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Guidance

THE REBBE'S CALL TO HEED THE WORDS OF THE MISHNAH "ASEI LECHA RAV," AND APPOINT MASHPI'IM AND MASHPIOS

Bearer of Our Heritage

THE STORY OF REB REFOEL NACHMAN HAKOHEN ("FOLLEH") KAHN

Early Memories

AN INTERVIEW WITH RABBI NOCHUM KAPLAN

זייעקב הורד

בדרכי



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The concept of having a *rav*, *mashpia* and spiritual guide is a longstanding institution in Yiddishkeit, and especially the world of Chassidus, beginning from the times of the Alter Rebbe.

On two separate occasions, the Rebbe made a massive push for this to become common practice: In 5737,

the Rebbe reenacted the institution of *mashpi'im*, asking that eligible people in every city and shul should step up and lead their communities. Then, in 5746, he broadened the campaign under the term “*asei lecha rav*”: Whereas the previous campaign was directed at the *mashpi'im*, this time the Rebbe called for every

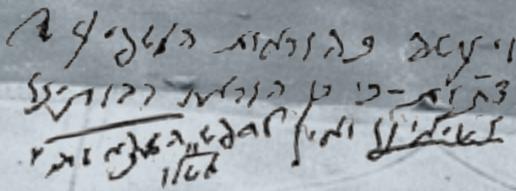
individual—men, women, and children—to appoint for themselves someone who they could confide with, be accountable to, and who could help resolve questions—for this would give them tremendous help in *avodas Hashem*. The Rebbe spoke about it many times throughout the year,

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GUIDANCE

The Rebbe's call to heed
the words of the Mishnah
"Asei Lecha Rav,"
and appoint
mashpi'im and mashpios.



explaining the *mitvza*, defining it, and beseeching everyone to fulfill it.

WHY IS IT SO IMPORTANT?

First and foremost, the Rebbe said, we are commanded in the first *perek* of Pirkei Avos, *asei lecha rav*, to appoint for ourselves a *rav*—and it is repeated twice, by two different *tanna'im*.

Thus, even if we wouldn't understand *why* it's important, we would still be obligated to do so without asking any questions. But it happens to be that *asei lecha rav* is one of the *mishpatim*—its importance is clearly understood, and if you think about it even briefly, you recognize how crucial it is,¹ as we will explore below.

THE ROLE OF A RAV:

As the Rebbe explained, there are several key roles that a *rav* fills:

1) **An unbiased view:** Everyone has areas in *avodas Hashem* where they can improve: we all have a *yetzer hara* who attempts to block our progress,² and there is always room to rise and grow in Yiddishkeit.³ The challenge is that people are not usually good self-evaluators, and we cannot depend on self-assessment. In order to get an honest assessment, we must appoint a *rav/mashpia* who is greater than ourselves, someone we will confide in, who will measure and test our progress in *avodas Hashem*, and whose guidance we will follow.⁴

2) **Accountability:** The Rebbe's campaign to appoint a *rav* came together with a push for tests for *yeshiva bochurim* with a similar goal. Just as tests should be used to motivate students, every person should go to their *rav/mashpia* to test and measure their progress from time to time. The very fact that one is accountable to someone else is a powerful motivator.

(At times, the Rebbe himself filled this role. In the earlier years, the Rebbe would sometimes instruct *bochurim* to send reports of their learning and *hafatza* to him on a regular basis—not expecting a reply, but so that they would feel accountable and motivated. Later on, there were times when the Rebbe wanted everyone to report to their *mashpi'im* for specific projects—and for the *mashpi'im* to report back to him (see below)).

3) **Resolving questions:** Due to the darkness of the world, one might be confronted with a situation in which he doesn't see Torah's light and guidance. Torah provides us the tool to resolve these questions, enabling us to continue doing our work: to ask a *rav*.

(In fact, in the landmark *sichos* of 5748, when the Rebbe gave the guidelines on how to make decisions

without his personal input, he said that questions in *avodas Hashem* should be resolved with the help of a *rav*, medical questions should be resolved by an expert doctor, and business decisions by understanding friends.)⁵

You can be confident with his advice: Being that you fulfilled the Torah's command to appoint a *rav* and chose this person *b'hashgacha pratis*, he will certainly resolve all your questions.⁶

Resolving your questions helps you be as stringent as you need to be—and also not to be *too* stringent: When one has a conundrum, it is not always correct to err on the side of caution, and resolving these questions with a *rav* helps chart the proper path.⁷

WHO IS IT FOR?

Every single person is enjoined in Pirkei Avos *asei lecha rav*—appoint for yourself a *rav*. This applies to *everyone*: Even a child needs a *rav* to help deal with his *yetzer hara* (sometimes even more so than adults). And the child will be willing to listen to a *rav* when he sees that his father, too, has a *rav*.⁸

In fact, even a *rav* needs a *rav*, for he, too, is biased about himself and needs an honest opinion.⁹ As the Rebbe said many times, the Mishnah uses the term *asei*, which implies that one must *force* themselves to do so. Even if it's not easy, even if one doesn't understand why they need a *rav*¹⁰—and even if one thinks that they cannot find anyone greater than themselves. Even if one is very methodical and wants to find the perfect candidate, don't wait around and have nothing to show; appoint a *rav* now, and if necessary it can be changed later.¹¹

(In one *sicha* the Rebbe says that if one cannot find anyone greater than himself, he should find someone lesser—the point is to have an unbiased perspective.¹² In another *sicha* the Rebbe says that if one was

THE CHASSAM SOFER NEEDED A RAV

Following the Rebbe's words on *asei lecha rav*, Rabbi Yossi Hecht wrote to the Rebbe that a certain passage of the Chassam Sofer might be of interest. He was asked about the unification of two shuls and what the congregants should do regarding differences in *nusach* and *minhagim*. The Chassam Sofer writes various possible proofs for the issue, but then he concludes, "I need to appoint myself a *rav* for this issue."¹⁵

The Rebbe replied:

יכניס זה לאחד הקובצים, ולכחב"ד.

You should put this into one of the *kovetz [ha'aros]*, and into the Kfar Chabad [magazine].¹⁶

In fact, even a rav needs a rav, for he, too, is biased about himself and needs an honest opinion.

commanded to get a *rav*—there is certainly someone out there who is greater than him...¹³)

In fact, it is even *more* important for a *rav* to have his own *rav*, since he is involved in *piskei dinim* that affect many people, and therefore he must have access to an unbiased view.¹⁴

WHAT SHOULD I BE TALKING ABOUT?

You should discuss all areas of *avodas Hashem*, both *sur meira* and *asei tov*¹⁷— including Torah-learning, your *tzedakah*, and even how you're serving Hashem in mundane matters.¹⁸

The Rebbe said that some people appoint themselves a *rav*—but the *yetzer hara* tries to convince them to be selective about which things they discuss. If they are confident that the *rav* will agree with them—they immediately consult with him. If they are unsure if he will agree—they cannot decide whether they should go to him today or push it off until "tomorrow." And in areas where they are *certain* that he will not agree with them, areas that are against their *geshmak*—then they really push it off: "Why put myself in hot water?"

The Rebbe said, "A great foundation of true moral conduct is to ask the *rav everything*. The priority should be to specifically discuss areas that you feel are not going well, or things you aren't sure about. This means even if you simply notice that someone else disapproves of your behavior... it is certainly *hashgacha pratis* [and you should speak it over with your *rav*]."¹⁹

Obviously, you will not threaten your *rav* that you will drop him if he doesn't give you the answer you're looking for... Once he gives you his opinion, you must follow it.²⁰ He should become your full fledged *rav*, so that your entire life is lived according to his guidance—not that you listen to him sometimes and to someone else at other times...²¹

WHICH QUESTIONS TO ASK

When it comes to resolving questions and doubts, the Rebbe cautioned that the *rav* should not become an easy fallback:

Someone might think that whenever he has a question or doubt (in Torah, *avodas Hashem*, or in his life), he can get away with simply asking a *rav* and placing the



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responsibility on him, thus avoiding working on it himself.

Hashem gave each person the power to find the solution to all his questions and doubts, through true toil, *yagaata u'matzasa*.

Today, the Rebbe said, after so much was accomplished in spreading Chassidus and Yiddishkeit, every one of us has been given the power to successfully be *mechaven* to the truth, especially through studying and toiling in the Rebbe's Torah and spreading Chassidus. The ultimate goal of a teacher is that his student's mind becomes like his—that our minds should decipher the Rebbe's *kavana*.

We are told to appoint a *rav* for ourselves—but that is only *after* we work on it ourselves. Once we've found all the answers that we can, we should not convince ourselves that we know the answer to everything, rather we should go to our *rav* for further



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guidance. (The Rebbe added that even the act of finding a *rav* and speaking to him is part of our *own avoda* and it is meant to develop and grow the mind of the *talmid*.)²²

WHOM SHOULD YOU CHOOSE?

Men should find a *rav*; women should find a *mashpiah*, and children should go to their parents, teachers, or *madrichim* (“counselors”).²³ *Bochurim* in yeshiva should go to their teachers, and if there are several *roshei yeshiva*, they can choose one.²⁴ (In a private answer to a *bochur*, however, the Rebbe said that he could choose someone from outside the *hanhala*. See sidebar.)

The Rebbe gave several specific pointers:

- You can choose whichever *rav* you want—similar to the fact that we are enjoined to study the areas of Torah that our hearts desire.²⁵

- A *rav/mashpia* should be someone who is greater than you, yet on *your* level. For example, if a child studying Chumash asks his questions to a prominent *rav*, he will be wasting both of their time—the *rav*’s time will be spent on answering a simple question, which could have been posed to someone else, and it will also waste the child’s time, because the *rav* has to figure out how to communicate the answer with a child. A child should be asking his *melamed*, his teacher, who is fluent in the child’s terminology and will have an immediate answer.²⁶
- As a person grows, he may graduate (or even surpass) his current *rav*, and it will be time to find someone else.²⁷
- As a general rule, the *rav* should be someone who truly has the traits that

personify Yidden: *Baishanim*, *rachmanim*, and *gomlei chassadim*—he should be bashful, merciful, and one who does kind deeds.²⁸

CHOOSING A RAV / MASHPIA:

The following is a series of *maanos* from the Rebbe about who should be selected as a *rav*:

Someone wrote to the Rebbe that he was taking the Rebbe as his *mashpia*. He received the following answer:

הצעה לעשות זאת היתה שיהיו בחינות בפועל, ומה היא השייכות להנ"ל?!

The proposal [of *aei lecha rav*] was so that there would be actual tests—so how does this relate to that [your choosing me]?

Rabbi Shaul Moshe Elituv asked the Rebbe whether *bochurim* should appoint a *rav* for themselves, and if so, whether they can choose someone from outside the yeshiva



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HISTORICAL POINTERS IN THE CAMPAIGN FOR MASHPI'IM/ASEI LECHA RAV

As mentioned, there were two different campaigns for *mashpi'im/asei lecha rav*, in 5737 and in 5746-5747 (and a bit later).

The 5737 campaign for *mashpi'im*: In the farbrengen of 19 Kislev 5737, the Rebbe announced that the time had come to reinstate a fundamental institution of Lubavitch: the concept of *mashpi'im*. Since the times of the Alter Rebbe, every community and town was led by a *mashpia* who taught Chassidus, guided people in *avodas Hashem*, and whom people confided in. (This continued until the times of the Rebbe Rashab and the upheaval of the World Wars.)

The Rebbe was now asking for people to step up to lead their respective communities. Anyone who felt that he could be *mashpia* in an area of Yiddishkeit, whether in Torah, *avoda*, or *gemilus chassadim*, should come forward and do so now.

People shouldn't attempt false humility, the Rebbe said. If you *might* be able to provide leadership in any of these three areas, you should begin doing so immediately. (There was no commitment; after an initial trial period it would become clear who was more qualified than others).³²

In the farbrengen on Shabbos Mevarchim Shevat, the Rebbe asked that all the *mashpi'im* and *mashpios* should send in their names before Yud Shevat. On Yud Shevat itself, he gave a lengthy, fascinating *sicha* on the name "*mashpia*" and the unique role that the position entails. The following month, the Rebbe signed and distributed special-edition copies of *Kuntres Ahavas Yisroel* to all the *mashpi'im* and *mashpios* because, as the Rebbe explained, leadership and influence are successful when permeated with *ahavas Yisroel*.³³

The 5746 *asei lecha rav* campaign: While the previous campaign focused on the *mashpi'im* volunteering to lead their communities, this was focused on individuals: Every person must take upon himself a *rav*.

It began at the farbrengen of Devorim 5746: After speaking about the importance of increasing Torah-learning and tzedakah, the Rebbe said that *bochurim* should begin having tests on their studies in order to motivate their learning. The Rebbe then said that the general idea of getting "tested" applies to people who aren't in the yeshiva system too; every person should have a *rav* whom they are tested by and are accountable to. After outlining the guidelines of what having a *rav*

entails, the Rebbe said that this campaign was directed at every single person.

"This is my *bakasha nafshis*—and even more than that, but I have no better expression—that these words should be publicized everywhere: *Every single person*, men, women, and children, should fulfill the directive of the Mishnah "*asei lecha rav*" and be tested by the *mashpia* from time to time regarding their level in *avodas Hashem*.

This will certainly cause every single person to increase their *avodas Hashem* with ever more light. This should be publicized either in my name or not, however it will be better accepted."³⁴

The Rebbe said that this was extremely urgent—*mahir dachuf*—and should be publicized in that manner, even if it incurred additional costs. (The Rebbe added that he doesn't expect people to run to the airport and take the fastest planes around the world to relay this message—it must be in line with *tikkun* (i.e. down to earth), but it should be done as fast as logically possible.)³⁵

The Rebbe also added: "In order to deal with the *yetzer hara*, there needs to be a warning in addition to the promise of reward. I am therefore giving a warning: When someone writes a *tzetel* with a question, it is possible that I will ask (before or after I give the answer) whom he has chosen as a *rav*!"³⁶

In following farbrengens, the Rebbe discussed the campaign at length, and in a *sicha* on Sukkos, he remarked, "There is much more to say—and I probably won't be able to hold myself back from speaking about this over and over again."³⁷

Throughout the year, as he was encouraging the widespread adoption of having a *rav*, the Rebbe bemoaned the fact that *machlokes* and terrible problems could have been avoided if only people would take this seriously and follow the advice and authority of an unbiased *rav*. (When speaking about the fact that even *rabbonim* need a *rav*, the Rebbe mentioned that even the Vilna Gaon had a "*mussar zugger*" who would speak to him from time to time.)³⁸

The Rebbe also emphasized that the term used in the Mishnah to "appoint" a *rav* is "עשה לך"—implying that sometimes it must be done forcefully. However, after a while a person will come to understand and appreciate the benefits of having a *rav*, an unbiased and objective party who can mentor and guide his *avodas Hashem*. Then he will fulfill the instruction of the Mishnah not by force—but willingly and with joy.³⁹



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“When someone writes a tzetel with a question, it is possible that I will ask (before or after I give the answer) whom he has chosen as a rav!”

administration. The Rebbe (through circling and crossing out) answered yes to both questions.²⁹

A *bochur* wrote to the Rebbe about his *chayus* in learning and about the general atmosphere of the yeshiva in 770, and the Rebbe told him to consult with his *mashpia*. In response, the *bochur* wrote that there aren't any *mashpi'im* today, that they are disinterested and aloof. He received the following answer:

כשדור דעה לא רצו בקב"ע דמשיפע,
הסבירו זה וכו' בנוגע למרע"ה, ואין פלא
 שמשביר זה בנוגע לדורנו. ויכריח עצמו לקבל
 עול המשיפע דתו"ת ולקיים הוראותיו בפנ"מ
 ויבש"ט

The [Yidden in the *midbar*, the] “most knowledgeable generation,” also didn't want to accept the yoke of a *mashpia*, and they managed to *explain* why Moshe Rabbeinu [was unfit]. So it is no surprise that you have explanations regarding our generation. You must *force* yourself to accept the yoke of the *mashpia* of Tomchei Temimm, and *actually fulfill*³⁰ his directives, and *you will share good news*.³¹ T

1. Toras Menachem 5747 vol. 1 p. 207; 212.
2. Toras Menachem 5747 vol. 3 p. 61.
3. Toras Menachem 5747 vol. 2 p. 425.
4. Likkutei Sichos vol. 29 p. 247; Toras Menachem 5747 vol. 1 p. 208.
5. See Sefer Hasichos 5748 vol. 1 p. 240.
6. Toras Menachem 5747 vol. 2 p. 410.
7. Toras Menachem 5747 vol. 3 p. 204.
8. Toras Menachem 5747 vol. 3 p. 61.
9. Toras Menachem 5747 vol. 1 p. 208.
10. Ibid.
11. Toras Menachem 5746 vol. 4 p. 183.
- 12.
13. Toras Menachem 5747 vol. 1 p. 209
14. Ibid.
15. Shu"t Chassam Sofer Choshen Mishpat

- Hashmatos, Teshuva 188.
16. Likkut Maanos 5747 p. 89.
 17. Toras Menachem 5747 vol. 1 p. 208.
 18. Likkutei Sichos vol. 29 p. 247-248.
 19. Toras Menachem 5747 vol. 1 p. 212
 20. Toras Menachem 5746 vol. 4 p. 183
 21. Sefer Hasichos 5747 Shabbos Pinchas p. 27.
 22. Sefer Hasichos 5748 vol. 1 p. 240; Sefer Hasichos 5749 vol. 1 p. 208.
 23. Sefer Hasichos 5747 vol. 1 p. 246.
 24. Toras Menachem 5747 vol. 2 p. 245.
 25. Toras Menachem 5747 vol. 2 p. 245
 26. Sefer Hasichos 5749 vol. 1 p. 208.
 27. Toras Menachem 5746 vol. 4 p. 183
 28. Toras Menachem 5747 vol. 3 p. 62.
 29. Likkut Maanos 5747 p. 25
 30. This is a double underline.
 31. This is a double underline.
 32. Sichos Kodesh 5737 vol. 1, p. 346-349.
 33. Introduction to *kuntres Ahavas Yisroel*, from the *sicha* of Erev Shabbos Hachodesh.
 34. Likkutei Sichos vol. 29 p. 248.
 35. Sichos Kodesh Shabbos Devorim 5746 p. 18.
 36. Sichos Kodesh Shabbos Devorim 5746 p. 19.
 37. Toras Menachem 5747 vol. 1 p. 212.
 38. See Toras Menachem 5747 vol. 2 p. 339
 39. 15 Menachem-Av 5747.