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Wisdom, 1982.

Wisdom
Daniel Jeremy Silver
May 9, 1982

Mell, we have given you a mother's day and grandmouner's present, and now for a bit of mindom.

in Jenusalem After Solomon was anointed as king of that he went to a shrine in Gibian and made there a royal offering to God. God was pleased with the offering of Coleman, and that night after the when Solomon word to sleep God appeared to Solomon in a dream, and he said From he wouldn't refuse ; "Ask he what I should give you. I wonder what we would answer if we had the good Me asked for long life or good health or great power or great wealth. We don't know whether he took a long time to on, we are told, answered God: God, I'd like you to give me an understanding heart with which to judge the people." And Solomon had just become the king, and in ancient Israel the king, among his other duties royal, was the date of spend a part of each day in the court and Anyone who wanted to could bring a case for the king to judge. And essentially, What Solomon was saying by W NOONOT! THE I know I wead is I am inexperienced in this part of my task and I we an understanding heart, the wisdom to judge fairly and justly among my people. And God, we are told, was pleased with Solomon's request. And the third chapter the that God gave to Solomon what he had asked for others Property to show solomon used his mideratarding heart, his Mustrate in that in which wisdom consists.

It seems that early on in his royal career two shrieking women came into court, they were prostitutes. And when the marshal had quieted the two women down and the king had demanded their cause, one of the women turned to the king and said, my lord, about ten days ago I gave birth to a child. It was a healthy child and I nursed my child, and three days later the other woman who lives with me, we're alone in the house, gave birth in her turn to a child, and several days later, while we were asleep at night, she must have rolled over on top of her

child and the child suffocated and he died. And then she got up in the middle of the night, and noticing her child was dead, she came to my room, into my bed, and she picked up my living child and substituted the corpse of her child for my baby. And when I awakened the next morning and recognized that the child who was with me was not only dead but not my child, I accused her of the substitution. And the king turned to the other woman and said, what have you to say? And she said, my lord, the baby who was with me in my bed is my child. And then the two women fell to shrieking at each other. And finally, the king ordered these women silenced and he summoned his general and he said, bring me my sword, and the sword was duly brought. And the king said to the general, cut the child in half, I'll give half of the living child to each of these women. And one of the women nodded at the justice of this decree and the other fell down on her knees and said, my lord, give the other woman the child, only spare the baby's life. And the king raised his hand and he stopped the general from cutting the child in two and he said, give to that woman who's on her knees the infant, she is the mother. And the Bible concludes by saying that all in Israel recognize that God had truly put the wisdom which is divine in Solomon's innermost being.

When the Bible tries to define wisdom it defines it as a very special commodity, an ability to discern, to be sensitive, to be clear-eyed, to see beyond the confusions of the moment to what is truly just and right and to be able to do it. The Hebrew word for wisdom is hochma, and among our people there was a very sharp distinction made between hochma, wisdom, and learning, or erudition, scholarship. I remember some years ago I attended a lecture at the university at which a very famous philosopher was discussing some very sophisticated elegant points in the area of symbolic logic. It was a brilliant lecture, and when it was all over there was a chance for give and take between the audience and the scholar, and after a number of pertinent questions were asked, as is almost always the case in a question and answer period, somebody raised their hand and asked a

question which was, as our kids would say, off the wall. And they turned to this brilliant philosopher, this person said to him: what do you think about the student protests that are taking place against our administration here at the university? And the philosopher began a long, vague, wandering discussion which must have lasted twenty-five minutes. No one could quite figure out what he was saying except he was saying, you're right and you're right and you're right, too, and the whole thing didn't add up to an answer at all. And the professor of philosophy who was sitting next to me turned to me and said, you know, I wish that our learned men were wise.

Learning and wisdom are not synonymous terms and Jews never have made the mistake of the Greeks, of assuming that because a man was a philosopher, because he had learned a great deal and mastered a particular discipline, he was fit to be the administrator, the head of the city, the king. The Greeks, as you know, had this concept of the philosopher-king as the most appropriate and proper leader of the society. They had a very special definition of knowledge. They insisted that knowledge consisted of the ability to see beyond the world of appearances into the world of reality, to see beyond the confusions of every day that which really is and, presumably, if we are able to discern the real lines of life, the real nature of existence, then we ought to make the kinds of judgments, political, juridical, which would truly and properly organize our society, and if we can separate out the confusions of the everyday from the higher purposes and goals of life, reality, then we ought to be able to manage our own lives with a great deal of judgment and of wisdom. And so they argued that the philosopher-king was the appropriate leader of the society.

The problem is, of course, that erudition and wisdom are not interchangeable terms. In our tradition the prophets were quick to say, let not the wise
man glory in his wisdom. They were quick to note that often those who are the
most learned are often people who do not have the good sense, or what we might
say the common sense, either to organize their lives intelligently or to make

sense out of the necessary elements of the puzzle which is daily existence. The kindest thing, sometimes, that our tradition has to say about learned men is that they are asses laden with books. They've read a great deal but they haven't been able to digest, relate, what they have read to their private lives. You know Helm, Helm, that wonderful city of fools in Poland about which all of the nudnik stories were told in our people's European experience. One of the Helm stories which you may not know, it's not inappropriate to this moment, there was a melamed in Helm. You know what melamed was. Melamed was a school teacher. He was a book man, and the melamed in Helm found himself a better job a few miles away in a neighboring village and he took the job. It paid better. The hours were better, but it meant he was away from home, and during the first few years that he was in his new job he visited home only once a year, on Pesach, and his wife finally complained to the local rabbi. My husband's deserting me, he's not paying attention to me, he comes home only once a year, and so the next Passover when the melamed of Helm came home to Helm to visit his family the rabbi called him into his study and said, Nu, you're a family man, you're a husband, you're not paying attention to your wife. And the melamed of Helm, who had read all of the books, looked at the rabbi as if he were something of a fool, how could he be asking this. He said, rabbi, I come home once a year and every time I come home my wife has a baby, you want me to come home every week?

Our tradition, as you know, values learning. In the Sephardic world the rabbi is called the wise man, and rabbis always put a lot of books on the shelves of their studies to convince you that we are in fact well read and, presumably, wise. But perhaps because we are a tradition which has made a great deal out of book learning, out of classes and study, perhaps because we're the tradition which, besides the Chinese, has the longest history of mandated adult education, university adult education, in the world, perhaps it's because of that we've recognized the limitations of erudition. You can master a subject, obviously, without

knowing how it could most intelligently be applied in your society. You can master the knowledge of the human body, of the human mind, and not be able to manage your own life. There is no necessary relationship between knowledge, erudition, and wisdom any more than there's a necessary relationship between knowledge and decency of character.

When I was in college I took a course with a man who was the most famous moral philosopher of his time, Ralph Barton Perry, and we would have two brilliant lectures a week and the third session of the week was a discussion which was led by what is called today a teaching assistant. These were in my day young post-doctoral students who were doing work for the senior professor. And the man who was assigned to our particular section had read everything and he had a brilliant logical mind, but he was a terrible human being. He delighted in tearing down us philosophic innocents. We were freshmen. This was our first or second blush with philosophic reasoning. He'd had the experience of six or seven years on us and he delighted to turn us over and over and over again to prove to us how essentially incompetent we were. Now, part of that can be a technique of learning, but it's clear that he took a rather sadistic and delicious pleasure in watching us unable to escape from his satire and the destruction of his critical argument. And I confess that I wasn't that surprised when I read a few years after I graduated this particular man had just been indicted for embezzling funds from the Philosophy Department. One can be a philosopher and, believe me, not be qualified to have leadership in the world of men.

Well, if wisdom cannot be gained in the classroom directly, where is wisdom to be found? I'm not sure I can answer that question, but I can tell you how to achieve the reputation for wisdom. It's very simple. Keep your mouth shut. It's very interesting, isn't it, that we tend to assume that still waters run deep; that we tend to assume that a person who doesn't say a great deal must be thinking profound thoughts; and I guess the reason is that we recognize that if we don't

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open our mouths we're not going to put our foot in it, and that when we do begin to talk we reveal, consciously and unconsciously, the limitations of our knowledge, of our experience, and of our wisdom. This is not a new idea. A rabbi of the eighteenth century said, silence is the only substitute for wisdom that he knows. And Simon ben Gomalion in Sayings of the Fathers, 1800 years before that, said that he had spent all of his days among the disciples of the wise and he'd found nothing more beautiful to wisdom than being silent, and that one who multiplies words multiplies sin, exposes himself, and believe me, there's truth to that. So if you covet the reputation for wisdom, don't become a public speaker, keep your mouth shut and your thoughts to yourself. But obviously, the semblance of wisdom is not wisdom so where is wisdom to be found?

Now, there are some who would argue that wisdom is to be found, if it is not to be found in the classroom, it is to be found out in the real world on the street. Our children often speak of people who have the smarts, and by that they mean someone who knows how to fend for himself or herself, how to make out, how to make things happen, how not to be limited, restricted, frustrated, by the rules and the forms and the complicated structure of our society. But, of course, worldly wisdom is not the same thing as wisdom. The person who is smart, shrewd, worldly-wise, knows how to extricate themselves from most problems. The wise person, obviously, doesn't get into the problem in the first place, and that's the difference. It's obviously wise to be prudent, to have some sense of what the world is really like, but that's not the true mark of wisdom.

Now, it's interesting that in ancient times there was a field of learning called wisdom. In almost every capital, in every palace, there was a school which was called a wisdom school. These existed in Thebes and Memphis, in Ninevah and in Jerusalem, and in these wisdom schools the young princes and the young bureaucrats were trained in writing, sometimes also in reading. They were trained to be the administrators of the society and they were also trained in the courtesies, the forms, the manners, the conventions, the sense of nobility of character

which that society maintained. And there has come down to us any number of the axioms and proverbs that were taught in these schools of prudential wisdom and they are interesting. They're important, many of them, in terms of the insight that they give us in the management of life. We know of one such school in the second century B.C.E. in Jerusalem which was run by a man named Joshua ben Sirach. He's left us his book, his list of proverbs and axioms from which he lectured week after week to the young elite princes and administrators to be of Judea It comprises the book of Ecclesiastes of the Wisdom of Ben Sirach in the Apocrypha. And in there you'll find practical wisdom, smarts, of this kind.

As long as you live, give no one power over yourselfson or wife, brother or friend.

Do not give your property to another,
in case you change your mind and want it back.

As long as you have life and breath,
never change places with anyone.

It is better for your children to ask from you
than for you to be dependent on them.

Whatever you are doing, keep the upper hand,
and allow no blot on your reputation.

Let your life run its full course,
and then, at the hour of death, distribute your estate.

And I suspect that there are many who have worked out all kinds of complicated trusts and arrangements in our society who later wished that they had not done so, regretted the sense of dependency that they now felt towards those to whom they had overgenerously and over early provided. And that's the smarts. That's thinking through your life, what can be achieved, the relationships that you'll want at each stage of your life for those who are closest to you. But I would also suggest to you that this is prudence and not wisdom, that it has a limited value. It doesn't tell you to what should I devote my life; how should I make the major decisions which I face; what are the causes to which I should dedicate myself. It's a protective kind of wisdom rather than a wisdom which has amptitude and some breadth to it.

And his bearing the man and an apparent

So where is wisdom to be found? By way of answer, I'd like to suggest to you that in the wisdom schools in Israel a unique element was added to that which was prudential, realistic, in the wisdom schools of all the other empires and palaces of the ancient Middle East, and that is that wisdom was treated as if wisdom included a highly important moral element, an element of social and personal moral concern. There is in the book of Job an inserted poem. It's not one of the poems which represent the dialogue between Job and the three comforters who come to explain to him why evil has happened to him, why his family has been taken away, why he has been stricken with disease, why he is no longer a wealthy or important man. The 28th chapter of the book of Job is a poem which tries to answer the question which we have set for ourselves this morning - what is wisdom and where is wisdom to be found. Let me read to you part of this poem.

There is a mine for silver
There is a place for gold which they refine.
Iron is taken out of the dust,
Brass is molten out of the stone
Man sets an end to darkness
And searches out to the furthest bound
The stones of thick darkness
and the shadow of death
Man breaks open a shaft away
from where others sonourn;
And out of the earth comes bread
And underneath it is turned up as if by fire
But where is wisdom to be found
And where is the place of understanding?

Man knoweth not the price thereof; Neither is it found in the land of the living. The deep saith: 'It is not in me'; The sea saith: 'It is not with me.' Wisdom cannot be gotten from gold Neither shall silver be weighed for the price thereof. No mention shall be made of the most precious of stones. The price of wisdom is above rubies. Whence then cometh wisdom And where is the place of understanding? Seeing that it is hid from the eyes of all the living And kept close from the fowls of the air. Destruction and Death say: We have heard a rumour thereof with our ears, God understands the way thereof And he knows the place thereof. For God looks to the ends of the earth And sees under the whole heaven.

When He makes a weight for the wind
And metes out the waters by measure
When God made a decree for the rain
And a way for the storm of thunder
It is then did He see it and declare it
And He established it, yea, and He searched it out.

And unto man God said:
"Behold the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom;
And to depart from evil, that is understanding.

According to the poet wisdom cannot be gotten directly. You can't set out on a academic career and get the PhD and have a certificate labeled: This man is a wise man. And you can't simply go out into the world and have a variety of experiences and because you've lived broadly and had many experiences be certified as a wise man or a wise woman. Where is wisdom to be found? Man knoweth not the place thereof/it is not to be found directly in the land of the living/it is not to be gotten for gold.

Then, how do we find wisdom? In books? In experience? Certainly, they help, but essentially, quintessentially, the first step in the finding of wisdom is to depart from evil, is to have the fear of the Lord. Wisdom begins in a certain kind of sensitive, sensitized, spiritual and moral life. It begins by being concerned about virtue and character and compassion and empathy and all of those things which must concern and do concern the morally sensitive person.

If I understand the poet right, he's making a comment which I find appropriate and apt to our immediate situation. I find myself, as I think you find yourself, surrounded by people who have all kinds of answers to all the problems of the world save their own lives. I've always been surprised at the number of people who have made an absolute and tragic mess of their lives, who are on the public platform and in the public eye, offering us answers to nuclear confrontation, answers to the problem of Social welfare, answers to the problems of peace in our times. They have answers to everything except their own thing. They are not able to put their own lives in order. Now, their answers may have some validity to them, but they operate as if the beginning of wisdom, the beginning of

the solution to the problems of the world were not to resolve our own problems of integrity and of character and of sensitivity and of concern. None of us would be as concerned about the possibility that a politician elected to office may press a little red button which will bring destruction to the world if in fact we felt that these men and women had that kind of moral concern, spiritual sensitivity, character, which would allow us to trust them with their fingers an inch or two away from the button. And none of us would be quite as worried as we are as to some of the experimentation which is going on in science if we had not had plenty of experience with scientists who say, the use of what I do is irrelevant to what I'm doing; all I'm concerned with is my narrow little world, my world of erudition, of knowledge, if they were both wise, morally concerned and learned. And many of us would not be as concerned about justice in our society if we felt that those who were fighting the so-called causes were seeking out cases, were not simply trying to be litigenous, to make a living, that were concerned in fact with justice, and we can go down all of the professions, all of the concerns, and recognize that if only we could in fact trust ourselves and feel that we could trust others we would have removed a pall of suspicion, a pall of concern from our lives, and would really be able to begin to deal effectively with most of the problems which surround us.

The rabbi said, he in whom the fear of sin is greater than his wisdom, than his learning, his learning will endure, that he whose learning is greater than his fear of sin, his wisdom, his learning, will not endure. And by this I think they were saying exactly what the poet in the 28th chapter of Job was saying: the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom and to depart from evil, that is understanding. In measure as we become intimately and immediately concerned with the quality of our own lives, we begin to develop a sensitivity which will allow us to see the problems of our world both with compassion, because we will acknowledge our own weakness and our own limitations and recognize them in others; it will

allow us to recognize the humanity of others and, therefore, our need to be concerned with it even as we ask them to recognize our own humanity, it is the beginning of wisdom, of the ability to see that the little nostrums, the simple ideologies, the utopian visions that we cherish, as solutions to the complexities of our world, that these will not really work. The beginning of wisdom is get wisdom. The beginning of wisdom is the fear of God. The beginning of wisdom is to depart from evil. The beginning of wisdom is to turn ourselves into the kind of sensitive person who can become sensitive to all of the ideas and all of the challenges that abound in the world about us because he is infinitely sensitive to his own needs, his own problems, his own struggle to achieve character and quality.

And I would submit to you that since no one has ever been able to lay before us a formula which says here is the degree and way you achieve wisdom, here is the way that you can get what Solomon asked for of God, the understanding heart. Since we really can't expect God to come to us in the dream and say, what do you want and we'll answer Him in all of our wisdom, an understanding heart, since we're going to have to do it ourselves. The way to achieve wisdom is through quality, through character, through sensitizing oneself. Each of us leads his own life. Each of us has his own experiences. Each of our minds has its own talents and its own perceptions. And what binds us together as human beings is the search of which we are all part of, to build lives of quality and of character, and if we could achieve that then so many of the problems of our world would be mitigated because we would no longer be facing situation after situation for which we can architect, design, effective plans, plans which falter and fail always because the fallible human beings with their own special needs who carry out the plans don't act resconably the way the plans assume that they would.

So where is wisdom to be found? What is the place of understanding? Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom. To depart from evil, in that way lies understanding.

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