

Fables from the Jewish Tradition
By Rabbi Manes Kogan

(16)

The Bear
Genesis Rabbah 86:4



Background to the Fable "The Bear"

Genesis 39:2

And the Lord was with Joseph, and he was a prosperous man...

Wisdom and Foolishness

A fool says what he knows, and a wise man knows what he says.

Source: *(Yiddish Proverb)*

Knowledge, Intelligence and Wisdom

Knowledge is defined (Oxford English Dictionary) variously as (i) expertise, and skills acquired by a person through experience or education; the theoretical or practical understanding of a subject, (ii) what is known in a particular field or in total; facts and information or (iii) awareness or familiarity gained by experience of a fact or situation.

Intelligence is an umbrella term used to describe a property of the mind that encompasses many related abilities, such as the capacities to reason, to plan, to solve problems, to think abstractly, to comprehend ideas, to use language, and to learn. There

Intelligence comes from the Latin verb "intellegere", which means "to understand". By this rationale, intelligence (as understanding) is arguably different from being "smart" (able to adapt to one's environment), or being "clever" (able to creatively adapt).

The ability to apply knowledge in order to perform better in an environment

Wisdom is knowledge, understanding, experience, discretion, and intuitive understanding, along with a capacity to apply these qualities well towards finding solutions to problems. It is the judicious and purposeful application of knowledge that is valued in society. To some extent the terms wisdom and intelligence have similar and overlapping meanings. The status of wisdom or prudence as a virtue is recognized in cultural, philosophical and religious sources.

Chochma – Wisdom: the beginning of All Beginnings

<http://www.kabbalaonline.org/>



Wisdom and the potential to be.

1) The Zohar breaks up the word chochma itself into two words: koach and mah. Koach means "potential", and mah means "what is." Thus chochma means "the potential of what is," or "the potential to be". This aspect of chochma describes the state of chochma in relation to the sefira of keter. As chochma emanates from keter, it "appears" in an obscure and undefined state. It is only potential being. It is virtually non-being. Thus the verse states, "and chochma emerges from nothingness" (Job 28:12). In other words, it is in a state of constant flux between being and non-being-- between revelation, the first point of immanent being, and non-revelation as it returns to its state of potential and merges in its source, keter. Chochma flashes in and out of existence. The Infinite Light thus becomes unified in the world of Atzilut through clothing itself first in the sefira of chochma.

2) The second aspect of the sefira of chochma is that it is the first of the immanent or in-dwelling sefirot. This is why it is called the beginning; Psalms (111:10) states "reishit chochma..." -- "chochma is the first, the head", that is to say the first of the immanent sefirot, the beginning and root of immanent being. Keter is the all-encompassing sefira from which all other sefirot are generated, whereas chochma is the first sefira to actually be generated.

3) The third aspect of chochma is that it is called the life-force of all Creation. The account of the Creation at the beginning of Genesis begins with the word "bereishit", -- "in the beginning". One of the Aramaic translations of the Torah, Targum Yonatan renders the word bereishit as b'chuchmata -- "with chochma," for this sefira is also the instrument of Creation. That is to say, it permeates all of creation. This is the meaning of the verse "You made everything with chochma" (Tehillim 104:24). In this sense Scripture refers to chochma as the life-force of all creation (as opposed to

keter which is the expression of purpose and motivation of all of creation), as in the verse "and chochma enlivens (or vitalizes) all that possess it" (Ecclesiastes 7:12). Similarly, "They will die but not with chochma" (Job 4:21), that is to say when they are without chochma. This is the aspect of chochma in its relation to all the other sefirot.

Thus, in brief, chochma is defined as the germinal, highly condensed revelation of Godly light in the highest level of immanence that is in the life force of all of creation.

The Bear Genesis Rabbah 86:4

מדרש רבה בראשית פרשה פו סימן ד

ד ויהי ה' את יוסף, הא עם שאר שבטים לאו, אמר ר' יודן לבהמי שהיה לפניו שתיים עשרה בהמות טעונות יין נכנסה אחת מהם לחנותו של עובד כוכבים הניח י"א והלך לו אחריה, אמרו לו מה אתה מניח י"א והולך לך אחרי האחת אמר להם אלו ברשות הרבים הם ואיני חושש להן שמא יעשה יין נסך, כך אלו גדולים וברשות אביהם אבל זה שהוא קטן וברשות עצמו לפיכך ויהי ה' את יוסף, ויהי איש מצליח, רבי ברכיה אמר גבר קפוז כמה דתימא (שמואל ב יט) וצלחו הירדן לפני המלך, משל לדובה שהיתה עומדת בשוק מקושטת באבנים טובות ומרגליות אמרו כל דקפיו לה נסיב ביה מה דעלה, היה שם פקח אחד אמר להם מסתכלין אתון במה דעלה ואנא מסתכל בניביה, א"ר ברכיה כל אותה דובה קפוז קפוז ואת רב מדין, אתמהא.

A bear, adorned with precious stones and pearls, would always come to the marketplace. People said, "Anyone who can jump over the bear can have all the jewels it is wearing."

A shrewd man who was there replied, "You are looking at what it is wearing, whereas I am looking at its teeth."

Genesis Rabbah 86:4

Our fable is told by Rabbi Berachia in Genesis Rabbah to illustrate his interpretation of the following verse: "And the Lord was with Joseph, and he was a prosperous man..." (Genesis 39:2). For Rabbi Berachia, the words "and he was a prosperous man" mean that Joseph was a clever man, like the man in our fable, who can see in the bear what no one else can.

Analysis Questions

? The dangerous situation described in our fable seems evident. So, why will people be looking at what the bear is wearing instead of looking at its teeth?

? Do you know situations in which people were caught in the bear's teeth?

Wrapping Up

! Can human beings "acquire" wisdom? How?

Discussion Ideas from Rabbi Dorit Edut

K-3rd GRADES:

1)

What do you think the shrewd meant by what he said? (“Shrewd” means a person who is clever or sees things that others might not see at first.)

2)

Why do you think the people were only looking at the precious stones and pearls that the bear was wearing?

3)

Make up a whole story based on what you see in the whole picture and what you already know about this fable.

4th-6th GRADES:

1)

What two different values do the people in this story have about the bear?

2)

Tell about a time when someone asked you to “dare” to do something and what happened. How did you respond and why? Looking back now, do you think you made a good decision?

3)

What would you say the moral of this fable is? How would you apply it to your own life?

7th-12 GRADES:

1)

How would you describe the attitudes of the people and of the shrewd man towards the bear—and maybe towards life in general?

2)

This fable is intended to show us an example of what cleverness means, as applied to Joseph in the Book of Genesis. What other Biblical figures would you say are clever and why?

3)

If cleverness is an admired characteristic, how would you say a person could develop this? (Think perhaps of people you know who are “smart” and what about their behavior makes them this way.)

Language Arts Strategies from Dr. M. Patricia Cavanaugh

Pre-Reading Strategy: Question Only

(Manzo, A. and U. Manzo. Content Area Reading. Columbus: Merrill Publishing Co., 1990.)

In this strategy, the teacher gives the students some background for the story. Since they will have already read several fables, students should be somewhat aware of the structure, the kinds of characters, and the lesson. So, the teacher might only say, “This is a fable about a bear, and it teaches us a lesson.”

Then, the students are told they may ask questions about the text, and the teacher will respond. They should be specific questions—not a general one like, “what is this story about?” The teacher can allow as much time as desired and available. The teacher must tell the students that when their questioning is over, they will take a quiz on the fable. They should strive to ask as many questions as they can so they will do well on the quiz.

After they have taken the quiz, they should discuss which questions they should have been able to answer correctly because the information was solicited and given. Through this process, students become aware of what to expect when they read a fable, and they learn how to ask good questions.

A sample quiz:

- 1) How many characters are in the fable?
- 2) How is the bear different from ordinary bears?
- 3) What is the bear wearing?
- 4) What do the people say the bear will do?
- 5) What do the people suggest someone needs to do for that?
- 6) What does the shrewd man say?
- 7) What does that mean?