PIRQE ABOT: Who is wise?

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In the fourth chapter of Pirqe Abot Shimon Ben Zoma tells us: “Who is considered to be a wise man? To one who learns from all people.”

How is a Tora sage called in Hebrew? The most honorable term that can be attributed to a person in the field of Tora is not HAKHAM (a Sage), but TALMID HAKHAM (a “disciple” of a sage), the one that always considers himself a student, and is constantly learning. There is an almost forgotten Sephardic tradition that is to call a Tora Scholar “TALMID HAKHAMIM”, “a disciple of Sages”, an individual that absorbes knowledge from several instructors.

Referring to the great challenge of being a real TALMID HAKHAMIM Maimonides (1135-1204) wrote in one of his letters: “One of the most common psychological dysfunctions, so common that almost no one escapes it … is to consider oneself wiser than all others. Thus, most men expect that everyone would listen and will accept his ideas, which he considers superior to other’s … and this self-perception is characteristic even of people who are not great experts in those subjects. ”

Ben Zoma teaches us that one of the prerequisites for acquiring wisdom is to recognize that we do not know everything. The greater our awareness of how little we know, the more wisdom we have, and vice versa. This idea was formulated by the Sages of the Talmud □”□, who always discussed and debated matters of wisdom and said MODIM DERABBANAN HAYNU SHIBHAYHU, “The wisdom of a Sage (of the Tora) is shown when he acknowledges that another Sage is right.”

Rabbi Shemuel Pinhasi explains in his commentary to Pirqe Abot, that a real sage is a champion of objectivity and

intellectual integrity, since he values □□wisdom, no matter from whom that wisdom is coming. A wise man always pushes himself to learn, even from those who know less than him. And he or she develops the ability to learn not only from other people's successes but (or especially) from people's mistakes. "The simple man learns from his own experience; the wise man, form the experiences of others. "

The ultimate goal of wisdom, Rabbi Pinhasi explains, is intellectual humility: knowing that we do not know enough. This element is very characteristic of the philosophy of Maimonides, when he speaks, for example. about te unknowability of the act of Creation, or our inability to know the details of the World to Come, and especially when he speaks of our limitations when it comes to "understand" God. The ignorant person believes that he knows (or is able to know) everything about God, since when he thinks about God, unconsciously, he humanizes Him. A wise man, on the other hand, is the one who is increasingly aware of the infinite distance between man and God. And in fact, "The less human characteristics he attributes to God, the greater his knowledge of God will be." This is known as a via-negativa learning or apophatic knowledge.

There is no more ignorant than the person who never says "I don't know" or "you're right".

Intellectual arrogance is the most obvious sign of lack of wisdom.