

Rabbi Moshe Walter



Do You Have a Rav?

This summer I encountered a number of upsetting scenarios that got me thinking: A person who shouldn't have fasted did so anyway, and ended up in the emergency room. A child was denied admission to a yeshivah in Eretz Yisrael over an issue that could have been dealt with. An individual was summoned to beis din for reasons that could have been avoided. And a couple who waited too long to address a problem they were having ended up in a compromised situation.

But I also had several other encounters that I found inspiring and encouraging: A couple came to me with their teenage daughter to discuss a critical decision they were facing as the new school year approached. An individual going out of town for business was worried about a potential spiritual descent on his trip and called me to discuss the matter. Another person who rarely asks me *sh'eilos* called to discuss a serious issue that would have caused undue hardship and stress

had he not raised it.

If you haven't figured out yet where I'm going with this, I would like to talk about the importance of having a rav — something that too many people today sorely lack in their lives. If you think I'm making a self-serving endorsement for the rabbinate in the age of AI Rabbi, Rabbi Google, and Ask-the-Rabbi.com, then you may want to turn the page. However, if you are among the multitudes who want to have a rav, then this article is for you.

First, let us turn to *Pirkei Avos* to help us understand the importance of having a rav. The first chapter of *Avos* instructs us, not once, but twice, "*Aseh lecha rav* — acquire for yourself a rav" (1:6, 1:16). Why would this need to be repeated?

The repetition teaches us that there are two reasons that one must establish a rav for oneself. One, a rav serves as a halachic authority; as the Mishnah states explicitly, "*Aseh lecha rav v'histalek min hasafek*" — establish a rav for yourself so that you remove yourself from making halachic errors. Two, a rav serves as a teacher, guide, mentor, and life inspiration, as the Mishnah states, "*aseh lecha rav u'kneh lecha chaver*." One needs to acquire a friend who is a peer, to discuss and debate important and serious matters, but one also needs a rav as a guide and mentor, to lead from a place of experienced Torah knowledge and understanding.

LET US FIRST ADDRESS the need for a rav as a halachic authority. When a person has a halachic *sh'eilah*, a rav will be able to give a much more personally suitable answer if he knows the person asking. For example, one thing a rav must consider when giving a *psak halachah* is the *shoel's* level of observance and background — perhaps there are emotional or psychological disorders, or perhaps the *shoel* is experiencing financial difficulty.

When a person who is not trained to answer halachic questions decides to consult a halachic text on his own, he may very well emerge with a conclusion quite different from the response he

would have gotten had he asked a rav. In issuing a *psak halachah*, a rav is trained how to weigh and evaluate all the varying circumstances.

A young girl once came to Rav Tzvi Pesach Frank's home in the Jerusalem neighborhood of Geula to ask about the kashrus of an egg. Rav Frank first asked her where she lived. When she replied that her family lived in Shaarei Chesed, a neighborhood some distance away, Rav Frank immediately gave a lenient ruling, on the basis of financial loss.

The other rabbis present expressed surprise at this. How could a single egg be considered a financial loss?

Rav Frank responded, "If her family sent her here all the way from Shaarei Chesed to ask about the kashrus of an egg, it is indeed a financial difficulty, and I must rule leniently."

Rav Frank clearly had an uncanny grasp of "the fifth *chelek* of *Shulchan Aruch*," and he serves as a model for every rav. But the girl's family also showed wisdom in asking the *sh'eilah*. Their question, along with Rav Frank's answer, teaches the community the importance of asking such *sh'eilos*, as financial loss can be defined differently depending on who is asking.

The mistakes and errors that emerge from not asking questions could easily be avoided if every individual fulfilled the charge of the Mishnah: *Aseh lecha rav, v'histalek min hasafek* — establish for yourself a rav, and thereby "remove yourself from doubt." Just as it is crucial to have a doctor for one's physical health, choosing a halachic authority is crucial to one's spiritual well-being.

LET US NOW ADDRESS the second aspect of establishing for oneself a rav — the need for a teacher, guide, and mentor. Just as one would never make a business investment, go to court, or elect to have surgery without asking opinions of qualified professionals, the same is true for matters relating to one's home, children, and spiritual affairs. It would be irresponsible not to ask the advice of a rav who is well equipped and experienced in the gamut of issues that families regularly face.

Unfortunately, in the scenarios I laid out in the opening, no rav was consulted, so someone wound up in the ER, someone else went to beis din unnecessarily, a child didn't get into his yeshivah of choice, and a couple's delayed response to marital issues caused even greater strife and damage.

There is no reason to suffer silently with a *shalom bayis* issue or a *chinuch* struggle. The problem will ultimately be revealed regardless, and brushing it under the carpet will only make it harder and more challenging to solve. If a family has a problem with a child and their school, their rav can serve as their biggest advocate.

All this is especially true with regard to monetary matters. Never wait to discuss a financial issue with your rav; there are so many horror stories that they could fill pages and pages of this magazine. (See *Mishnah Berurah* 606:1 for a forceful illustration of this point.)

But there is a third element of making a rav for oneself — and maybe the most important. Allow me to introduce it with a story.

Nearly two decades ago, Rav Reuven Leuchter shared with me that his son in elementary



school was enamored of soccer and became quite a good player. His son was interested in playing the sport more seriously, which involved a significant time commitment and potentially harmful influences on the field. Rav Leuchter suggested that they go to consult with his rav, the famed mashgiach Rav Shlomo Wolbe. Rav Leuchter and his young son presented the issue to the mashgiach, who took it quite seriously.

Rav Wolbe's answer is a subject for another article. What is important for us to absorb here is the valuable lesson Rav Leuchter's son learned on Chazal's teaching of *aseh lecha rav*. Rav Leuchter taught his son how seriously he took his son's love for soccer by seeking direction on this question from their family's rav. We also learn from this story that *aseh lecha rav* is a responsibility that a father must teach and model for his children, even from a very young age.

His son's interest in a game was no "problem" of epic proportions; it was something that Rav Leuchter could have solved, and his son would have accepted it. Instead, he attained a much greater goal teaching the importance of *aseh lecha rav*. This story remains deeply ingrained in my mind years after Rav Leuchter shared it with me.

A FAMILY'S RAV SHEPHERDS, directs, and inspires them to follow a Torah compass in all areas of home, school, shul, and business. A rav is the family's arbiter and guide, who helps with their journey through life's joys, challenges, good times, and hard times. A rav is the one the family looks up to, and when they are contemplating an important decision, they ask, "What would the rav say?"

If you've read this far, I would hope you have not

found this to be self-serving. So allow me to make two final suggestions: a series of questions that you should ask yourself, and a series of questions that I know you are already asking me.

One, as we find ourselves approaching Chodesh Elul preparing for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, when we are introspective and looking for ways to improve our relationship with Hashem and accept upon ourselves behaviors to concretize these goals, consider the following. Ask yourself: Do you have a rav? Do you have a relationship with a rav? Do you bring serious spiritual, emotional, and halachic matters to your rav? Do your spouse and children know who your rav is? Is it important that your spouse and children have a relationship with a rav? Will you take it upon yourself this Elul to work on establishing for yourself a rav?

Two, you ask: Where is that rav? How do I find such a rav? How can I be sure that the rav is the right match for me? How do I know the rav will understand me? How do I know the rav will be sympathetic to my plight?

Those are excellent and important questions, and the Mishnah itself addresses them. "*Aseh lecha rav*" means it's up to you to find a rav and establish a connection with him. Nobody said it would be easy; it requires time, dedication, commitment, and patience. If you worked hard to find a true friend, a spouse, and a community, then you can do the same for a rav. Make sure that you have searched and pursued hard enough, make sure that you have tried asking questions and discussing challenging matters with a rav. If you have and you are still not feeling connected, keep on trying until you find one.

I have no doubt this may just be the most important and impactful *kabbalah* you ever make. ●

Rav Leuchter taught his son how seriously he took his son's love for soccer by seeking direction on this question from their family's rav

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