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The Rav, the Shul and the Chevra

Why the Change?

Years ago, as a *bachur*, I remember overhearing one of my *chaveirim* in Ponovez Yeshiva relate that the Mashgiach Rav Chatzkel Levenstein *zt"l* lamented that former *talmidim* who return to the yeshiva years later are frequently unrecognizable, due to the great weakening in their overall stature as *bnei Torah*. Some, however, return after many years substantially unchanged, steadfast at the *madreigah* where they stood while in yeshiva. The *Mashgiach* supposedly acknowledged that he did not know the cause of this distinction, but that it was unquestionably apparent.

I never verified the accuracy of that quote, but, after several decades of serving as a Rav, I can point at a pivotal defining factor that affects a person's ability to retain his level as a ben Torah. I will direct this article to those who have left the *koslei yeshiva*, but, as so many *yungeleit* today no longer live on "Yeshiva Lane," many of the points may apply to those who are *zocheh* to learn full time in Yeshiva, as well.

The Critical Role of *Chaveirim*

"Rabbi Yehoshua ben Perachia says: Make for yourself a *rav* and acquire for yourself a friend and judge each person favorably" (*Avos* 1;6).

If there was ever an era in which there was a particularly acute need for both a *rav* and a good *chevrah* it is surely today.

The Rambam in *Hilchos Deios* says:

דרך ברייתו של אדם להיות נמשך בדעותיו ובמעשיו אחר ריעיו וחביריו ונוהג כמנהג אנשי מדינתו, לפיכך צריך אדם להתחבר לצדיקים ולישב אצל החכמים תמיד כדי שילמוד ממעשיהם, ויתרחק מן הרשעים ההולכים בחשך כדי שלא ילמוד ממעשיהם.

Inevitably, a person is influenced by his surroundings and by those with whom he associates. Not only does one mimic the behavior of those around him, one begins to adopt **their thinking and attitudes**. Despite widespread protestations to the contrary, even the most thoughtful and independent-minded person, and even a *ben Torah*, begins to adopt the frames of reference and subtle tendencies of those with whom he is constantly interacting in the broader society. Perhaps even more insidious is the influence of lifestyles within the *frum* community that are foreign to *bnei Torah*, both on the *talmid chacham* himself and on his family. The existence of this tendency is stated by the Rambam as the absolute *emes* and it is true for you and I, not just for the 'Other Guy.'

The most effective antidote that I've seen to the ever-present threat of outside influences is, as the Rambam writes, to closely connect to a *chevrah* of like-minded *bnei Torah* collectively committed to growth in all circumstances and through all stages of life.

A person who retains a close *kesher* with a *moreh derech* and *chaveirim* has a much easier time maintaining his status as a *ben Torah*, while his counterpart who does not work to keep up these

relationships will inevitably find himself straying after the ways of his newfound “associates.” I have yet to meet a *ben Torah* who can honestly claim to have sustained his level of *yiras shamayim* absent a close *kesher* to at least a small group of *bnei Torah* peers.

Growth or Atrophy

There is another important reason why a good *chevrah* is so vital to the adult *ben Torah*. As we grow older, a slow change in our fervor sneaks into our hearts and tells us that as we progress in life, personal growth in *ruchniyus* is no longer expected of us, even by Hakadosh Baruch Hu. It can happen both to those who leave Yeshiva — even to become *marbitzei Torah* — and to those who remain in Yeshiva long term. This unarticulated mindset is toxic and inevitably leads not only to a halt in growth but also to a downward spiral.

The Vilna Gaon teaches in *Mishlei* that in *ruchniyus*, there are only two options: growth or atrophy. If an individual does not choose to grow, he is making the *de facto* choice to atrophy; he cannot remain in a static state.

This is why the establishment of a connection with a personal *rav* and a quality *chevrah* is so crucial. By being part of a group who are constantly in a state of *aliyah* will obligate the individual to feel the need to continue growing as well. Having spent one’s earlier years in a yeshiva nor even ongoing contact with one’s Rosh Yeshiva is usually not enough to fortify one’s long-term resolve by itself.

The Chevrah the Shul, and the Rav

For the American *ben Torah* engaged in the broader society, belonging to a group of individuals who share his moral and ethical standards is critical. Such an association establishes expectations and provides support, both in *shemiras hamitzvos* and *limud Torah*.

Historically, the shul has served as the linchpin to one’s social context. The shul provides the context for the development of the *chevrah*. By identifying himself with the correct type of shul, the *baal habayis* embraces its members as a frame of reference in formulating life style choices appropriate to the *ben Torah baal habayis*.

Rav Shimon Alster *shlita* expressed this universal need at a gathering of prominent *rabbanim*, and asserted that the main function of a *rav* is “to create a *makom* that everyone feels is his *makom*.” He explained that the *rav* can fulfill this role in many different ways, whether by being the *posek* or the *lamdan* or the *darshan* or the *baal eitzah*. Any of these mediums can be used to successfully pull together the *tzibbur* as a unified group, by which the Shul functions as the “*makom*” that will set the standard for its members and their entire families.

Harav Yosef Rosenblum *zt”l*, Rosh Yeshiva of Shaarei Yosher once advised a *rav* to remember that above all, his *baalei batim* need a *chaver*. One very important function of a *chaver* is to help you make the correct decisions in life. When we discuss our situations with someone who understands us, shares our values, and wants the best for us, but whose thinking is not colored by our personal subjectivity, we are more likely to reach the truth. If that *chaver* is the *rav*, a *talmid chacham* of stature experienced with different life situations, the benefit is so much greater.

Personal Relationship

We all know the famous story of Rav Yisroel Salanter, who chose to wash his hands with a minimum of water, rather than trouble the *yesomah* who carried the water to the shul. It is relatively easy to determine the best way to wash *netilas yadayim* according to all halachic opinions, but much more difficult to decide when to rely on a more lenient opinion because a *yesomah* is drawing the water. Situations requiring sensitive *shikul hada'as* occur on a regular basis to all of us. No *Shulchan Aruch* can delineate the perfect answer for each individual in every situation. The ability to weigh all considerations lies only in the heart and mind of a *talmid chacham* infused with the values and teachings of the Torah, who is honestly trying to seek the right solution for the person seeking his advice.

The *rav* also must know the situation of the asker. Rav Menachem Mintz *shlita*, speaking to a group of *rabbanim*, stressed that a *rav* must know his *baalei batim* personally in order to be effective. He described the absolute bedlam that ensued when someone was advised that it is halachically preferable to make Kiddush Friday night as soon as you walk in the door. But, he said, “we need to also consider the fact that he has six little children at home, his wife works all day on Friday and can barely keep it together — before advising him to conduct himself in this area in the most *mehudar* way.”

Unfortunately, many people forfeit a relationship with a local, accessible *rav*, and instead try to ask only famous *poskim*. In most instances, the local *rav* is more than equipped to address the issues at hand and his familiarity with the circumstances of the *baal habayis*, including the environment of his home and community, his history and personality, often renders the *rav* the most appropriate source of guidance.

The Challenge

Unfortunately, however, the goal of “making for yourself a *rav* and acquiring for yourself a friend” is not easily achieved. The practical obstacles are more readily recognized, but it is important to pinpoint the cultural obstacles.

Often, adult *bnei Torah*, identify with their individual yeshivas, and therefore resist accepting a new identity within a *chevrah* and with a *rav*. But it is important to realize that the adult *ben Torah* faces challenges and needs, which are quite distinct from those he was familiar with in the past. Therefore, in addition to his continued connection to Yeshiva, he needs to also connect to an anchor suited for his stage in life.

The role of the shul in a family's identity has been substantially marginalized in our world. Instead of being recognized for the pivotal role it could play, the shul is commonly regarded merely as a place to find a *minyán* or host a *kiddush*. Too often, the *avreich*, *rebbe*, or *baal habayis* davens everywhere and belongs nowhere. And yes, the children need a place with which to identify as well. The broad community and even the yeshiva world in general are often too big and too complex to serve this purpose. Growing up belonging to a particular shul, *chevrah*, and *rav* can have a tremendous positive influence on children.

Aseh Lecha Rav

The role of the Rav in creating the “*makom*” and *chevrah* is crucial. He can foster the *ruach* that elevates and strengthens the entire group. But we need to recognize and nurture the Rav’s role in our lives. It is a shame to limit that role to answering our *sheilos* and sharing a *dvar Torah* Shabbos morning.

Many are hesitant about pursuing a relationship with a *rav* because they lack confidence in those who really could play that role. After all, most *rabbanim* are not world-class *poskim* or famous *mashgichim*. The *ben torah* is often a *talmid chacham* in his own right and feels that few *rabbanim* qualify to serve as his guide. I would like to suggest a solution to this dilemma by providing a different perspective on the nature of such a relationship.

“Make a Rav for yourself”: The Rambam explained that even if [the best candidate] is not worthy to be your *rav*, make him a *rav* over you and do not just learn on your own.” – (Rav Ovadiah of Bartenura)

Let’s reflect on the words of Chazal with the aim of implementing them *halachah l’maaseh*. How can I possibly regard a person whom I perceive as less learned than I am as my *rav*?!! If we understand the profound lesson in what Chazal are telling us to do, it becomes easier to apply their words to our own situations and enables us to gain from one of the many *chashuva rabbanim* available to us today.

The command “Make yourself a *rav*” is actually a calling to be the type of individual who is ready to listen and learn. A person can only grow when he is in “other-focused” mode, when he is seriously listening to others and weighing their words. Chazal, as we know, define a *chacham* as one who learns from every person and Rabbenu Yonah explains that a person can only acquire wisdom if his love of the truth is paramount. This *bikush ha’emes* will lead him to learn from anyone, regardless of position, rank, or stature. In this *mishnah*, Chazal are telling us that even if we truly have greater knowledge than the *rav*, we should learn to be humble and to be open to the opinions of another *talmid chacham* who is saying words of truth. So the key to “making oneself a *rav*” is to put *yourself* in “learning mode” rather than “know-it-all-mode.”

A *kehillah* needs to seek a *rav* who is a *choshuva talmid chacham* from whom everyone can learn from — and *baruch Hashem* we have many who can fill that position, as long as we are poised to listen and learn from him.

The Rav’s Achrayus

The challenge in creating this relationship has to be met at both ends. Several years ago, the Mashgiach Rav Matisyahu Salomon *shlita* was speaking to a group of *rabbanim* about the dangers of technology. The Mashgiach was sensitive to the fact that he was asking for major intervention in the lives of the members of their *kehillos* — beyond the comfort zone of many *rabbanim* and more than they are accustomed to do in their position. The Mashgiach looked around and said, “If you all fail to go into my business, that of being a *mashgiach*, you are placing the entire *Klal Yisroel* in grave peril!” His message was clear. *Rabbanim* must view their job as including a deep concern for the overall *ruchniyus* of their *baalei batim* and the personal challenges they face. He must strive to advance the constant growth and well-being of their *kehillos*. Most certainly, there are increasing numbers of *rabbanim* who are assuming

these responsibilities, but the need remains for *kehillos* to be encouraged to seek such commitment on the part of their *rabbanim*, particularly when a new rav is being engaged.