

HOW DOES ONE BECOME WISE?

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The Gemara (Niddah 70b) continues with the questions posed by the people of Alexandria to R' Yehoshua ben Chaninah. The first of the three questions labeled as Derech Eretz – 'the way of the world' – was: What does one do to become wise?

R' Yehoshua answers, "Maximize your study, and minimize your business dealings." They respond, "Many have tried this and were not successful." R' Yehoshua responds, "Rather, seek mercy from the One whom wisdom is His. As the Pasuk says, 'For Hashem gives wisdom from his mouth, as well as knowledge and understanding' (Mishlei 2:6). The Gemara presents a parable of a human king that makes a feast for his subjects, and sends portions to his beloved friends directly from his portion. The Gemara concludes, "This without that is not sufficient", meaning that both study and prayer are necessary to achieve wisdom.

Various observations and questions emerge from this passage in the Gemara. [1] The original question in the Gemara, 'What does one do to become wise?' seems elementary. It is an explicit Mishnah in Pirkei Avos (2:7), "increased study leads to increased wisdom". [2] The original answer given by R' Yehoshua ben Chaninah also seems obvious. If one does not study, how will one become wise? Seemingly this question should have been listed in the previous passage of the Gemara among the boorish questions of the people of Alexandria. [3] It would seem that R' Yehoshua accepted the rebuttal of the people, 'Many have tried this and were not successful' and reversed his position regarding increased study, maintaining instead that praying to Hashem for wisdom is the way to acquire wisdom. If so, why did R' Yehoshua refrain from saying this initially? [4] When the Gemara concludes "This without that is not sufficient" what do the pronouns 'this' and 'that' refer to? Which is primary and which is secondary? [5] The Ksav Sofer asks in his responsa (Orach Chaim #18): If the conclusion of the Gemara is that both 'study' and 'prayer' are necessary, why did R' Yehoshua refrain from mentioning both concepts in his original answer.

Earlier in Mesechet Niddah (16b), R' Chaninah bar Papa teaches that an angel named Layla, who is appointed over all pregnancies, takes the drop of semen (that fertilizes the ovum) and presents it before Hashem. The angel asks, "Master of the world, what will become of this drop? Will it be strong or weak? Intelligent or dim-witted? Wealthy or poor?..." It would appear from this Gemara (16b) that intelligence and wisdom are decreed from Heaven and are not dependent on man's efforts. However, our Gemara (70b) seems to maintain that increased study and prayer can help one acquire wisdom.

The Maharsha (to 69b) presents this very contradiction, and includes the next two questions of the people of Alexandria in the contradiction as well, namely, 'What does one do to become wealthy?' and 'What does one do to have male children?' Based on the earlier Gemara (16b), wealth also seems to be predetermined. Another Gemara (Moed Katan 28a) states that life, children and livelihood is not based on merit, but on one's Mazal or 'fortune', which would again seem to imply that it is not within one's ability to have male children.

The Maharsha answers that the people of Alexandria were asking R' Yehoshua what one can do to overcome their heavenly decree. If one was born into this world with a predisposition to being poor, or dim-witted, or having only female children, is there anything a person can do to change their lot in life. To that the Gemara concludes that both human efforts, such as increased study, honest business dealings or marrying a righteous and modest woman, along with sincere prayer to Hashem, has the ability to override a heavenly decree or a bad Mazal.

Whereas business dealings with trustworthiness, or marital relations with modesty, may increase one's merits, how can additional amounts of study by itself bring about the overturn of a heavenly decree? Perhaps we can suggest based on the Gemara (Makkos 10b), "In the way a person wishes to walk, he will be led". By decreasing the amount of time in business matters and devoting more quality time to Torah study, one is demonstrating to 'the One whom wisdom is His' the value being placed on Torah study. Thus, through the act of diligent study along with making material sacrifices for Torah learning, one merits to have the heavenly decree overturned.

Returning to the Ksav Sofer's question, of why R' Yehoshua did not mention both study and prayer in his original answer, we can suggest that this would have implied that study and prayer share an equal role. Rather, R' Yehoshua mentions increased study first, to emphasize that diligent Torah study is the primary catalyst in overturning one's heavenly decree. Prayer, on the other hand, is mentioned second, because although it is a necessary condition to acquiring wisdom, it is ancillary to the efforts of toiling in Limud HaTorah.

This approach also answers a difficulty presented by the Kesef Mishnah. In Hilchos Teshuva (5:2), the Rambam writes, "It should not enter your mind, the idea put forward by the ignorant nations of the world and the majority of uneducated Jews, that Hashem decrees upon a person in their initial stages of development, whether they will be righteous or wicked. It is not so! Rather, every person has the ability to be as righteous as Moshe Rabbeinu, or as wicked as Yeravum (ben Nevat), or wise or foolish".

R' Yosef Karo questions why the Rambam put in this last phrase 'or wise or foolish', since it seems to contradict the aforementioned Gemara Niddah (16b). However, according to our approach, the Rambam would maintain that any heavenly decree can be overcome by dedicated human efforts and sincere prayer, based upon our Gemara (70b).

Rashi, commenting on the Gemara's final question, writes, "Why did he mention to them increased study, since it is dependent upon mercy?" HaRav Shlome Wolbe zt"l, (AleI Shor II, page 124), derives from Rashi's words 'dependent upon mercy' that the conclusion of the Gemara is that prayer catalyst to overturn a heavenly decree, whereas human effort, such as Torah study, is simply a condition to allow the prayer to have something tangible on which to be operative. He would thus learn the Gemara's concluding line as: "This (prayer) without that (study) is not sufficient",

However, if we examine the words of the Maharsha, "With great effort and work, along with aid from heaven, via prayer and merit one is able to change his heavenly decree", it would seem he understands the concluding line of the Gemara as: "This (study) without that (prayer) is insufficient", meaning that although humanly efforts to study is the primary factor to overturn the heavenly decree, it will not be effective unless accompanied by some sort of supplication.

It would seem that both the Rav Wolbe and the Maharsha would understand Rashi as reverting back to the word 'Rather', a point in the Gemara where it is assumed that 'prayer' is the primary catalyst. However, whereas Rav Wolbe accepted this premise in the Gemara's conclusion, the Maharsha would maintain that this premise was only a Hava Amina – a fleeting assumption of the Gemara that is rejected. According to the Maharsha, the conclusion of the Gemara reverts back to the very beginning of the discussion, where R' Yehoshua gave the answer of 'increased study' as his initial response to the question posed by the people of Alexandria.

This approach of the Maharsha would also solve the question posed by the Ksav Sofer above, regarding why R' Yehoshua did not initially mention both 'study' and 'prayer' together in his first response. Seemingly, by first mentioning 'study' alone, it would support the notion that 'study' is the primary tool to acquire wisdom. If both were mentioned at the outset, one might presume that 'study' and 'prayer' share an equal role in acquiring wisdom, as opposed to one being primary.