

## Who Is Wise, Powerful, Wealthy and Honored?

by David Spinrad

A September trip to Immokalee, Florida, with Rabbis for Human Rights-North America triggered my memory of a passage from *Pirkei Avot*. In the passage, Ben Zoma asks four rhetorical questions. “Who is wise?” He said it is one who learns from everyone. “Who is powerful?” One with self-control. “Who is wealthy?” Wealthy is the one who appreciates what he has. And finally, Ben Zoma asks, “*Aizohu mechubad? Who is honored? Hamchabed et habriyot (Pirkei Avot 4:1)*. The one who is honored honors God’s creations, specifically, honors other human beings. The one who is honored honors and affirms human dignity in another.

Wisdom, power, wealth and honor – we all want these. Ben Zoma teaches us we have access to them all, because he tweaks our contemporary concept of each. While in Immokalee, I was part of a group of rabbis and rabbinical students who had the opportunity to meet extensively with members of the Coalition of Immokalee Farm Workers (the CIW). We also spent time with Jon Esformes, a principal partner of Pacific Tomato Growers. While there, we witnessed positive examples of each of Ben Zoma’s explanations of wisdom, power, wealth and honor.

Ben Zoma says wisdom is acquired by learning from everyone. Neither mountaintop sage nor one on a high rung of the corporate ladder holds a monopoly on teaching us what we need to know. Wisdom is gained by talking to all kinds of people, by listening to what they have to say, be they the person next to you on the bus or those who help bring our food from the fields to our tables.

In Immokalee, the CIW is succeeding because it understands the wisdom Ben Zoma advocates. The CIW operates by consensus and it strives to achieve goals that reflect the outcome of real conversations and ongoing reflections among the workers regarding their pressing needs for better conditions and improved wages. How to most intelligently pursue these goals is expressed in their Campaign for Fair Food, a campaign to improve conditions on one end of the chain – the workers in the field – by focusing a campaign on the other end of the chain, the large fast food and supermarket corporations.

The organizational structure of the CIW exemplifies Ben Zoma’s understanding of power. Real power is not to be defined by accumulated control, but rather, power must possess the restraint and self-control to make room for everyone with something at stake to find their own personal empowerment. We’re reminded of the echoes of words of educator and activist Lilla Watson, who said, “If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time... But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.” One of the key structural components of the CIW is that every employee also must work at least one harvest, assuring that the potential for dissonance between what goes on in the fields and what happens in the office is minimized. Another compelling element in the sharing of power within the Coalition is that every employee is paid an identical salary. While their responsibilities may differ, a flat pay structure helps to maintain an environment of shared power and equal investment in the task.

Regarding wealth, Ben Zoma expands our concept and what is of value and teaches that appreciation for what we have is the key to true wealth. If this is so, the desire for more can only be satisfied when it's accompanied by a feeling of appreciation for what we've already got. While dissatisfaction and a need for change serves to spark a movement, movements fail if they focus only on the negative and what has not been accomplished. Applying this concept of wealth to activism, it is clear that a part of the CIW's ongoing success is due to its evident appreciation for the slow, steady gains it has been able to make so far.

In the past decade, fast food giants Taco Bell, Burger King, McDonald's and Subway have all agreed to purchase tomatoes only from growers who have agreed to the terms of the Fair Food Agreement. The grocery chain Whole Foods and the food service corporations Bon Appetit and the Compass Group have also signed on, and, in 2010, the CIW and the Florida Tomato Growers Exchange signed an agreement to extend the CIW's Fair Food principles – including a strict code of conduct, a cooperative complaint resolution system, a participatory health and safety program, and a worker-to-worker education process – to over 90% of Florida's tomato fields.

Finally, to Ben Zoma's question of "Who is honored," the answer is the one the one who honors others. This is the principle of *k'vod habriot*, the principle of human dignity and the acknowledgement that we have a responsibility to see every person we encounter as a physical manifestation of the Divine and to treat that person accordingly. In Immokalee, the person who embodied this principle was Jon Esformes of Pacific Tomato Growers, a major grower in the region.

Going against the convention of many of his competitors and in signing on to be socially accountable in his labor practices, Jon referred to Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel's often quoted phrase, "Some are guilty, but all are responsible." In speaking out against the conditions in agriculture and in he and his family business agreeing to take responsibility to make changes from within their own corporation, Jon honored his workers and affirmed their human dignity.

It's convenient to look at Jon and Pacific Growers with skepticism. The conventional wisdom in our society would prefer us to doubt that people are capable of change. But to stand in the presence of two formerly adversarial groups, the CIW and Pacific Growers, and to feel the tremendous sense of respect the workers feel toward Jon is to understand that the path to truly being honored by others is a path that can only be known by honoring and respecting the dignity of another.

Wisdom calls us to learn from everyone. Power requires us to share. Wealth must begin with appreciation for what we have. And honor comes by honoring others. Ben Zoma taught this two millennia ago, but these principles are alive and thriving with the Coalition for Immokalee Workers and in the labor practices of Pacific Tomato Growers.