

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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BH

WHO IS MORE VALUABLE: THE INTELLECTUAL OR THE PRACTICAL DECISION MAKER?

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The last two study passages have been devoted to determining where a person ranks in the sages' social system. According to the sages, learning and menschlichkeit are what bring a person the greatest honor. (We recall that Rabbi Meir, one of the greatest sages who ever lived, runs into trouble when he makes a grab for power that would have involved publicly humiliating Rabban Gamliel.) Even among the learned, the Gemara attempts to develop a hierarchy. What is the sort of learning which ranks highest in their taxonomy?

It was asked: Comparing Rabbi Zeira and Rabbah bar Rav Matanah, which one's style of learning is more desirable?

Rabbi Zeira is keenly intelligent but he makes it hard to come to any practical conclusions. And Rabbah bar Rav Matanah is mildly intelligent but he is able to come to practical conclusions.

So which form of learning is more desirable? Teiku (it remains undecided). (B. Horayot 14a)

This passage ends with the word teiku, which means that no conclusion is drawn from the discussion. Passages that are constructed with this word at the end are found only in the Bavli. These are relatively later passages designed to bring out differing, equally valid views of a topic.

Both sorts of expertise, intelligence and the ability to reach a decision, are necessary for the sages' system to function. In this passage, the sages are affirming that both sharp intellect and decisiveness are important kinds of intelligence.

This is the way the entire tractate named Horayot concludes. Rabbah bar Rav Matanah is a Babylonian sage of the fourth generation who was a student of Rabbah and Rav Sheshet. Some think that he might have studied in the Land of Israel and come back to Babylonia after the Jews there were forced to leave. Rabbi Zera was a sage of the Land of Israel in the Land of Israel in the third generation.

Discussion Questions:

1. In your experience, what is the value of brilliant intellect? Of decisiveness? Is one better than another? What happens when you only have one or the other?
2. Which Jewish scholars and/or leaders in Judaism can you think of who combined brilliance with decisiveness? Were those they led particularly blessed?
3. All the brilliance and decisiveness in the world are no good without menschlichkeit. Does this teaching apply to our society today? How or how not? Would we be better off if this was how we ran our society? Why or why not?