



Insights into Pirke Avot

by

Rabbi Yaakov Hillel

Rosh Yeshivat Ahavat Shalom

Perek Alef, Mishnah Vav (part 1)

1:6 Yehoshua ben Perahiah and Nitai HaArbeli received from them. Yehoshua ben Perahiah says, make a teacher for yourself and acquire for yourself a friend. And judge every person favorably.

Teachers

Yehoshua ben Perahiah and Nitai HaArbeli, students of Yosse ben Yoezer of Tzeredah and Yosse ben Yohanan of Jerusalem, **received** the Oral Tradition **from** them.

Make a teacher for yourself.

Everyone needs a teacher, because we cannot rely strictly on our own knowledge and understanding in learning Torah, keeping *mitzvot*, interpreting *halachah*, and refining our *middot*. Torah has always been preserved and passed on through guidance and instruction from teacher to student.

Our Sages tell us that *girsah*, straightforward, comprehensive study of the actual text, is better learned from only one teacher, as this will eliminate confusion. We will have a single clear, consistent text to learn from and work with. However, we should learn *sevarah* – in-depth, detailed study, analysis, and discussion – from several teachers. Each one will have a different approach, and we will gain from the exposure to a broad range of opinions and study methods (*Avodah Zarah* 19a, cited by Bartenura; see *Hullin* 18b, Rashi, *Avot D'Rabbi Natan*, Chapter 8).

Before the Oral Tradition was committed to writing, first in the form of the *Mishnah* by Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi and later, in the Talmud by the *Amoraim* Rabbi Yohanan, Ravina, and Rav Ashi, it was transmitted exclusively through personal study with a teacher. This is why our Sages teach, “Sinai (knowledge of all the Torah



given at Sinai, a reference to *bekiut*) and *oker harim* (literally “one who uproots mountains,” a reference to *sevarah*, profound analytical study)... Sinai is preferable” (*Berachot* 64a). A solid, comprehensive base of knowledge received from a scholar proficient in the Tradition is more important than brilliant, sharp intellectual acumen – if we lack the basic information, there is nothing for us to analyze. *Sevarah* can only be built on a foundation of knowledge.

In our times, however, knowledge of the text is transmitted not necessarily by a teacher, but through books. There is no longer any danger that the Tradition will be forgotten, because it has been preserved for eternity in writing (see *Gittin* 60a). This is why our main efforts in learning are now devoted to deeper understanding of the printed texts available to us. Studying under a number of teachers, rather than confining ourselves to one alone, will greatly enhance our knowledge and comprehension of Torah.

This relates to studying Talmud, *halachah*, and *aggadah*. However, we need an advisor as well, who can instruct us in the service of Hashem. Rabbi Tzvi Michel Shapira, a disciple of Rabbi Yehoshua Leib Diskin, cites our Sages’ teaching that one should have an advisor in whom he can confide (*Avot D’Rabbi Natan*, Chapter 8). Their relationship should be close enough for him to share his innermost thoughts, so that his mentor will truly know him and can offer guidance geared to his particular needs and circumstances. This is also part of our Sages’ injunction to develop a close relationship with a rabbi who can serve as our mentor (*Tikun Hatzot, Maamar Rishon*, Chapter 3:4).

Rabbi Shapira goes on to cite the ethical work *Sefer HaGan (LeYom Shevii)*, which recommends having not just one advisor, but three. This raises an obvious question: if our Sages felt that a single advisor was sufficient, why would we need three?

He explains that dispensing good advice calls for many qualifications. Our mentor should be well versed in the Talmud, the works of the halachic authorities and the responsa literature, be fluent in *Kabbalah*, and have extensive knowledge of ethical and spiritual matters such as service of Hashem and the Torah outlook on life. In an earlier era it was possible to find exceptional individuals who combined all branches of Torah wisdom. Today, a scholar’s knowledge is often specialized. A *rosh yeshivah* may not have the same expertise in rendering halachic rulings as he does in profound Talmudic topics. A halachic authority is not necessarily a *mashgiah* who deals extensively with the finer profundities of ethical issues. And even if he is both, it is unlikely that he will be a Kabbalist as well. This is why the *Sefer HaGan* advises us to have several teachers, in order to attain all facets of complete, comprehensive



Torah wisdom: abstract learning and practical *halachah*, ethical piety and *Kabbalah*.

With this in mind, we can explain the eleventh blessing in *Shemoneh Esre*: “Restore our judges as of yore and our advisers as in the beginning.” “Our judges” refers to the halachic authorities and Talmudic scholars. “Our advisors” are the authorities and scholars who are also well versed in ethics and *Kabbalah*.

Our Sages tell us to **make a teacher for yourself**. We all need a teacher, but he should be someone who is right for us, in light of our own particular level and conditions. We cannot expect that every great rabbi and Torah scholar will necessarily be the right teacher and guide for every single individual. In fact, a special note of caution is in order here. When we **make a teacher** for ourselves, we should be sure that his instruction and leadership are positive and beneficial. A rabbi once said that if a community has no leader, the Satan will be more than pleased to take on the job.

Making a Teacher

Make a teacher for yourself.

Would it not have been more straightforward for the *mishnah* to say, “You should have a teacher”? Why must we **make** a teacher?

The Rambam provides an interesting answer: “This means that even if he is not worthy of being your teacher, make him your teacher” (*Perush HaMishnayot*). We personally have need of a teacher. Even if the Torah scholar who is available to us is not entirely suited for the role and his level is not all that much higher than our own, we should nonetheless accept him as our teacher, because the relationship is important and we need it. A teacher is our essential link to the unbreakable chain of tradition going all the way back to Mt. Sinai. In addition, it is only through having a teacher that we can learn the deference and humility essential to proper Torah study.

Our Sages teach that “Yiftach [one of the least of the Judges] in his generation is like Shmuel [one of the greatest of the Judges] in his generation” (*Rosh Hashanah* 25b). Every generation is granted the rabbis and leaders they require; a rabbi is a reflection of his generation, and he suits their level and needs exactly. We may be tempted to look back on the great rabbinical figures of old who served our communities in days gone by, and draw unfavorable comparisons to the present. If we had rabbis like our grandfathers did, we say, we would revere and respect them and obey their every word. But who are today’s rabbis? They are not the same at all.



This line of thought is clearly a tactic of the *yetzer hara*. Every generation's rabbis are precisely those it needs. It is up to us to accept their guidance without doubt and without complaint. If we undermine their authority by saying that the rabbis in our times cannot compare to the rabbis of the past, we endanger the success of the community, and risk its eventual disintegration, G-d forbid.

Practically speaking, we should accept the authority of the Torah teachers available to us, and learn as much as we possibly can from them. If we decide instead that they have little to offer us, and that our only hope is to go elsewhere and study under some other rabbi, we will lose out on valuable gains which are there for the taking.¹

There is another important factor to consider when we **make** ourselves a **teacher**. Our Sages cite the verse, “For the lips of the *Cohen* will safeguard knowledge and they will seek Torah from his mouth, for he is an angel of Hashem, the L-rd of Hosts’ (*Malachi* 2:7). If the rabbi is like an angel of G-d, they should seek Torah from his mouth. And if not, they should not seek Torah from his mouth” (*Moed Katan* 17a). Obviously, if a teacher is deficient in his level of learning, observance, or character, we should not learn from him, because he is not a good role model. His teaching will not be true Torah and he will mislead his students.

However, we may also understand this teaching as a reference to our perspective as students. Do we view the rabbi as angel – do we begin with the assumption that he is scholarly, pious, and refined, and as such, competent and qualified? Or are we eager to question and criticize, constantly on the lookout for faults and frailties? Are we latching on to trivial matters and elevating them to the status of fundamentals, much to our own detriment and the delight of the *yetzer hara*?

Faultfinding, and viewing the insignificant as essential, can cost us our chance to learn Torah from a good **teacher**. I am personally familiar with one such unfortunate instance. The son of a fine Torah scholar was accepted into an excellent *yeshivah*. His father had a little talk with him before he began his first term: “You are going to a very good *yeshivah*, but don’t forget – the wife of the *rosh yeshivah* there doesn’t cover her hair with a scarf. She wears a wig. A person who allows that cannot possibly be a good Torah teacher.”

When I heard this I told him, “Don’t you understand what you’ve done? You have destroyed your son! Wig or not, he is going to learn in this *yeshivah*, and every time

¹ See Insights into *Pirke Avot* 1:4 for a fuller discussion of this topic.



he hears a lecture, or even just one word of Torah, from the *rosh yeshivah*, he's going to think, 'But his wife wears a wig, so how can I learn from him?'"

Part of making **a teacher for yourself** is accepting his authority with due deference, as we explained earlier. Our Sages teach, "Let your fear of your teacher be like your fear of Heaven" (*Avot* 4:12). The student who is willing to humbly fold his teacher's garment will be the one to learn from him (*Baba Kama* 20b).² A teacher is not a friend, and we should not relate to him as such.

Teachers and Friends

Make a teacher for yourself, and acquire for yourself a friend.

We find a related concept in another teaching of our Sages. "Rabbi Hanina said, I learned much from my teachers, and from my friends, more than from my teachers, and from my students, more than from them all" (*Taanit* 7a). Yehoshua ben Perahiah said **make a teacher for yourself**, because a good teacher is a major factor in learning Torah. However, where a friend is concerned, he tells us to go out of our way to **acquire**, or more literally, actually **buy** him, if need be. The Bartenura writes, "even if you must acquire him at great cost and spend money on him."

We find this principle in the famous words of Honi HaMe'agel. When he realized that he no longer had any colleagues with whom he could learn, he said, "Either a study partner or death" (*Taanit* 23a). Apparently, a good friend (*haver*), and a good study partner (*havruta*), who helps us learn and grow in Torah, is even more important than a good teacher.

Why is this so?

We may have an excellent, scholarly teacher – so excellent and so scholarly, in fact, that at times, his level may be too advanced for us. We do not understand him, but are embarrassed to ask many, or any, questions. This is a serious problem and an impediment to our Torah study, because "the shy person does not learn" (*Avot* 2:5). Not every teacher is like Rav Preda, who repeated a lesson to a struggling student not once or twice or three times, but four hundred times (*Eruvin* 54b), and not every student is like the *Amora* who finally did grasp the material after a mere four hundred repetitions. A formal student-teacher relationship will always have its limits.

² See Insights into *Pirke Avot* 1:1 and 1:4 for a fuller discussion of this topic.



Learning with a *havruta* is different. We are on equal footing, and feel free to argue opinions and differences of opinion. Together we can question and answer, prove and disprove, investigate and explain, and in general, help one another along. The learning goes more easily and smoothly. Also, we have much more access to our study partner than we do to a teacher. The teacher gives his lecture, perhaps staying behind to answer a few questions, and we will only see him again the next day or the next week. Our *havruta* is, or can be, accessible nearly twenty-four hours a day; we can learn from him and with him at almost any time. A good *havruta* is a necessity, and we should do anything we can to **acquire** one, even if it involves some out-of-pocket expense.

Midrash Shmuel, citing Rabbi Yehudah Lirna, raises an interesting question. Rabbi Hanina tells us that for growth in Torah, a teacher is important, a friend even more important, and students most important of all. If we are to invest special effort in obtaining a friend because of the greater benefit to learning, would it not have been logical for Yehoshua ben Perahiah to have continued, “And above all, acquire students,” who bring us the greatest gains of all?

He points out that this is not really up to us. Students choose to study where they feel that *they* will derive maximum benefit. They are interested in their own progress in Torah, not in contributing to the growth of an aspiring teacher. There is no point in instructing us to “acquire students,” because they will go where they wish, not where we attempt to attract them.

In essence, the sequence mentioned by Rabbi Hanina describes the best way to acquire and transmit Torah. First we must learn the basics of the Tradition from a teacher. Our next step is to study it in depth with our colleagues, clarifying the various topics through shared discussion and analysis. Then we can pass on our knowledge to yet another generation of students.

Teachers in Print

The Hidda explains this *mishnah* somewhat differently (*Hasde Avot*). As we said, until the time of Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi the Oral Tradition was transmitted strictly by personal, verbal teaching, from teacher to student, generation after generation. Our Sages’ instructions to learn *girsā* (accurate reading of the text) from only one teacher in order to avoid confusion were vital; a student grappling with conflicting versions of an Oral Tradition received from different teachers would be totally lost. In light of the troubles of the times, Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi eventually took the unprecedented step of abrogating a principle of the Torah in order to maintain the Torah (*Tehillim* 119:126; see *Gittin* 60a). His redaction of the *Mishnah* was later followed by the preservation in writing of the more detailed discussions which



constitute the *Gemara*. A correct, accurate Talmudic text is now readily available to anyone with access to a printed set of Talmud who is willing to read and learn. The single, personal teacher is no longer the imperative it was when the Oral Tradition was in fact exclusively oral.

How, then, the Hidda writes, are we to fulfill our Sages' instructions to **make a teacher for yourself**? With books. We should have works of Torah which will be our teacher wherever we go, at any time of the day or night. Using books as our **teacher** we can learn with the towering Early Authorities – Rashi, Rabbenu Tam, the Rif and the Rambam – as well as with the Shach, the Mahaneh Efraim, Rabbi Hayyim Brisker, and other great Torah scholars of recent centuries. They do not go out of town during *yeshivah* intersession, they never tire, and never disconnect the phone. This is an excellent way to **make a teacher for yourself**.

The Hazon Ish strongly recommended that every Torah student learn a work entitled *Darche HaGemara* by Rabbi Yitzhak Kanpanton, one of the great Spanish Torah scholars prior to the Inquisition. Rabbi Yitzhak Kanpanton writes, "Man's wisdom only reaches as far as his books reach." We cannot know more than the books we have, and the more books we own, the more wisdom we can acquire. He writes that if one needs to refer to a book he does not own, and is forced to learn from borrowed books, we may say of him, "and your life is dangling before you" (*Devarim* 28:66). Torah is our life (*Devarim* 30:20). If the Torah we need is in a book we do not have, making us dependent on others, it is as if our very lives hang suspended before our eyes.

Books or Learning?

If we understand that **make a teacher for yourself** refers to works of Torah, as the Hidda teaches, it follows that we will be eager to assemble an extensive Torah library. In our times, this introduces us to a unique *yetzer hara*. A good book store today stocks a truly impressive number of books on any possible Torah-related topic. It is very tempting to dabble in this endless variety of minor sidelines rather than sticking to the basic fundamentals of Torah learning, namely *Gemara* with Rashi and *Tosfot*. The great Early Authorities were fluent in the entire Talmud, but who today even attempts such an undertaking? Instead, we are distracted by the plethora of easy, appealing compilations.

We find this idea in a story related about the Hazon Ish. One Shabbat, a man came rushing in to the Lederman *bet midrash* in Bnei Brak, where the Hazon Ish learned, with terrible news: the Hazon Ish's house was on fire. The Hazon Ish leaped up, *ran* to his house, and grabbed his manuscripts, leaving the rest of his possessions behind without a backward glance. He was asked, "How can you be so



calm? Everything you own, your entire library, may be going up in smoke, and you hardly even seem to care.”

The Hazon Ish explained. “In the last few years I’ve accumulated too many books, and they took away too much time from serious learning. All we really need is a set of Talmud – that’s enough.”

We may turn ourselves into “a donkey carrying books” (see *Hovat HaLevavot*, *Shaar Avodat Hashem*, Chapter 4). We can load a donkey down with volume upon volume of brilliant writings. It will carry them around with good grace, although without the slightest idea of the treasures contained between the books’ covers. We too can “carry around” a great assortment of books, confidently quoting random bits and pieces but not really comprehending their contents. In fact, we have no guarantee that even our choice quotations are especially accurate...

A story is told about Rabbi Elhanan Wasserman and Rabbi Yosef Shlomo Cahaneman, the Ponevizher Rav. They remembered that the *Mishnah Berurah* had quoted a certain work, and assumed that if the Hafetz Hayyim had cited the book, he must own it. They asked him about the book. He told them, “I once had it for a few minutes, looked through it, and quoted it. That’s all.” Reb Elhanan took the opportunity to take a quick glance at the Hafetz Hayyim’s library. It was minimal, consisting of perhaps a Talmud and a *Tur*. In those days, ownership of an entire set of Talmud was a rarity; who could aspire to such an expensive acquisition? A *Shulhan Aruch* was even more surprising. And yet, without the luxury of massive libraries, people learned.

There are different opinions on the question of where to concentrate our major efforts in learning. Some authorities, among them the Hazon Ish and Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, learned the works of the Early Authorities and perhaps one or two of the Later Authorities.

The Ben Ish Hai, on the other hand, differs, as we find in the Introduction to *Rav Pe’alim*, an extremely scholarly work of responsa. He writes that it is important to refer to the writings even of the Later Authorities, since in our generation, with our limited capacities, it is quite likely that an author has seen an opinion from an Early Authority that we have not encountered, or developed an insight that never occurred to us. We may agree with it and suggest additional proofs to bolster it. Even if we happen to disagree, the information nonetheless helps clarify our own understanding. In any case, we should not waste precious learning time on fruitless criticism of the opinions of Later Authorities with whom we disagree.



We need reference works to find answers to our questions and other necessary information, but not at the expense of learning *Gemara* and the writings of the Early Authorities. Owning too many books and not knowing how to use them can be problematic, as we may be diverted from our real goal of in-depth learning. In the computer era, with its database search programs, this problem has intensified a thousand-fold. Above all, we need the basics, the classics. We need *Mishnayot* and *Shas* and *Tur* and *Shulhan Aruch* and the Rambam. Then, if we wish to clarify a specific point, we may study and consult the many other halachic opinions. This is where we should invest our time and energy, rather than diffusing it by gleaning endlessly from a variety of books, without developing a thorough background of knowledge.

This essay contains divre Torah. Please treat it with proper respect.