

B”H
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That Which Is Greater Than Wisdom

*By Rabbi Ariel Bar Tzadok
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***“Rabbi Hannah Ben Dosa says
“All whose fear of sin precedes his wisdom (Hokhma), his wisdom will survive.
All whose wisdom precedes his fear of sin, his wisdom will not survive.
All whose actions are greater than his wisdom’ his wisdom will survive.
All whose wisdom is greater than his actions, his wisdom will not survive.”
(Pirkei Avot 3:11-12)***

Rabbi Hannah was a man of miracles. He lived in a frame of mind that most of us would never be able to comprehend. One story about him relates the tale about how his neighborhood was pestered by a large poisonous snake that had attacked and hurt many people. In response Rabbi Hannah sought out the snake's hole in the ground, and rather than act against the snake with any normal means, including prayer, Rabbi Hannah instead stuck his foot deep into the snake's lair. The snake immediately struck at Rabbi Hannah and bit him. The result was that he died. No, not Rabbi Hannah, the snake died. Rabbi Hannah pulled out the dead body of the snake wrapped it around his neck, brought it into town, and threw it on the floor of the yeshiva. He then proclaimed, “it is not the poison that kills, it is sin that kills!”

There is no record that Rabbi Hannah prepared himself in any way, either medically or spiritually, for this miraculous feat. He simply seemed able to perform it and without hesitation did so. This is the act of a righteous and zealous man. Rabbi Hannah was able to manipulate the very fabric and order of the laws of nature by the sheer power of his nature. Yet, he never used his power for individual gain. He and his family lived in adverse poverty all their days.

With the power of life and death in his hands we might ask, how did Rabbi Hannah accomplish such a high spiritual level? Although we can never know for sure without asking him directly, we can turn to his words for some insights and directions.

Rabbi Haninah's main concern seems to be for the survival of wisdom. Apparently from our above quoted text Rabbi Hannah believes that only through the fear of sin and the abundance of righteous action can one maintain a level of wisdom. Yet, how can this be? Wisdom is an intellectual accomplishment, whereas the fear of sin is an emotional matter and actions are physical things. How then do emotions and behavior effect our

intellectual accomplishments? Regardless of how one behaves, one's memory is usually not affected. One still remembers what one has learned. Therefore, how can Rabbi Hannah say that one's wisdom will not survive unless one's fear of sin and one's actions are greater?

In order to understand this properly we must first understand all three things involved, specifically what is wisdom, what is the fear of sin and what actions is Rabbi Hannah talking about?

We will begin with a definition of wisdom. Like the other Rabbis of his day, Rabbi Hannah was an adept of the mystical schools of Torah. Judging from his actions, he was a master of accomplishment equaled by few others. Apparently, he succeeded in ascending to the heights of spiritual accomplishments. In the terms of the Kabbalah, Rabbi Hannah elevated his consciousness to become aware of G-d in His Divine aspect referred to as the Divine "Long Face" known in Aramaic as Arikh Anpin. This level of elevated mind is said to encompass the highest of G-d's grades (sefirot) revealed in creation. This is the level of Keter, the crown, the symbol of the Divine Will.

Wisdom is the second of the ten sefirotic emanations. Wisdom (Hokhma) emanates from Keter and is an expression of it. Although referred to above as an intellectual accomplishment, wisdom is not acquired through academic study. Actually, wisdom can only be acquired as a gift from G-d. While we might do many things to achieve it, unless G-d gives us wisdom as a gift, all our efforts to acquire it will be in vain. Wisdom is a glimpse of the Divine Will, the Keter. Wisdom as experienced by us is those aspects of thought that come to us independently. Wisdom is the proverbial light bulb of intuition that pops on above someone's head enlightening one a great idea about something. This type of thought hits one like a bolt of lightning. It comes "out of the blue" meaning as if from some unknown source. Of course, the source is the Divine Will.

Knowing the Divine Will requires a level of mental comprehension that few humans will ever accomplish. Yet, Rabbi Haninah did. With the gift of wisdom/intuition, Rabbi Haninah acquired the ability to sift through the myriad of thoughts that bombard the mind at every moment. At such a level, one acquires the ability to "know" which thoughts are right and good and which are a waste of thought time. Rabbi Haninah knew that to stick his foot into the lair of a poisonous snake was the right thing to do at that time. His wisdom enabled him to choose the right course of action that would serve as a moral for centuries to come.

Wisdom enables one to perceive right courses of thought, of feeling and of action. Without wisdom/intuition, intellectual pursuits become dry exercises without rhyme or reason. Feelings become like tidal waves along the seashore, always causing havoc. Without wisdom, one's actions are erratic always hurting oneself and others. Wisdom therefore is the monitor and the guiding light of the soul.

As important and crucial as wisdom is to human success, it cannot sustain itself unless two other elements are present. Mind you, Rabbi Haninah's words are not telling us how

to initially acquire wisdom. He is speaking to those who already have acquired it. Rabbi Haninah is giving a warning to those already on a high spiritual level, how they must maintain themselves, lest they fall from their lofty heights. If the highest of angels can fall, then so can the highest of men. In essence Rabbi Haninah is giving us a lesson that will not be found expounded in detail until Rabbi Haim Vital came along almost 1,500 years later and revealed these teachings in his Kabbalistic masterpiece the Sefer Etz Haim. Rabbi Haninah is expounding to us secrets of the sefirotic Tree of Life and explaining them in a very practical down-to-earth manner so that every one can apply these lessons and benefit thereby.

Rabbi Haninah states that without the fear of sin, Hokhma cannot survive (be maintained). Yet, what is the fear of sin? Sin, we know, is any thought, feeling, or action that violates the Divine Will. Yet, we only know certain aspects of the Divine Will. The commandments of the Torah teach us what we are to do and everyone in the religious communities performs the mitzvot. Yet, no one, not even the most righteous of the Haredi communities, can always control what is thought or felt.

Are such wanton feelings and thoughts considered sins in the “eyes” of G-d? Unfortunately for us, yes, they are considered sins. These blemishes in our souls/minds/beings create walls of separation that disable us from proper perception of the Divine Will. In Kabbalistic terms, we cannot see the sefirotic Face of Arikh Anpin. Instead, we see the lower, “short” Face of G-d referred to in Aramaic as Zeir Anpin (or Z.A.). This manifestation of G-d does not reveal to us the fullness of G-d’s glory and grace. One perceiving G-d at this level best keep his or foot out of a snake pit, because unlike Rabbi Haninah, the snake will kill us!

In order to accomplish a fear of sin, we must place the awareness of G-d’s Presence foremost in our minds at all times. We must constantly ask ourselves, what does G-d want of me in this or that situation. What am I supposed to think, feel or do, now? When one sincerely opens one heart and mind to think, feel and act in this way, then Hokhma enters and intuitively reveals to one an aspect of the Divine Will, the Keter. In essence, the fear of sin is a revelation of the Keter. This is why it controls Hokhma, for in the sefirot, Keter is the source of Hokhma. Therefore, without a fear of sin, which is the constant awareness of the Presence of G-d, one can never achieve the intuitive awareness of Hokhma/wisdom to be able to ascertain the difference between right and wrong in every situation, thought, feeling and action.

Yet, how can one achieve a constant state of awareness of G-d? Without such a state, which manifests and defines the fear of sin, wisdom, which defines for us right from wrong will be lost! Rabbi Haninah anticipated our question and answered it before we asked. He states that not only must the fear of sin be greater than our wisdom so also must our actions be greater.

Now, actions refer to the sefirot Malkhut, the lowest of the ten sefirot. Actions are the vessels that contain within them the summary of our thoughts, feelings and sense of right.

We act upon what we believe, feel, and desire. Therefore, as Malkhut receives all the lights from the upper sefirot, so to do our actions reveal all that is going on inside of us.

There is a great rule within the Kabbalah – the only way to reveal the highest sefirah, Keter, is through the lowest sefirah, Malkhut. The two are joined in a mystical way which signifies more of a circle than a column of sefirot.

One's actions define who one is. Therefore, the sefirah Malkhut is referred to Kabbalistically as Ani, the "I" of ego identification. Keter on the other hand is above and beyond all conscious perception in the universe. If one is to grasp Keter consciousness one grasps it without even being aware of it. For this reason, Keter is called Ayin, the "Nothing."

The secret relationship between these two is revealed in their Hebrew spellings. Both words, Ani ("I") and Ayin ("Nothing") are spelled with the same three Hebrew letters, Alef, Nun and Yod.

Alef, Nun, Yod spells Ani ("I"). This order of the letters reveals that the letter Yod is placed last, after the letter Nun. This is not the order that the three letters are to be found in the order of the Hebrew alef-bet. Yod, signifies G-d's holy Name YKVK and it is placed last, after the Nun. As such G-d is last and the Hebrew alef-bet is not in order. Thus, we have an entity separate from G-d called "I" (Ani). However, when the three letters are placed in their proper order Alef, Yod Nun, then there is a direct flow of Divine light in accordance to their numerical expansion (Alef=1, Yod=10, Nun=50). This is the Divine order. When this is manifest then one perceives the Divine Will.

And how can this be? Simply by allowing it to happen. When one performs right actions, one puts all things in their proper place. By doing the difficult but nonetheless right thing one surrenders what one wants to do personally and does that which he or she knows G-d wants done. Such surrender unites the three letters and manifests the Ayin of Keter.

In today's world when the decisions between right and wrong are often blurred, even our deepest intellectual pursuits are often marred by our lack of intuitive perception. Many of our spiritual leaders are paralyzed with either fear or confusion and therefore do not council action that is best for the survival of the Jewish people in both Aretz and outside the land.

In our many sins, the onslaught of secularism and its pop new age psychology of the "me first" generation has practically eliminated Ayin consciousness from mankind. Without the Keter level of fear of sin, we forfeit the intuitive wisdom to know right from wrong. This sorry state of affairs plagues us now ever so much. Our religious leaders, in Aretz and abroad have lost their resolve to fight our enemies both physical and spiritual and do not properly council their students how best to sanctify and give honor to G-d's holy Name.

In order to repair this sorry state of affairs, we must desperately seek to apply Rabbi Haninah's words of wisdom, lest wisdom cease from us forever and we end up adrift upon a sea of confusing moral issues and conflicting rationalization which tends to justify even the worst of evils. We must return to a fear of sin and correctness and boldness of action. Notice that Rabbi Haninah said that one's actions must be more (merubim) than one's wisdom. In other words, we must have abundant acts of righteousness and zealotry, all performed with wisdom.

We must act not as Ani's ("I"s – individual egos acting for our own personal benefits) but rather as Ayin (souls united in the surrender of the "me first" attitude), all for the sake of Heaven. We must be willing to completely sacrifice ourselves to Heaven in order for our children to survive. For if we do not cease to exist unto ourselves, we will cease to exist before HaShem.

In essence, we are blocking the Hand of Heaven from being revealed on the Earth. For without righteous action, performed with zeal and wisdom, for the sake of Heaven, then Malkhut (the physical world) will manifest neither Hokhma (wisdom) nor Keter, (the Divine Will) and it will be the same as if the world had its head chopped off. We will forever remain in exile, without direction.

Like Rabbi Haninah, we must be bold and unafraid of today's serpent and its poison. We must rise up and do the right thing!