



IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF OUR FATHER'S

Pirkei Avos – Perek 1 Mishna 6

WALKING WITH WISDOM

Harav Y. Reuven Rubin Shlita

Some of the most wondrous stories I ever heard were told whilst strolling with my Rebbes. There was a time when one walked with his teachers, and spoke of things that seemed beyond the realm of a classroom. There is something about the fresh air, the leisurely pace that allows for deeper thoughts to come forth. No matter how much you can gain in a classroom, or even in a beis medrash, there are certain things that can be better understood whilst walking under Hashem's sky. In our urbanised, stressed-out society it isn't always possible to take walks with our teachers, and to me this seems a great loss.

In Poland before the war, it was considered the rigour to walk from one village to the next. Chassidim would often take to the roads as groups, where they would walk to their Rebbe in some far-off place. These long shpatzeers would always include an elder chassid, a teacher, who would speak of times long past. I remember hearing of such long walks; one in particular was told to me by an older Gerrer chassid from Warsaw. He told how when the Rebbe, zy" a, would be in Atvosk to refresh his much depleted kochos, the entire surrounding forest would become filled with Chassidim. He described how on a frosty early morning he joined a group of young men and set out on a three-hour hike to join the Rebbe for davening. The group was led by an elderly Yiddel who had been in Kotzk as a youngster. The stories that Jew told, the memories he described, were



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the stuff of heavenly sustenance. Even decades later those reminiscences had the ability to give a new generation, one far from those ancient places, the thrill of what it meant to be a true Yid.

We lived in an area that had a lot of countryside, and so, I introduced a new activity into the schedule of my kehilla. Once a month we all got together for a walk through the forest. I can't pretend that the entire kehilla attended, but there was a hardy group of regulars who came along to "Ramble with the Rav." I see this as an act of kiruv, and most importantly, an opportunity to learn from my community. There are things that need saying, thoughts that weigh down one's soul and while walking through the green fields they can be allowed to find airing. Such times allow for speaking what otherwise may never have been said. As one put into a position as teacher, I found this opportunity immeasurably worthwhile. My walking partners became not only congregants but spiritual friends as well. This may sound a bit far-fetched, and perhaps it is, however, the bond attained through those walks was felt by all.

Let us learn this mishna, and perhaps I will be able to prove my theory.

"Yehoshua Ben Perachya says: Provide yourself with a teacher, acquire for yourself a companion, and judge all men meritoriously."

The Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rav Yosef Yitzchak, zy" a, tells us, "Learning exclusively from books is insufficient; to improve one's character and serve Hashem fully, one must also secure a teacher. Thus, concerning the war against Amalek, Hashem commanded Moshe, the teacher of all Israel: 'Record this as a remembrance in a book, and place it in the ears of Yehoshua ...'"

Today there are more sefarim being published than ever before in our history; yet, can we truly say that ours is the most spiritual of generations? What may be missing is the connection needed between the written word and the spiritual intent they represent. A teacher can build the bridge between these two aspects, but only when he is able to be a full partner in our lives.

The Slonimer Rebbe once explained this with a parable: A man once heard that a particular pharmacy carried medicines for all the maladies in the world. So he thought to himself, Why should I consult doctors? If I take all the medicines, they will cure whatever ails me. This man did not realize that he was endangering himself, for many medicines heal one part of the body but damage another. Only an expert physician, who understands both a sick man's condition and the capabilities of different medicines, can restore his patient's health.

This is true with our souls as well. There are so many ways to serve Hashem, and it is often difficult to discern which path is best suited for our individuality. We are not meant to be coming out of some celestial cookie cutter, we each have different needs.

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A Rebbe knows how to guide us; however, we must be ready to learn. There are so many ways that we can be trained, and for many the unstructured fashion of a walk is a powerful tool.

The mishna tells us, “Judge all people favourably.” The Sfas Emes points out that literally the mishna says to judge “all the person” favorably. Even if someone does something improper, says the Rebbe, look at the totality of the person. Surely his good deeds and virtues outweigh his misconduct.

Now you may ask what all this has to do with a walk in the forest with your Rebbe and friends? Well, to this small Yid it seems that there is no better way to break down the barriers that may stand between ourselves and those who care about us. Walking together allows the flow of thought to go in directions that may not always be available in the ordered confines of a classroom.

However, the Sfas Emes adds yet another dynamic to all this, and his holy words clarify this matter even more. He tells us that the phrase “provide a teacher for yourself” may refer to our environment. Let the environment, your surroundings, be your teacher. Everything in the material world carries a message. We walk in this world and seldom stop to realize how much this world offers. We are so busy, so rushed, that the lessons are there but we cannot focus on them. If we gather with the two groups that are most important to our spiritual growth, our teachers and our friends, then we can hear those messages and allow them to percolate within us.

The Lev Simcha speaks of this in his special unique way. “We need both, for whilst a Rebbe can encourage one to fear Hashem, only a trusted friend can lead one to love Hashem. You can deduce this from the passage in the Torah, ‘You shall love your friend as yourself.’ This may be interpreted that through your relationship with your friends, you will love Hashem. On the other hand, when describing the respect due to Torah scholars, the passage in Va’eschanan tells us, ‘Fear Hashem your G-d.’ The Gemara interprets this as referring to the respect accorded to Torah scholars. This implies that by associating with Torah teachers you will learn to fear Hashem.”

And so we see that a fully rounded educational experience is comprised of a Rebbe and good friends, and what can be more suitable to such a merger than a nice walk in the fields?