"

"A job! No, I came to learn the secrets. I have no need for a job!"

"Go and find a job, and then we'll have plenty of time to learn together!"

The boy left the rebbe. He knew he must obey if he ever hoped to learn the secrets of God.

The village baker was advertising for an apprentice. The boy offered himself. He had never worked so hard in his life. From early in the morning until late in the night, until his hands were weary and his back ached and his head hurt. But he learned. He learned how to turn flour and water into fine loaves of bread and sweet cakes. He learned the joy of serving his neighbors. And when he had mastered the trade, the village baker made him a partner. On that day the boy took a basket of his best breads and cakes and brought them to the rebbe.

"Rebbe, you told me to find a place to stay, so I built a home. You told me to get a job, so I learned to bake. Now, please, share with me the secrets I have waited so long to hear!"

The rebbe looked long into the boy's face. Finally he asked, "Are you married?"

"Married?" asked the boy with obvious frustration. "Why should I be married? I came to learn the great secrets of God, not to get married!"

"Of course," said the rebbe. "But first, go and get married. Then you'll learn the secrets."

The boy was frustrated. He was angry. But what was he to do? How could he argue with the rebbe?

In the town there was a girl he liked, and he suspected she liked him. So he began to spend time with her. Eventually, they fell in love. Their wedding was simple but warmed by their love. She moved into his cozy home, and they shared the fruits of their labors.

The boy returned to the rebbe. "Rebbe, you told me to find a place to live, so I built a home. You told me to find a job, so I learned a trade. Then you asked me to get married. I found a woman. I never knew I could love anyone as much as I love her. Now, Rebbe, please, teach me the secrets of God."

"Do you have children?" the rebbe asked.

Somehow, the boy expected this. He wasn't nearly as frustrated as before. This time he just smiled. "No, not yet, but if you tell me, I will obey."

"Good," said the rebbe. "Go and have children. Then come back, and I will teach you!"

When the children came, the boy discovered that he could love even

deeper and work even harder and feel even more complete than he ever had felt before. He cared for his family and gave them everything he had and everything he made. And yet he felt more happiness than he had ever known.

So he returned to the rebbe.

"Great Rebbe, I am ready. I have done everything you asked. Now, please, teach me the secrets of God."

The rebbe stared into the boy's face: "Not yet. You're not ready yet."

"But what else do you require?" the boy cried. "What else?"

"Soon you will know." And with that, the rebbe turned back to his books.

Soon after, a messenger came from the boy's village with an urgent message. The boy's grandfather was ill.

The boy rushed home. He sat with his grandfather, and they talked, sharing all that life had taught them. And when the grandfather realized that his grandson had grown into a man, learned and wise, he smiled weakly, fell asleep, and peacefully died with his grandson beside him.

The boy cried with a sadness he had never felt before. But as the days went by, sweet memories of his grandfather replaced some of his pain. And he found the way back to life, to his family, to his happiness, to the rebbe.

"Great Rebbe," he declared. "I loved my grandfather so much. I never thought I could say good-bye. I never thought I could ever overcome my sadness and pain. But my grandfather taught me to love life as he did. And so I have found a way to remember him and yet feel happy. Am I ready now to share the secrets of God?"

"Yes, my son. Now you are ready to hear the secrets." The rebbe took a deep breath. "You came here years ago looking for a God outside yourself – far away, up in the universe. But the best place to find God is within: in your ability to grow, to learn, to build, to produce, to love, to share, to care, and to overcome life's pain. You have already found the God you came looking for. My son, you already know the secrets."

The boy listened to every word. He knew in his heart that the rebbe was right. All the secrets he needed were his already.

The boy remained the rebbe's student and disciple for many years. And when the rebbe was old and in need of rest, he turned to the boy and appointed him rebbe in his place.

The new rebbe humbly assumed his position. Soon his reputation had spread far and wide throughout the land: the new rebbe was wise beyond compare. He knew all the answers to all the questions. He could answer even the biggest of questions – he knew the secrets of God.

People came from all over seeking the rebbe's wisdom. And when any

young person would come and say to the rebbe, "Teach me, please, the secrets of God," the rebbe would look into his face for a long while and then reply: "Do you have a place to stay? Go find a place. Then I'll share the secrets with you."<sup>4</sup>

This year, as we grow, learn, build, produce, love, share, care, and overcome life's pain, may we earn a glimpse of the secrets within. May we all be blessed with a year of wisdom

L'Shanah Tovah Tikateivu V'teichateimu. May we all have a good year. Let us be inscribed and sealed in the book of life.

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4. "Finding God," abridged from *Capturing the Moon*, by Edward Feinstein.