

Do We Know Too Much?

Tractate Berakhot 62a

מסכת ברכות סב.

תניא אמר רבי עקיבא פעם אחת נכנסתי אחר ר' יהושע לבית הכסא ולמדתי ממנו ג' דברים למדתי שאין נפנין מזרח ומערב אלא צפון ודרום ולמדתי שאין נפרעין מעומד אלא מיושב ולמדתי שאין מקנחין בימין אלא בשמאל אמר ליה בן עזאי עד כאן העזת פניך ברבך א"ל תורה היא וללמוד אני צריך

It was taught in a *Baraita*: Rabbi Akiva said, "I once entered the bathroom after [my teacher] Rabbi Yehoshua, and I learned three things from [observing] him. I learned that one should not defecate [while facing] east and west, but rather [while facing] north and south; I learned that one should not uncover himself while standing, but while sitting; and I learned that one should not wipe with his right hand but with his left." Ben Azzai [a student of Rabbi Akiva] said to him, "You were impertinent to your teacher to that extent [that you observed that much]." He replied, "It is Torah, and I must learn."

תניא בן עזאי אומר פעם אחת נכנסתי אחר רבי עקיבא לבית הכסא ולמדתי ממנו ג' דברים למדתי שאין נפנין מזרח ומערב אלא צפון ודרום ולמדתי שאין נפרעין מעומד אלא מיושב ולמדתי שאין מקנחין בימין אלא בשמאל אמר לו ר' יהודה עד כאן העזת פניך ברבך אמר לו תורה היא וללמוד אני צריך

[Similarly,] it was taught in a *baraita*: Ben Azzai said, "I once entered a bathroom after Rabbi Akiva, and I learned three things from [observing] him. I learned that one should not defecate [while facing] east and west, but rather [while facing] north and south; I learned that one should not uncover himself while standing, but while sitting; and I learned that one should not wipe with his right hand, but with his left." Rabbi Yehuda said to him, "You were impertinent to your teacher to that extent." He replied, "It is Torah, and I must learn."

רב כהנא על גגא תותיה פורייה דרב שמעיה דשח ושחק ועשה צרכיו אמר ליה דמי פומיה דאבא כדלא שרף תבשילא א"ל כהנא הכא את פוק דלאו אורח ארעא אמר לו תורה היא וללמוד אני צריך

Rav Kahana entered and lay beneath Rav's bed. He heard that [Rav] chatted and laughed [with his wife] and saw to his needs [i.e. engaged in marital relations with her]. [Rav Kahana] said to [Rav], "The mouth of Abba [i.e. Rav] is like one whom has not swallowed a cooked dish [i.e. his behavior was lustful]. He said to him, "Kahana, you are here? Leave, as this is an undesirable mode of behavior. [Rav Kahana] said to him, "It is Torah, and I must learn."

In the example above from the Talmud, students follow their teachers into both the bathroom and the bedroom. In each case, the student suggests that they had to do it, because learning these things is a matter of Torah.

1. Do you think that it is appropriate for students to follow their teachers into private places so that they can learn from them?
2. Rav chastises Rav Kahana for hiding under his bed presumably while he was having sex with his wife. Why do you think that those who followed someone into the bathroom were simply questioned while Rav Kahana was treated more harshly for hiding under the bed?
3. In the story above, the students are hoping to learn things that they would want to emulate. Do you think the teachers would have treated them differently had they gone in search of negative or damaging information?
4. Today, we have nearly "all-access" passes to the lives of anyone in the both public and private sphere. Is this fair?
5. Do you think that what one does in their private life should impact how we feel about their accomplishments as a public figure?

Who is Worthy?

Pirke Avot 4:1

אינזהו. לי שיחה עדותיך כי השכלתי מלמדי מכל (קיש תהלים) שנאמר, אדם מכל הלומד, תכם אינזהו, אומר זומא בן השמח, עשיר אינזהו. עיר מלמד ברוחו ומשל מגבור אפים ארף טוב) מז משלי (שנאמר, וצרו את הכובש, גבור. הבא לעולם, לך וטוב. הנה בעולם, אשריך. לך וטוב אשריך תאכל כי כפיך יגיע) קכח תהלים (שנאמר, בחלקו יקלו ובני אכבד מכבדי פי) ב א שמואל (שנאמר, הבריות את המכבד, מכבד אינזהו

Ben Zoma said: Who is one that is wise? One who learns from every person, as it is said: From all my teachers have I gained understanding. (Psalm 119:99) **Who is mighty? One who conquers their impulse to evil**, as it is written, "One who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and one who rules over their spirit than one who conquers a city" (Proverbs 16:32) Who is rich? One who is happy with their portion, as it says (Psalms, 128:2), "If you eat of toil of your hands, fortunate are you, and good is to you"; "fortunate are you" in this world, "and good is to you" in the World to Come. **Who is honored? One who honors the creations**, as it says, "Those who honor Me I will honor, but those who scorn Me will be despised" (I Samuel 2:30)

1. According to Ben Zoma, who is mighty? Does this match your definition of a mighty person? Why or why not?
2. According to Ben Zoma, who should be honored? Does this match your definition?
3. What kinds of things are people honored for in today's society?

Wisdom of the Talmud, (Page 33-34)

The great dictum of Avot d'Rebbe Natan says, "Who is the greatest of all heroes? One who turns an enemy into a friend." (23:1) Commenting on this idea, Rabbi Dov Peretz Elkins teaches, "Someone who can achieve an enormous act of strength without lifting a finger, but rather by exercising clear judgment, engaging in compassionate and empathic listening, and using finely tuned skills in negotiation and conflict resolution — such a person is the most powerful person in the world."

1. Think of someone who you think is powerful. What makes them powerful? What qualities and traits do they exhibit?
2. According to this text, what makes a person powerful? Does this person share any traits with the person you described?

Proverbs 16:16-19

קנה-חכמה מה-טוב מחרוץ וקנות בינה נבחר מקסר:
 מסלת ישרים סור מרע שמר נפשו נצר דרךו:
 לפני-שקר גאון ולפני כשלוו גבה רוח:
 מסלק שלל את-גאים: [ענגים] טוב שפלות רוח את-עניים

How much better to acquire wisdom than gold; to acquire understanding is preferable to silver.
 The path of the upright avoids evil; they who would preserve their life watches their way.
 Pride goes before ruin; arrogance, before failure.
 Better to be humble and among the lowly than to share spoils with the proud.

1. What is the general theme of this text? Do you agree with its message?
2. Why do you think it was written?
3. Do you think it matches the view of who should be honored in today's society?
4. In today's society, whom do you think most needs to hear this message? Do you think they would listen?



Biblical Hero Cards - Moses

Moses was born to Yocheved during the Israelite enslavement in Egypt, at a time when Pharaoh had decreed that all male Hebrew infants be killed at birth. With the help of midwives Shifrah and Puah, he survived and was placed into the Nile river where his cries were heard. He was taken to Pharaoh's palace and adopted by Pharaoh's daughter, and his mother was brought in to serve as his nursemaid.

We know little of Moses' early life. We first learn of his character when he sees an Egyptian taskmaster striking a Hebrew slave and strikes the taskmaster, unintentionally killing him. When, the next day, he tries to make peace between two slaves, one makes it clear they know he killed an Egyptian the day before. Pharaoh announces his intention to have Moses killed and Moses flees Egypt, fearing for his life.

Moses settles in Midian and meets and marries Tziporah, daughter of the Midianite priest, Jethro. While watering his flock alone in the desert, God appears to Moses in the form of a burning bush. God tells Moses to return to Egypt and ask Pharaoh to let the Israelites go. Moses objects, citing impaired speech. He is eventually convinced to go back and, with the help of his brother Aaron, speaks to Pharaoh. After much back and forth, including the unleashing of a number of plagues, Moses secures his people's freedom. During this episode, as the Israelites are crossing the Sea of Reeds, and at many other times during their desert wandering, the Israelites have faith in Moses, only when it's clear that God is behind his words or actions.

Not long after the Israelites are safely across the Sea, Moses ascends Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments. Descending the mountain to find the people worshiping a golden calf, Moses is frustrated and angry. Moses is often frustrated and angry; the people are impatient and demanding. Though Moses expresses his disappointment in the behavior of the Israelites, often strongly, he protects them from God's wrath.

Some of Moses' impatience with the people may be his own doing. At one point in the book of Exodus, Moses is seen adjudicating all matters brought before him from morning until evening. His father-in-law, Jethro, suggests that he delegate, appointing judges to take care of the routine matters so that he only has to be involved in larger matters.

Among the defining moments of Moses' career occurs in the biblical book of Numbers when the Israelites demand water (the wells have dried up after his sister Miriam's death). Though they have asked for other things in the past—to be returned to Egypt, for better food, for meat—Moses reacts impatiently to this request. God commands Moses to gather the community and speak to a rock, producing water. In his anger, Moses strikes the rock. This is the reason given for why Moses was not allowed into the Land of Israel. Some interpreters suggest it wasn't anger but ego that kept Moses out of Israel. Before striking the rock he says, "shall we get water for you out of this rock?" implying that he and Aaron were doing the work, not God.

After obtaining freedom for the Children of Israel, shepherding them through the desert, tending to their needs, and teaching them God's laws, Moses gives one last long speech, reminding the Israelites of their obligations, before dying on a mountain in view of the Holy Land and being buried there by God.



Biblical Hero Cards - King Saul

Saul was the son of Kish, of the tribe of Benjamin. His family was well-to-do and, according to the text, “there was not a man among the sons of Israel more handsome than he, being taller than any of the people from his shoulder and upward” (1 Samuel 9:2).

Saul was Israel’s first king. Before this, the people were led by Samuel, a judge and prophet. This role required him to act as moral leader and arbiter, but not strategist or diplomat. During Samuel’s tenure, the Israelites were often at war with the Philistines. The people thought it would be a good idea to have a military leader, and asked Samuel to appoint a king.

Though Samuel appointed Saul king, he did so at God’s choosing. As a matter of fact, he was anointed secretly before being “chosen” by the people. Saul’s reign began peacefully, but was marked by many wars against enemies including the Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, and the Amalekites. There were many victories, including one over the Philistines in which a little-known shepherd named David slew the much more powerful Goliath using only a slingshot.

Saul’s victories made him very popular, but he also made a series of mistakes. Among them he disregarded God’s command when, in war, he didn’t eliminate all of the Amalekites and their animals, and when he didn’t kill their ruler, King Agag. Further, Saul lied to Samuel in an attempt to cover this up. Though he later apologized, God had already chosen to reject him and to find a replacement, and Samuel refused to see him again.

Saul served out the rest of his life as king, but it was a tormented life as God’s spirit had been replaced by an evil spirit. These later years were punctuated by delusion which could only be soothed by David’s music. Though Saul loved David, he also felt threatened by him, as David grew into a better military leader than Saul had been. Saul tried to kill David many times but David always prevailed, sometimes with the help of Saul’s children, Jonathan and Michal.

Near the end of his life, Saul was so preoccupied with killing David that he neglected both his kingdom and his fortune. He ended up losing both. The Philistines, whom he had once defeated, bested his army, killing many, including Saul’s sons. Ashamed, grief-stricken, and impoverished, Saul took his own life.



Biblical Hero Cards - Solomon

Solomon was the child of David and Bathsheba. Though he wasn't the oldest, in a story we see many times throughout the Bible, his father chose him to be the leader over his older brother Adonijah, and sent him to be anointed. Unlike his predecessors, Solomon didn't meet with immediate approval. There were those in the palace who thought his brother should have become the king. After removing these men from their posts, or killing them, he appointed those whom he could trust to be his closest advisors.

Though Solomon inherited great wealth from his father, he is known to have achieved even greater fortune. In the biblical book of Kings (I) we learn that he had 12,000 horses and 1,400 chariots. He gained both land and wealth through marriage. The book of Kings (I) suggests that he had 700 wives and 300 concubines. He forged trade alliances with many other leaders, most notable among them being the Queen of Sheba. Among his political achievements, he split the land into smaller districts so they were easier to govern.

Solomon achieved a great deal during his kingship. He oversaw the building of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem, a seven year project, fortified a number of cities, and many other building projects. Known for his great wisdom, Solomon is credited with the authorship of a number of biblical books, among them: Song of Songs, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes.

Solomon was popular and successful into his old age, when the people became unhappy with some of his choices and policies. He taxed the people excessively and engaged them to work in his army against their will. He granted the southern tribes special privileges, alienating the northern tribes. Known for being surrounded by women, he built edifices where his foreign wives could make sacrifices to their gods. This angered God, who promised to tear apart the kingdom built by Solomon.

Toward the end of his life, his peaceful reign was threatened by new adversaries. Solomon died of natural causes. After his death, his kingdom was divided as had been prophesied.



Samson

The story of the biblical super-hero Samson is found in chapters 13-16 of the biblical book of Judges. Samson, the last of the major judges, was a complicated character.

As with many biblical figures, Samson's mother, the wife of Manoah, is seemingly unable to have children. She is visited by an angel who tells her that she will have a son, but that he will be a Nazirite*, dedicated to serving God. She also learns that her son will be a hero, saving the Israelites from the Philistine army. Samson is known, not only for his long hair, but for his super-human strength.

We next see Samson as an adult, when he asks his father to get him a Philistine wife. His parents would rather him marry an Israelite but, the text explains, if he's married to a Philistine it will be easier for him to fulfill his destiny as he'll have inside information. Readers first see his strength as he's on his way to get his bride when a lion roars at him and "he tore the lion apart with his bare hands."

When he starts killing people, he does so in a fit or rage, killing 30 men. Later, the Philistines raid a Judean town, capture Samson and tie him up. The spirit of God comes over him and the ropes that are holding him melt as though on fire. Once, free, he finds the jawbone of an ass and kills 1000 men, by himself.

Though God tells Samson to fight the Philistines, he's less interested in fighting than in romance. He falls in love with a second Philistine woman, Delilah, who asks repeatedly about the source of his strength. At first, Samson lies but eventually tells her it comes from his hair. One night, as he is sleeping, Delilah cuts his hair, causing him to lose strength. She turns him over to the Philistine authorities who gouge out his eyes.

Samson dies in one final act of mass killing. Having been lashed between two pillars in a Philistine Temple to be made a mockery, Samson asks God to give him back his strength. His prayer is granted and he pulls down the pillars, killing all of the worshippers and causing his own death.

*The term Nazirite comes from the biblical book of Numbers (6:1-21) The root word, נזיר *nazir* means consecrated. Nazirites vow to do three things: a) abstain from grapes and products made from grapes and alcohol of any type, b) never cut their hair, and c) never come in contact with dead bodies or graves.