

# CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP

Center for Modern Torah Leadership



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## THE CHAKHAM AND THE TAM IN THE AGE OF SCIENCE

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The Talmud reports on Tamid 31b-32a that Alexander of Macedon asked the Elders of the Negev ten questions. Among them was **אידין מקתרי חכם** = who is called wise? They reply:

איזהו חכם?

הרואה את הנולד.

*Who is chakham/wise?*

*The one who sees the nolad.*

When Ben Zoma asks the same question rhetorically in Mishnah Avot 2:9, he answers that the wise is **הלומד מכל אדם** = the one who learns from all human beings." Alexander seems to be living out that principle by asking the question here. But why does he receive a different answer? (Or if the Mishnah existed in two alternate versions, what motivates and distinguishes the different answers?)

Mishnaic Hebrew is notoriously unable to keep its tenses straight. *Nolad* therefore can mean either "that which has been (recently) born," or else "that which will be born." Rashi to Tamid 32a defines "the one who sees the *nolad*" using the latter sense:

המבין מלבו מה שעתיד להיות

קורות שעתידים לבא

ונזהר מהן

*one who understands from his own mind what will be in the future*

*events that in the future will come*

*and is on guard regarding them*

Wisdom, it seems, is the capacity to anticipate, and to act on the basis of current anticipation.

However, Rashi to Devarim 18:13 takes a very different position. The verse is

תמים תהיה עם יקוק אלקיך

You must be *tamim* with Hashem Your God.

Rashi comments:

התהלך עמו בתמימות

ותצפה לו ולא תחקור אחר העתידות,

אלא

כל מה שיבא עליך - קבל בתמימות

ואז תהיה עמו ולחלקו:

כמאמר החכם שאמר:

"חברו של אדם שכלו,"

ופעל השכל במדותיו והנהגותיו הוא

שיהא רואה את הנולד בכל דבר שיעשנו,

וטרם עשית הפעולה - יתבונן התכלית הראוי לצאת ממנה.

*Walk with him in temimut  
and be eager for Him, and don't probe regarding future events  
rather*

*Everything that comes upon you – accept with temimut  
then you will be with Him and become His portion*

Defining *tamim* as "having *temimut*" doesn't necessarily advance the conversation, but the context suggests a sort of simplicity or even naivete that take life as it comes, without regard for the future. Regardless, the incompatibility is clear. The wise person prepares for the future; the *tamim* does not.

For Rav Nachman of Bratslav, this might be no contradiction. In his famous story "The Chakham and the Tam," there is no question that the *tam* is religiously superior. One might reconcile him with the vast bodies of Jewish literature that idealize the chakham by arguing that the one who "learns from all other human beings" is nonetheless capable of *temimut*. The one who "understands from his own mind what will be in the future . . . and is on guard regarding them" cannot also be a *tam*.

One can also explain "who sees the *nolad*" differently from Rashi. Rabbi Ovadiah miBartenura suggests that such a person understands the **ultimate** consequences of actions, namely the Heavenly reward or punishment they will yield.

Bartenura is commenting on Mishnah Avot 2:9, which does not mention wisdom explicitly. Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai tells his students: "Go out and see what the straight path is that human beings should cleave to." Rabbis Eliezer, Yehoshua, Yose, and El'azar ben Arakh each offer suggestions modified by the adjective *tov*: a *tov* eye, a *tov* friend, a *tov* neighbor, a *tov* heart. Between Rabbi Yose and Rabbi El'azar, Rabbi Shim'on says: "One who sees the *nolad*." The literary lack of fit is so stark that some commentaries suggest that Rabbi Shimon was not offering an independent suggestion but rather defining the "good neighbor" suggested by Rabbi Yose. Meiri even suggests that it defines the good friend, and in the process rules out any reconciliation along the lines of Bratslav.

וכל אשר יעשה כן - לא יחטא  
וישלמו ענייניו והנהגותיו על צד [ה]ראוי ושלם.

*As in the saying of the chakham who said:  
"the friend of a human being is their intellect,"  
and the action of the intellect in one's character and actions is  
that one sees the nolad in everything one does,  
and before doing an action – meditates on the end-goal that is likely to emerge  
from it  
and anyone who does so – will not sin  
and their interests and actions will be shalem in a manner appropriate and  
shalem.*

Meiri attributes the definition to a *chakham*, which suggests that he sees Rabbi Shimon as defining *chokhmah*; and he emphasizes the completeness = *shleimut* of such a person. Onkelos translates *tamim* in our verse as *shalem*. So it seems possible that Meiri here is endorsing Onkelos and rejecting Rashi's understanding of the verse, perhaps because he does not see simplicity/naivete as a religious good.

Tosafot Yom Tov cites Midrash Shmuel as taking issue with Meiri's moral confidence in his *chakham*. He notes that when Rabbi Yochanan Ben Zakkai asks the inverse question "Which is the bad path from which a person should distance themselves," all of Rabbi Yochanan Ben Zakkai's other students simply reverse their positions, saying *ayin ra'ah*, *shakhen ra*, etc. Rabbi Shimon, however, says it refers to one who borrows without repaying. Tosafot Yom Tov argues that this is because seeing the *nolad* is a good trait, not seeing the *nolad* is not per se a bad trait. Perhaps carried away by his own argument, he then argues that perhaps seeing the *nolad* is not a costless good, as it prevents ultimate *shleimut*.

ובמדרש שמואל כתב בשם הר"י לירמא:  
שעם היות שהרואה את הנולד היא דרך טובה,  
הבלתי רואה בנוולד אינה היא רעה,  
לפי שמצינו אנשים הרבה  
שעם היות שאינם רואים את הנולד, הם הולכים בדרך ישרה  
או האנשים שמקיימים התורה לשם שמים  
לא לתקות שום שכר, ולא מפחד שום עונש,  
אלא לשמה,  
שזאת היא העבודה היותר שלימה שבעבודות,  
ולכן לא א"ר שמעון שדרך הרעה היא מי שאינו רואה את הנולד  
*Midrash Shmuel wrote in the Name of R. Y. Liramma  
that while seeing the nolad is a good path,  
not seeing the nolad is not a bad thing,  
because we have found many people who,  
while they do not see the nolad, they walk a straight path,  
or people who keep the Torah for the sake of Heaven  
and not in the hope of reward, or fear of any punishment,  
but rather lishmoh,  
because this is the service that is most complete among services,  
and therefore Rabbi Shimon did not say  
that the way of one who does not see the nolad is a bad one.*

Tosafot Yom Tov seems to see even considerations of ultimate consequences as somehow tainting, or in our terms, or as a lack of *temimut*.

What I hope to have established so far is that the Bratslav story of the *chakham* and the *tam* has deep roots. However, the advantage of the *tam* has been harder to see in our era, when scientific prediction has enabled vast public goods. One can claim that we are at grave risk because we have failed to be full *chakhamim*, and foreseen only some of the consequences of our actions, but it is hard to sustain a contemporary Jewish claim that we would therefore be better off abandoning the predictive capacities we have gained. We resonate much more with the line of interpretation that sees "be *tamim*" as preventing us only from seeking knowledge by supernatural means other than Divine prophecy.

This approach fits very well in the context of our verse, which is preceded by a list of occult practitioners whom we are forbidden to consult, and followed by the laws of Divine prophets. All the predictive tools of science are legitimate on this rule. Most of us (I think) also resonate with the Maimonidean claim that all true modes of knowing reality are legitimate, and that the Torah bars only the fruitless seeking of predictive wisdom from frauds.

My question is whether we lose anything by this approach, in terms of either *temimut* or *shleimut*, and whether there is any way to get it back. Some theologians Jewish and otherwise have tried to develop a concept of "second naivete" with regard to religious claims about the past; perhaps that can be extended to secular claims about the future. But do we see any virtue in such naivete, or would any such attempt inevitably leave us in the position of a drunken Noah exposed to the jeers of his son and grandson.

Rav Moshe Feinstein's endorsement of genetic screening for Tay-Sachs (Igrot Mosheh EH 4:10) is an interesting test case. Rav Moshe acknowledges that such testing should be a violation of Rashi's understanding of *Tamim*, which he seems to endorse (and lived by, according to the biography at the start of volume 8 of Igrot Mosheh). But he cannot tolerate the suffering having Tay-Sachs children causes. So he develops a new distinction.

כיון שעתה נעשה זה באופן קל לבדוק  
יש לדון שאם אינו בודק את עצמו –  
הוא כסגירת העינים לראות מה שאפשר לראות  
*Now that it has become easy to check (whether one is a Tay-Sachs carrier),  
we can decide that if one does not check themselves  
this is like closing the eyes from seeing what it is possible to see.*

Virtuous simplicity does not entail walking around blindfolded until one falls into a pit. But how far over the horizon would Rav Mosheh want us to see? Tay-Sachs testing depends on predictions of events many years down the line. Can we still construct a credible and meaningful theory of *temimut* in the spirit of Rashi? Would we gain something religiously by doing so?

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