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Who is the Wise Man?, 1957.

WHO IS THE WISE MAN?

Some Thoughts On Our Present Quiz Champions

Rabbi Daniel Jeremy Silver - April 7, 1957

This morning the Biblical section was read to you from the Book of Proverbs. This little volume is one of the most exciting and exalting of our whole Scripture. It contains a crystallization - a synthesis - of the worldly, practical day-to-day wisdom of our ancient teachers and sages. I was reading some time back this Book of Proverbs together with many rabbinic commentaries upon it when I chanced upon a line from the 29th chapter of the Book of Proverbs and a comment from one of the medieval Rabbis which sounded, to me, strangely and almost unrealistically prophetic. The line from the Book of Proverbs is this: By knowledge, by knowledge are the chambers of a man's house filled with all manner of desirable riches. The comment was: The man who has stored up within himself a fund of information shall gain for himself great wealth. The mental image which flashed into my mind was the fantastic rewards which the present quiz champions have won on these almost nightly programs in which they are to bring forth from the depths and recesses of their mind obscure, and yet, accurate details in some field of human knowledge. By knowledge, by a fund of information today, some of our fellow citizens are ^{truly} receiving great wealth.

These quiz programs have a strange fascination for ^{me} and, I think, for most of you. To watch men have amazing breadth of knowledge and accuracy ^{and detail} in fields in which we claim to be only amateurs, is in itself an exciting thing and I think that most of us, as we watch these programs, have this experience: that once a question was asked and while we were delving back into the hazy and half-forgotten memories of books once read and titles once memorized and facts once known, to see these men come forth glibly, accurately, immediately with the precise detail, the precise date, the precise fact, I think almost of us were glad that we were competing with them in the privacy of our living rooms rather than from the isolation booth which is not so isolated which enters

into millions of American homes each week. For a while I consoled myself that it was a match, a boxing match if you will, between unequally matched opponents, that these men had certain technical abilities in their minds which most of you, and I certainly, lack; that their minds were equipped with a photographic camera which could record immediately and accurately all the pages, all the facts, which they had seen and heard and observed while we must trust to memory, to recall, and to the thinking processes which we possess. It is as if I felt that these men had a human microfilm laboratory in their minds which could photograph and store away and recall at a moment's notice any reference which they had ever come across in their lives.

Now certainly there are many well authenticated instances of men who had this mental photographic capacity. I would cite a few from our own tradition. The great Elijah, the Gaon of Vilna, the religious leader of that great community during the late seventeenth century was reputed to have read twenty thousand volumes in his lifetime and to be able to quote at length from any page or any footnote of any ^{one} of these twenty thousand texts which he had read. There used to be a feat of memory that certain of our ancestry produced for the astonishment of their medieval contemporaries. A few of them had this photographic mind and would challenge some member of their community to take up any of the volumes of the Talmud or any of the other codes of Jewish law and to stick a pin through its pages from cover to cover, and then they would proceed to recite each word which this pin had pierced - a feat which obviously could have been done only if they had the page itself photographed on their minds. And finally, in more ancient times, in the days before books were plentiful and ^{while} ^{still} there was a prohibition of the setting down of the oral law on paper, every academy and school hired for its sessions a living textbook - a man who had stored away in his mind all of the law and the literature and the lore of our people and who was able at an instant's notice whenever a reference was needed for the debate or for the discussion or for legal decision to recite the appropriate sources without so much

as changing a preposition or a coma - an amazing feat - one which most of us can hardly begin to understand. And so famous were some of these men that one of them is mentioned by name in the Sayings of the Fathers of our Mishna. Rabbi Johanan Ben Zakkai describes the mind of this particular memorizer and teacher as ^amind which was like a cemented cistern, a completely watertight bottle which did not lose a single drop of all the learning which had been poured into it. So we cannot doubt that there are minds which have a photographic capacity which most of us certainly lack and yet, we must ask this question. Do we have the right to assume that these quiz champions have this type of photographic memory? Unfortunately the evidence is to the contrary. The testimony of these men, themselves, especially that of Charles Van Dorn and Richard Strom indicates that they do not have the capacity to visualize most, or even a part, of that which they have read. In then what lies the secret of ^{this} ~~that~~ remarkable ability of theirs to have an almost catholic recall of all the facts of most of the fields of world knowledge. I think, personally, that the secret is a rather simple one. Our minds are often idle, often used up to only a fraction of their capacity. Their minds are used fully, efficiently, at all times without any idleness or intermittence. They have been persistent in their search for knowledge. They have persevered in their general education. They have never allowed a day or a week or a month to pass by without reading some valuable book, without immersing themselves in some new discipline, without exposing themselves to a series of ideas or of philosophies with which they were previously unacquainted, While we, most of us, have been much less disciplined in our attack on the world of knowledge. After college we read spasmodically, intermittently at best. When a particular book caught our fancy or was common, current in the discussions in the circles in which we moved, we read it but for the most part we made no consistent, determined effort to set for ourselves a fixed discipline of study,

a fixed core curriculum which day by day and week by week we would carry out. And so whereas we have heard the list, as I say, of English kings or of Roman emperors once and memorized them for a course back in college, we have not come across this list time and time again ^{while} ~~but~~ these men have because their reading, their omniverous reading, brings these facts ever and again to their attention. The facts are fresh in their minds where they are rusted in ours - rusted by little use. And I think if we search our professional fields and our business interests we will see the truth of what I am saying. Most of us have at our fingertips the facts and the figures and the details, the methods of logic which we need for our professional or our business competency. We know our specialty and most of us would be quite willing to challenge any of these quiz champions in our narrow field of endeavor. It is our bread and butter and we see to it that we are up on all its details. The facts are fresh with us - always fresh.

Now whereas we have kept abreast of some narrow field of knowledge, these men have kept abreast not only of their narrow specialties but also of the vast sea of learning - the whole adventure of ideas with which our world surrounds us - and there is something quite fascinating in their omniverous reading. I am thrilled when I hear of this Teddy Nadler - this man who finished only eight years of formal education but who went, day by day, to the St. Louis public library and won for himself by dint of determined effort and perseverance, a knowledge in almost every branch of the social sciences and the liberal arts and the aesthetics which ^{capable of} is/permitting him to challenge successfully even the experts in individual fields. At the cost perhaps of only a few book fines, which he paid over the years, he won for himself an education for which many of us are paying for our children or had paid for us thousands upon thousands of dollars.

I am thrilled when I read of a Charles Van Dorn who not only came from a family steeped in the culture of our age and who not only has persisted in an academic career but who set for himself as a discipline from his first year in

college, the leafing through of the Columbia catalogue and the choosing of some course or two completely unrelated to his basic areas of interest; who attended these courses and did the reading and the work only because of the joy of learning, only because he was enthusiastic to know as much as he could about the symphonies which sound about us in the world.

These men have recaptured the spirit, I believe, of an old Jewish admonition to any man or any woman who would learn as much as they can about the world about us and who would live their days as fully as they might in this world into which we are born. This Jewish principle, this bit of advice which comes down to us from our fathers is called *

* What is *

*?

You all know the phrase Talmud Torah. Talmud Torah means study, education. It is the learning and the wisdom which was given to the young Jewish boy and the maturing lad in the parochial schools of the Jewish community which raised him by degree into ~~looking~~ competency in the fields of Jewish and general learning. We still call, today, the Jewish parochial school - the day school - the Talmud Torah. Torah means learning and *

* deals also with study and education but it

deals with the study and the education which we win for ourselves after the school day is over, after ~~the~~ ^{our} school years have been completed we begin the long adventure of adult living. It is the study and the education in which we persist not to win ^{gain} honors, not to ~~win~~ new degrees, but simply to immerse ourselves into the learning into the knowledge into the facts and figures of the world about us so that we feel more at home in this world and more competent to deal with the myriad of puzzlements and of questions with which it daily faces us. This is *

with us

* and it is a valuable principle for us to carry/into life because

*Omission of Hebrew

I think most of us are a little bit too lazy and indulgent with our minds. We come home tired from our daily occupation, tired from the work about the house, and we feel that to force ourselves to gain some insight or understanding into a new language or a new discipline or a new science or some ~~new~~ classic of the literatures of our peoples would be too much demanded from us. We want peace. We want leisure. We want quiet and so we let any desire on our part to learn more about this world, slip by - slip away from us - and yet I think we make a fundamental mistake when we do this because the mental breakdown, the mental over-taxation of which we are afraid does not come from stimulating yourself with new learning. It comes from emotional causes and worry from anxiety and fear, and the thrill of learning - the thrill of being exposed to the great beauty of some poet of the first order or the wisdom of some science of which we were previously ignorant - this thrill, this joy, takes us out of ourselves for a few hours, makes our worries and our anxieties subside so that we gain a better balance in our lives. Mental health, I submit to you, would be strangely improved were each and every one of us to discipline ourselves ⁱⁿ ~~take~~ ^{into} this adventure ~~of~~ ideas for most of us live in one world, and one world only - our professional world and our family world. We channel, we point, every single one of our energies, every mental capacity which we have, for success in this world, for the rewards which this world can offer to us and to those near and dear to us but what will happen if the rug is pulled out from under us as it can be. What happens if this one world is shattered. We are left shattered human beings. But if we have along the way open for ourselves many worlds and become familiar with many disciplines and many arts and many studies, we will become in a sense, colorful many-sided people - better balanced, better able when the time, if it comes, when the time comes to have other resources, to find the resources within ourselves and to make the fullest use of them. And those of you who are approaching the years of retirement, I think, can understand this the most clearly because now you must find within yourselves other interests. There is no greater interest, or more

enthraling one, than that which continued learning - continued study - presents to you.

I am heartily in favor of a continuing adventure into ideas and I applaud, with all the fervor that is within me, I applaud the persistence of these quiz people - these quiz champions - who have shown a determination which we would do well to copy.

But another question faces us. These quiz champions have reached the first rank in the world of knowledge but are they wise men? Are they men of understanding? We have all met learned fools - parrot men - men who can hear and mimic almost any bit of information or scrap of detail which is given to them but have not the faintest glimmer of the basic meaning of the implications of all that has been told them. Wisdom is, in a sense, knowledge plus. Wisdom is the ability of the human mind, not only to absorb knowledge, but to digest it and to relate it and to apply it effectively and positively to the life problems which surround us. Some of these quiz people - these quiz champions - may be wise men. We have no way of knowing. Only life really would tell and certainly the quiz programs do not test wisdom as such. Wisdom is knowledge plus and this plus, I think, is a gift of the Gods - something with which we are uniquely dowered.

I once searched through Jewish tradition to find the definition which our rabbis gave to the wise man - something which, after all, which we would all like to be and if we know the goal, perhaps we can set out to find it. And I found that in the whole rich treasury of Jewish lore, there were three definitions offered none of them complete in itself but each suggestive. An early rabbi asked the question *

*. Who is the wise man? His answer

was *

*. The wise man is the seminal mind,

the creative mind, the ingenious mind. The wise man is the man who has the capacity to take the same facts, the same figures, the same principles which are presented to all other people and to come up with a suggestive, a novel, and effective new solution. He is the man who adds to the beauty and to the meaningfulness of the life which is about us; and this creative capacity is something

*Omission of Hebrew

which, I think, is born within us and not bred into us. A later contemporary of this first rabbi also felt called upon to answer the question *

*. Who is the wise Man? And his answer is also, I think, a suggestive one. He said *

*. The wise man is the man who has an incisive mind who can strip away from a problem all ~~the~~ its superficial details, all its tangential matters, and see to the heart of it. He is the man who can fully weigh, and honestly weigh, the real issues involved in a situation and because of this ability to see into the heart of a problem, arrive at a solution which is worth the name. And finally, a third man, much later in our history, asked the same question *

Who is the wise man? And he defined the wise man as one *

as the man who is open-minded, as the man who has the capacity to learn from his environment, from all people with whom he comes into contact. The man with a flexible mind who is not so set in his ways, in his preconceptions, in his mental set that when something comes along - some fact, some detail - with which he disagrees, which runs against all of his preconceptions, he does not set it aside and deny its existence but he absorbs it into his system of thought and re-fashions his beliefs in order to accept this new detail. But all of these three definitions - none of them complete - and I do not think we could ever at a complete and wholly satisfying definition of the wise man; all of these three definitions take us into the realm of a creative mind - of the mind which can do more with the facts, the knowledge presented to it than the facts imply. It is a mind which makes the whole larger, greater, than the sum of all its parts. And this, I think, is a gift uniquely given by a kind God.

But I do think that we ought to keep one thing in our minds and that is the wise man - the understanding man - cannot think, cannot create without knowledge.

Facts and figures, rules and principles are the food, the fuel, on which his

*Omission of Hebrew

wisdom feeds. You would not, for long, be able to spin out a theory of humanity if you considered only the vacuum and yet there are today vacuum theories of education - theories which tell us that what we ought to present to our young people are not so much the facts and the details and the rules and the principles of the sciences, of the languages, and of the world which is about us; but that we ought to teach them, not the subject matter, but rather the mental habits, the mental skills, which they will need in life. What an inversion this is of all that is reasonable because you cannot teach any mental skill unless you have the brick and the mortar, the facts, the subject on which this skill can operate. They have taken out of our school systems the alphabet, the rules of English grammar, the principles of mathematical thought, and instead of creating minds capable of skillful thinking, we have created sloppy minds and careless minds - minds which have no self-regulators. We have forgotten that the most creative genius in any art be it the master poet or the master musician or the master architect, needs to know the rules and the disciplines and the great products - the great artifacts - of his particular area before he can produce great art. A great artist needs to know the rules of verse and of meter. He needs to be acquainted with the great products of the past. His originality is not in denying these rules but in so over-laying them with his originality that he makes us forget these rules; and if he denies these rules, he leads us only into a world of bizarre poetry - one which is not understandable to most of us. A painter, who has no knowledge of perspective, will never be able to create great art in he but when/his painting/may do violence to some one or two canons of the classical theories presented to him. And the same is true of our children; and the same is true of us. We must begin, in all that we do, to reimpose upon ourselves the regimen of knowledge - of * * - of learning a great deal more of the world about us than we now know. How often in the course of the day we are called upon to enter in some discussion of politics, of world affairs, of economics, of physics - now that the atom has brought physics into our libraries

and living rooms, of the social sciences when we deal with such problems as crime and juvenile delinquency; and how often we find ourselves frustrated in these arguments because we do not have the facts and the figures before us, in our minds, on which to base an intelligent decision. We must, again, begin to think of our minds as minds which should not worry so much about being cluttered with learned lumber - useless mental facts - but as minds which ought to be used more fully than we use them now, which ought to be crammed/^{full}with the knowledge necessary for living, which ought to enjoy the eternal quest to learn more, and ever more, of the world about us. We ought to seek the two things which the prophet, Isaiah, hoped would be the mark of the messianic king of Israel - the *

* and the *

* - the spirit of knowledge,

the eternal adventuring into ideas and the *

* - the

spirit of understanding and of wisdom which can make of these ideas something useful, necessary, hopeful for our private lives, for our personal happiness, for the well-being of our families and of our communities, for the artistic creations which fill and thrill our world, for the ultimate betterment of mankind.

Amen.

*Omission of Hebrew