

Three Rabbis
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I often say I have three rabbis. I have a rabbi I go to for halakhik questions. If I don't know what a specific law is or how a law ought to be applied, I call my Talmud professor from rabbinical school, Rabbi Joel Roth. He is an extremely clear minded, thoughtful and passionate, person. His writing is brilliant and he is able to unpack an issue like no one I have ever seen. He is widely published and held in high regard by nearly everyone in our movement. His book, "The Halakhik Process, A Systemic Approach," is required reading for every rabbinical school student. So when I have a legal issue, he's the first and usually the last call I make.

Also, I have a rabbi I go to for administrative questions. If I don't know how to set up a process for hiring or evaluating a staff member, I call Rabbi Vernon Kurtz. Rabbi Kurtz is the senior rabbi where I had my first job as an assistant rabbi. He is a master mega shul rabbi. Every time I have had to create a process to establish a policy, I have called him. I watched his every move for the five years I worked with him. I watched him move mountains and create vision for a large community and now, when I hit bumps in the road, or even if I see one coming, I call him.

Finally, I have a rabbi I go to for counseling issues. My father is the most empathetic advisor a person could want. If I'm stuck in a counseling situation and don't know how to advise someone, I call my father. He helps me explore the varied possible avenues for growth. Whether it is with life cycle, career or family issues, my father Rabbi Israel Stein, seems to have seen it all and I know the recommendations are going to be right on target.

The only problem I have is knowing what kind of problem it is – sometimes what presents itself as a halakhik question is really a personal counseling issue. Sometimes what seems to be about counseling is really a wider policy issue. However, in time and with my three mentors, I can always figure it out. What is even more important than anything they've ever said, is the inspiration they've been. They have each shown me the incredible potential I have within me. They each set the bar incredibly high and then demand that I reach and surpass their marker. So I am working on it.

The lesson is simple.

We are envious of acquaintances, we are happy for friends. Let me tell you what I mean – mentors inspire us to think better. If you are the smartest person in your circle of friends, you need to expand your circle of friends. If someone who happens to know, though has no real connection to you, tells you of the fantastic deal they have made or the unbelievable stroke of fortune that has come their way, if you are not close to that person, you might have a jealous reaction. If, however, a dear friend tells you of something wonderful that has occurred to them, you're more likely to feel the pride or joy they're feeling.

Surround yourself with people who are going to inspire you and raise you up. The Torah tells us how. Last week we read a phrase that seemed bizarre when taken out of context. Chapter 31: verse two reads, “I am now 120 years old, I can no longer be active.” Moreover, the Torah has said to me, “You shall not go across Jordan.” Once again in this sentence, Moses reminds the Jewish people that he has face-to-face communication with God. At this moment, Moses appears to be showing off. “Look how old I am and I still carry on a conversation with God, the likes of which, the level of which, the depth of which you will never know.” Moses says, “*V'adonai amar elai*,” God is talking to me, not you. Which prompts R.G. Moulton in the *Modern Readers Bible* (1896) to comment that this expression by Moses is “a pathetic break with his nobility.” Moulton suggests that this approach is beneath Moses. We get it, you talk to God and God talks to you. You don't have to show off. You don't have to rub it in our face--but Moulton got it wrong. Moses wasn't showing off, Moses was raising the bar.

The real difference is not Moses, but the reader. What appears to be showing off to one person, is a challenge to another. To one reader, Moses is pleading with the Jewish people to finally recognize the contribution he has made, while encouraging them to seek that same connection. To another, this is just a pitiful grab for attention. For me, Moses is an inspiration. He is real and he has flaws, but when he gets it right he is inspiring. Many of Moses' achievements are unattainable, but many of them are within reach. When Moses says, “*Lo ba'shamayim he*,”-- the law and the life of Judaism isn't in heaven, it isn't beyond the sea. He is telling us that we can have it if we so desire, all we have to do is envelop ourselves with the right people and it will rub off.

As Moses is dying, he's instructed by God to appoint Joshua as leader. The phrase he uses is “*V'natatah Me'hodecha eilav*, he invested him with some of his authority.” Moses gave some of himself to Joshua. He just rubbed off on him. Moses wasn't diminished, he just elevated Joshua. We too must do the same for

each other. We must find ways to raise up our friends and we must find friends who push us to greatness. We have to pick people to be part of our lives that are the best at what they do so they can help us become the best at what we do. We have to stay away from people who are small minded and petty. We must encircle ourselves with visionary, insightful people and then we have a chance at being visionary and insightful.

If we want to become respectful, positive, giving and a person of integrity, then we must enfold ourselves with respectful, positive, giving people, people with integrity, because these qualities will be sure to rub off on us. That is why our morning liturgy pleads with God to protect us from evil neighbors, from a “*shochein rah*,” because worse than anything they can do to us is the fact that they can rub off on us. They make us like them and there isn’t enough room in our lives for everyone. Our inner circle has to be of the finest people. That is why we send our kids to Perelman and Akiba. There we have found the highest quality of people – we like who our kids come home from school with. We like the example and motivation they manifest. You can’t pick your family but you can pick your friends and, as parents, we try our hardest to pick our children’s friends as well. Because choosing the wrong friends will spoil your destiny.

I reiterate, mostly for my children and the many adults I meet, who often struggle with issues of popularity. It isn’t the quantity of friends, it’s the quality. Proverbs 27:17 *barzel b’barzel yachad, v’ish yachad p’nai rei’eihu*, as iron sharpens iron; so one man sharpens another. Not only are we made in God’s image, we see ourselves in others as well.

You know as well as I do that we surround ourselves with people that we think are like us. Birds of a feather flock together. That is what we are all doing here today. You came to the synagogue because you know you’ll find people who also find value in faith. This is true of almost every arena in life--like people find each other. Faith, joy and hope is contagious. If that is what you want, then today is a day of decisions. You have to choose. There may be moments of loneliness but I promise you won’t be lonely.

This summer has been a summer of great strides forward in my career. Many of the things that will happen over the next year are, for me, crowning achievements. I have shared those accomplishments with my friends and my mentors, and they have rightfully taken responsibility for them as well. They have not been snide or jealous, they have not been envious or annoyed with my bragging. They have been genuinely proud. I suppose the Yiddish is better, they “shepped nachas.”

This is our season of New Year's resolutions. It's the time of year we, in the Jewish community, decide what we're going to resolve to do this year. Therefore, I would like to suggest a New Year's resolution. Get new friends – just kidding. What I really mean is decide if the friends you have are one's that encourage and support you or are they friends that bring you down. This is the season of judgment. You must decide if the people that surround you are the caliber of people you would like to surround you. Are the people you choose as company taking room from the people you should be surrounding yourself with? Are there people you are remaining friends with because you are afraid of being alone or are they people that inspire you. Are your friends people who bring you down in their negativity or are they people who raise you up with the example they set in their lives?