

Shabbos Sazria Metzora 5780 - Pirkei Avos Chapter Two

One of my children, who has two older boys who have been learning out of town for the past several years, and have been forced to be home for the past seven weeks, observed how they have not been home for this span of time in several years. She marveled over how much appreciation she gained for them now that she was able to spend so much quality time with them and observe them up close.

I believe many of you, despite the obvious challenge of juggling tablets and cellphones while zooming around the house, have gained a deeper appreciation for your children, and they no doubt as well for their parents.

It is that sense of being valued and appreciated that is so critical for their success not only in their learning but in life as well.

I share with you this week a glimpse of one of the greatest Tannaim, who despite many personal challenges achieved remarkable greatness, because of the devotion of his loving mother.

Born to Be Happy

One of the greatest sages of his time a disciple of Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakaai, was the famed Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chanaya.

He bridged the tumultuous period prior to the destruction of the Temple and the despondent times post-*Churban*. He was a great scholar and statesman who was beloved by his people and highly admired by non-Jew alike. He walked the halls of foreign governments interceding on his nation's behalf and successfully debated the philosophers and heretics of his day in promoting the purity and brilliance of Torah.

Despite his outstanding personality and scholarly brilliance, we are told, he was pointedly ugly and utterly impoverished. The walls of his house were blackened due to his profession as a smith, and evidently had no other place to work in except his personal living quarters.

The Mishna records how his teacher Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai lauded praise upon each of his five primary disciples. Each one was noted for some personal trait.

One retained all his learning; another was known for his constantly flowing novel interpretations and inspiring insights. One was known as scrupulously pious, the other famous for his fear of sin.

Rabbi Yehoshua however is extolled as *אשרי יולדתו*, *fortunate is the one who bore him*.

Although by praising his mother it intimates that he possessed sterling qualities, but we are still left guessing as to what precisely they may be.

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Why didn't Rabbi Yochanan specify the outstanding attributes he attained? Was he intending to ascribe all his qualities to the devotion his mother tendered to him?

Various sources indicate that even while she was pregnant, she frequented the study halls to ask the scholars to pray for the fetus within her womb.

There is an indication that his father died yet before he was born, adding to the trauma and deficiency of this 'ugly duckling' who did not even benefit from the guidance of a loving father in his youth.

Another reference avers that she brought him as an infant in his crib to the *Beis HaMedrash* so that he would imbibe the sanctity of Torah into his very essence. (פרקי אבות ב ט-טז ובמפרשים)

How indeed did Rabbi Yehoshua overcome the challenges he was born into - no father; a poor self-image having been born notably ugly; obviously not endowed with a more marketable talent and skill having to resort as his livelihood to blacksmithing with all the soot and discomfort associated with it?

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Perhaps *יֵאֱשֶׁרֵי יוֹלְדוֹתָיו*, *fortunate is the one who bore him*, is not solely a tribute to his mother, but more so to an attitude he inculcated into his very psyche.

The awareness and acceptance of how fortunate he was, remaining constantly mindful of his gratitude to G-d for the station he was born into, despite its seeming deficiencies.

It was certainly due to his mother, who showered him with constant affection and encouragement, never allowing his 'looks' or 'lacks' to diminish her absolute confidence in him that he would succeed and was inherently worthy and valued.

He was admired and praised for maintaining this attitude, awareness, and appreciation of 'being privileged' even when facing numerous challenges in life.

When Rabbi Yochanan instructs his students to select '*a way in which man should cling*', Rabbi Yehoshua responds with the advice to be a *חבר טוב*, *a good friend*.

Does he mean to choose a good friend or to be one?

Rabbi Yehoshua understood the value of being cherished and happy with oneself. He knew that firsthand, as he had to overcome his own personal insecurities and inadequacies.

He conveyed that which he learned on his own hide.

Everyone can be the recipient of a friend's sincere admiration, and each one of us can bestow that upon those who feel so unworthy.

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Perhaps what Rabbi Yehoshua is really suggesting is that we must be our own 'best friend' as well. To be happy with the deck of cards we were dealt, knowing that no matter what we may be lacking, we have inherent greatness regardless, that is solely contingent on knowing and appreciating who we really are.

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When a person has that inner confidence and satisfaction with self, he can deflect the many 'demons' that taunt and torture him.

Why are people jealous? The answer is because they are unhappy with themselves. Always looking at others who 'seem' happier, and by desiring the objects or circumstances that we delude ourselves into thinking supply happiness.

Why do people 'binge' on physical pleasures? It is because it gives us momentary sensory joy. But it never lasts, and one can never maintain an ample supply before withering away.

People who are content with themselves rarely feel compelled or driven to feed their carnal desires and pleasures.

Often people who are dissatisfied with life will withdraw from society and choose to isolate themselves, burying themselves under their proverbial blanket. They mistakenly think that by avoiding the 'happiness' of others they will find solace.

They forget though that under those covers they must still face themselves!

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Each one of the students offers three-pronged advice.

Rabbi Yehoshua taught that the 'evil eye', the 'evil inclination' and 'hatred of people' remove a man from the world. (אבות ב טו)

The 'evil eye' is the jealous eye that thinks happiness always is found by others.

The 'evil inclination' is the misguided notion that external physical pleasure can replace the need for inner true happiness.

'Hatred of people' is the aversion we have in being engaged with others, because it accentuates our deficiencies.

Rabbi Yehoshua begs of us to realize that it is all an illusion, it is 'not of this world', it is merely one's own dissatisfaction of self that clouds our vision and thinking.

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The Revelation at Sinai is the starting point. Each member of our people was there because each one of us is uniquely worthy and contributes to the health of our nation by being true to ourselves.

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If we view our children that way, then they will be infused with the confidence they need to succeed.

We must be there for each other, reassuring one another how much we truly value every individual's contribution in the collective mission to promote the Honor of Heaven.

But we must most importantly be our own best friend in appreciating ourselves and utilizing the tools we were given in claiming our own stake.

We are all born to be happy, but we must first discover who we really are. When we accept that and strive for perfection within that context, we will be amply equipped to ward off the tempting and dangerous pull of jealousy, passion, and withdrawal, and finally discover true and lasting happiness within.