

RABBI AARON GOLDSCHEIDER
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Rav Kook on Pirkei Avot: Make for Yourself a Master (Pirkei Avot 1:16)

"Make for yourself a Rabbi" (Pirkei Avot 1:16)

Rav Chaim Volozhin emphasizes the importance of having a rabbi or teacher whom one can readily consult with questions of Jewish law. In addition, if one does not have a rabbi to consult and simply adopts the stringent view whenever one is unsure of the correct halachic ruling, this too is ill-advised. This is precisely the message expressed in the continuation of the Mishnah: "...do not tithe excessively through approximation." It is imperative to have a teacher available. (Ruach Chaim, 1:16)



Rabbi Shlomo Elyashiv zt"l (The Leshem)

CONVERSATIONS AND INTERACTIONS

The Talmud (Sukkah 21b) emphasizes that even the mundane and casual interactions one has with a rabbinic personality or teacher should be treated as opportunities to learn and glean inspiration. "Even the conversation of Torah scholars requires analysis, as it is stated [regarding the righteous]: 'Which brings forth its fruit in its season and whose leaf does not wither'" (Psalms 1:3).

The Talmud understands the verse to suggest that, with regard to a Torah scholar, not only is his primary product, his fruit, significant, but even the seemingly incidental matters that emerge from his conversations, his leaves, are significant.

Rav Kook adds a beautiful insight regarding the above Talmudic passage and the verse used as a prooftext. There is a natural outgrowth of the scholar's deep learning and righteous ways, such that even his mundane conversations and actions are filled with great wisdom and lessons from which one should be sensitive enough to learn:

"There is a spiritual principle called 'the simple conversation of Talmidei Chachamim/Torah Scholars must be studied' (Sukkah 21b). A conversation is something that grows naturally without any forced effort from the person. This can be compared to a plant in the field that grows in a natural and general way. Therefore, this is the explanation of 'simple conversations of Talmidei Chachamim must be studied.' When people are continuously immersed in the words of

the Torah, their simple conversations also become words of Torah. This happens on its own without any forced effort…" (Kevatzim Yad Kodsho 1, Pinkas Rishon L'Yaffo 56, translated in *The Spiritual Wisdom of Rav Kook*, Schwartz, p. 62)

WHEN TO BASK IN THE TZADIK'S LIGHT

In a beautiful teaching, Rav Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook highlights another dimension of the need to have a spiritual master and explains why the honor given to such an individual is so important. The Talmud makes the enigmatic statement that, "One is not required to show kavod (show deference/honor) to who is greater on the road, nor on bridges, not when one's hands are soiled." (Berachot 46b–47a).

Why would there be an exception to showing honor in the above-mentioned circumstances?

Rav Kook suggests that this passage expresses a more comprehensive understanding of the reverence one should have for rabbis. A Jew extends honor to a sage not merely because that individual deserves respect and admiration for his scholarship and righteousness. More importantly, says Rav Kook, by honoring a rabbi or great individual, one opens one's heart and mind to that teacher's wisdom and righteous actions. To honor another individual is to allow their presence to become a source of inspiration and a spark of motivation.

Rav Kook explains that the three examples in the Talmud represent scenarios in which a person cannot readily receive inspiration because he is distracted and unable to focus on the master's example. When traveling on the road, one is concerned with one's own safety and must pay close attention to the path ahead. Similarly, when crossing a



bridge, especially one that is less sturdy or narrow, one must concentrate on watching one's steps. Just as one is not permitted to study Torah when one's hands are soiled, so too, soiled hands symbolize a situation in which one is not open-hearted and receptive to being influenced by one's teacher. (Ain Aya, Chapter 7, piska #12)

Kavod HaTorah, the honor one extends to great sages and teachers of Torah, should not be a form of honor that makes one feel belittled or diminished because of one's own limited talents or capabilities. Quite the reverse: the honor one gives great masters serves to ennoble and elevate one's own spirit. Showing esteem and reverence for exceptional personalities spurs a person to pursue greater heights and attain more elevated levels in their own service of God.

GIVING GIFTS TO THE KOHEN

The Talmud asks the question: "Why is the portion of Sota juxtaposed with the portion of terumot and tithes (Bamidbar chapter 5). They are juxtaposed to tell you: Anyone who has terumot and tithes and does not give them to the priest, will ultimately require the service of the priest by means of his wife." (Berachot 63a).

What is the connection between the laws concerning a wife suspected of an immoral relationship and the giving of tithes to the

kohen? They seem to be unrelated laws.

Rav Kook suggests that this passage highlights the idea that when one fails to interact with the kohen, who represents the inspirational figures in our religious lives, one can easily begin to slip in one's observance. This slippage can affect the entire household until, God forbid, it can even lead to immoral behavior.

The gifts we give to the kohen are not merely a way to support him in his role of administering the service in the Beit Hamikdash and serving as a teacher in the community. Rav Kook argues that the many gifts given to the kohanim - 24 in all - allow for regular interaction and serve as contact points meant to strengthen the religious commitment of the giver. Being in the presence of great people, engaging in conversation with them, and simply spending time in their company can help bolster one's commitment to and love of Judaism. (Ain Aya, Berachot 9, #318)

RAV ARYEH CONSULTED HIS MASTER

Rav Aryeh Levin was known as the "father of prisoners" for his visits to members of the Jewish underground held in the Central Prison of Jerusalem, in the Russian Compound, during the British Mandate. He would often visit during the week and pray on Shabbat morning in the prison alongside the prisoners. His Shabbat visits were especially meaningful and heartwarming to the inmates. After prayers, he would often stop at the homes of their parents and family members to relay that their son or sibling was doing well.



It is less well-known that Rav Aryeh would often make another stop after visiting the prisoners. The prisoners frequently asked him questions in the area of halacha, and at times these questions were complex, involving intricate matters of Shabbat and kashrut law.

Rav Aryeh was an exceptional talmid chacham and could certainly have addressed these questions himself. Nevertheless, he would go to the home of his esteemed brother-in-law, Rav Zvi Pesach Frank, and present these queries to him. The honor and reverence Rav Aryeh showed Rav Zvi Pesach Frank, and indeed all the gedolei Torah of his time, were legendary. Rav Aryeh truly epitomized the teaching: "Make for Yourself a Master."

LOVE FOR TALMIDEI CHACHAMIM

Throughout his life, Rav Aryeh yearned to be close to great Torah scholars, and he formed strong bonds with them (*A Tzaddik in Our Time*, p. 132). Rav Aryeh developed close relationships with some of the most eminent rabbis of Jerusalem, such as Rav Chaim Berlin, Rav Isser Zalman Meltzer, and, of course, Rav Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook.

He also attached himself to one of the unique and saintly personalities living in Jerusalem. For a period of three years, Rav Aryeh would go every night to visit the master of Kabbalah, Rav Shlomo Elyashiv. Neither cold, wind, nor rain would stop him from making the journey, and he would always stay for hours at a time. Rav Elyashiv

emigrated to Israel in 1922. His primary work, *Leshem Shevo Veachlama*, is considered one of the most exceptional expositions on Kabbalah in contemporary times.

His son, Rav Chaim Yaakov, recalled: "On a number of occasions I went along with my father. My father entered an inner room, and I, being quite young, remained in the anteroom for about two hours. Returning home I asked my father: 'What did the two of you learn?' He replied: 'That great and holy scholar studied and delved into the sacred volumes, while I stood on the side holding the candle in my hand. When he needed a particular volume I handed it to him…I do not know how I deserve such a great privilege as to serve this man of holiness.'"

Rav Chaim Yaakov commented that, in his father's exquisite humility, he concealed the fact that he had studied the secrets of Kabbalah with the eminent sage.

When Rav Elyashiv died, however, Rav Aryeh wrote a short biography of the scholar of mysticism (privately published as a booklet; second edition, Jerusalem, 1935) and divulged a little more about the learning they had shared: "…Rav Elyashiv finally permitted me to come night after night and read to him from his sacred volumes. Thus I would always spend several hours, and though I lack any human understanding of this wisdom of truth (i.e., Kabbalah), nevertheless, as I sat in his presence I felt myself as if in an entirely different world…"

Here again, Rav Aryeh humbly presented himself as comprehending very little. However, those who knew Rav Aryeh intimately and were familiar with his mastery of Torah were also aware of his extensive knowledge of the esoteric teachings of Kabbalah. (*A Tzaddik in Our Time*, pp. 400–401)

The above episode remarkably exemplifies the humility of a student who opened his heart and mind to absorb his master's teachings and receive his spiritual light.

A CHASSIDIC INSIGHT

The famed Noda B'Yehudah, Rav Yechezkel HaLevi Landau, once asked Rebbe Shmelke of Nikolsburg, a great Torah scholar and disciple of the Chassidic Maggid of Mezeritch, why he devoted precious time away from his Torah studies to travel and visit his teacher. Rebbe Shmelke answered with a novel interpretation of our Mishnah: Appoint for yourself a teacher who will help you overcome your doubts… in faith. A teacher is one who not only provides knowledge but also strengthens one's faith in God and in one's own potential. (*The Pirkei Avos*, Artscroll, p. 48)

This beautiful Chassidic insight captures Rav Kook's message regarding the importance of honoring a rabbi. The act of extending honor and acclaim opens the channels through which the teachings and spiritual influence of one's master can deeply enter the heart and soul of the disciple.

AN ADORING DISCIPLE

The following are a few powerful examples of Rav Kook's expression of love and devotion to his rabbinic role models:

When the young Avraham Yitzchak Kook, then an eighteen-year-old Talmudic student in Smargon, heard of the passing of Rabbi Yisrael Salanter, founder of the Lithuanian Mussar movement, he rent his garment, removed his shoes, and sat on the ground in ritual mourning. And when Rav Salanter's premier disciple, Rabbi Yitzhak Blaser (known as "Reb Itzeleh Peterburger" after his rabbinate in the Russian imperial capital), was hospitalized in Jaffa, Rav Kook walked

to Sha'arei Zion Hospital rather than ride in a wagon. Rav Kook explained that, when paying a visit to someone of Reb Itzeleh's spiritual stature, it was fitting to set out on foot as a pilgrim. (*The Legends of Rabbah Bar Bar Hannah*, Naor, p. 214)

Rav Kook married the daughter of Rabbi Eliyahu David Rabinowitz-Teomim. Sadly, not long after their marriage, Rav Kook's wife passed away from an illness. Rav Kook later remarried his wife's first cousin but remained deeply bonded to his first father-in-law, also known as the Aderet. One of the first works Rav Kook wrote after settling in Israel was entitled *Eder Hayakar*. The book was written as a tribute to his saintly father-in-law and celebrates a life devoted to Torah study, compassion, and remarkable service of the Almighty.

Rav Kook's choice to write a book that lovingly captured the spirituality of this saintly figure is a beautiful articulation of the Mishnah's teaching: "Make for yourself a rabbi."

The heartwarming anecdotes above exemplify the esteem and admiration one should show exceptional rabbinic personalities and demonstrate how this adoration serves to uplift and enrich one's commitment to Torah and mitzvot.

RAIN, SUN, AND A PARENT'S LOVE

Rav Chaim Shmulevitz, in one of his classic mussar shmuessen (talks), discussed the uniqueness of the teacher-disciple relationship. He cited a dramatic episode from the Talmud in which the eminent students of Rabbi Eliezer visit their rebbe as he approaches death and express their adoration for him and the remarkable impact he had on his students.

"You are more valuable than a drip of rain," said Rebbe Tarfon.

"You are more valuable to Israel than the sun," said Rebbe Yehoshua.

"You are more precious to Israel than a father and mother," said Rebbe Elazar ben Azarya. (Sanhedrin 101a)

The great Rosh Yeshiva of the Mir, Rav Chaim Shmulevitz, taught that each sage pointed to another dimension of the unique relationship between teacher and student. The rain brings growth to a seedling. The Rebbe is able to recognize the student's potential and provide the nourishment needed for growth.

The sun provides the constant light that a plant needs for its growth and health. Similarly, the Rebbe's warmth and guidance over the long term are essential for one's well-being and spiritual development.

Perhaps the most significant relationship is that between parent and child. When a rebbe or teacher serves in the profound role of a mother or father figure, it becomes a relationship in which support and love are non-negotiable. Through this bond, the student is assured that the love they receive is everlasting and unconditional. (*Sichos Mussar, Reb Chaim's Discourses*, Artscroll, pp. 268–269) ■





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