



## AIMING STRAIGHT

*Pirkei Avos Perek 2 Mishan 11*  
Harav Y. Reuven Rubin Shlita

It seems there was no reason, so natural was it, yet I now realise that it was nothing of the sort. Every great teacher has the knack, and it is so easy, but it takes huge effort to make it happen. Bonding with students is no simple task, because each human soul carries its own needs and strengths. There may be great lecturers who can speak of lofty ideals and express huge theories, but that doesn't make them teachers, at least not in the fullest sense. The true teacher is able to convey ideals and drive them into the very core of his students. He has the ability to allow his students to accept his words, develop them in their own way, and bring them into their reality. Such Rebbes are not just charismatic; that's not their true strength. Rather, they are able to humble themselves to the realities of those in their charge and with them create a glow of change.

When I was young, I had the merit to see this first hand, and I realise now how wondrous my Rebbes were. We were the talmidim of the first generation after the Holocaust, and every student came to school with his own pekela. Many were children of survivors, and the dark shadows of those horrendous events sometimes swept through their homes. There were others who came from totally uncommitted families, and somehow, they made their way to the Yeshiva with no true family support. Yes, everyone came with their own package and their teachers had to make their lives whole.

Our Mishna tells us that Rabban Yochanan ben Zakai had five disciples. "He used to enumerate their praises..." This is a fascinating thought, the Rabbi praising aloud his students. Usually, we would think such praise could cause difficulties. Firstly, it could bring them to becoming vain; secondly, what would the many other students feel. Yet here we have this Giant of the Spirit singing their praises aloud. The Radomska

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Rebbe ztl explains that, indeed, the Rabbi had many students, but these particular five were extremely humble and self-effacing. He knew that they needed extra assurance and therefore he lifted them up with his words.

Our Rebbes had to do the same. They had to reach into our hearts and give us what we so needed.

I remember the Bobover Rebbe Ztl, whose Yohrziet falls on Rosh Chodesh Av, working this sort of spiritual magic on a daily basis. As an example, I recall that there were two young students who were from very secular homes. They had no familial connections and could have easily been lost. Once at a gathering the Rebbe called one of them over, gave him an extra portion of food and looking to those sitting around him said, "He has a soul that is connected to mine in Shomayim, we have one spiritual root." Imagine how that young man felt, he had no one in the yeshiva who knew of his background, his battles or his needs. Yet here was a leader of the generation telling everyone that they share a soul. The other boy was given such care as well. The Rav would often say: "That young man, he is a true tachshit, a precious jewel." The Rebbe would often entrust both of these neshomahs with important tasks that needed reliability. In the realm of spirituality, a teacher is a healer, and as such he must pick up what each "patient" needs. Today we have witnessed a healthy growth in many of our Torah citadels; however, the real success will not be in the numbers but in the ability to touch each student. There are many who can just shuffle through without particular attention, but in truth they haven't come through, they just haven't been seen as making trouble. These youngsters may be blessed with special understanding at home or from others around them, but is that all that we want?

The youth who have become disenfranchised are a weeping sore in all our hearts; perhaps they need teachers who are able to speak those few words that make the difference. Recently I read of a study concerning "at risk" students. Often these young people will say that their break with the Torah community was triggered by a dismissive or disrespectful comment from a teacher. Rabbi David Pelcovitz tells of a student whose Rebbe commented on a small suede yarmulke he was wearing. "If you're going to wear a yarmulke like that you might as well go to McDonalds and eat a cheeseburger," he told him. The boy's response was to remove his yarmulke and proceed to McDonalds to enjoy that cheeseburger! While the student's response clearly shows that he was struggling for a while and the Rebbe's comment was not the sole cause for his rejection of Torah life; had the Rebbe made a welcoming and somehow embracing comment rather than distancing and repelling one, the student may have been drawn back.

Obviously not everything is attributable to our Rebbes; in fact, we are all Rebbes to our young.

There is a Kotzker vort that is germane to this subject. He notes that in Tehilim chapter 127 we read, "Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are sons..." The Rebbe makes a link between childrearing and an archer. He suggests that just as with an archer, the closer he draws the bow to his heart the further and straighter the arrow flies; so too with raising children: the closer we hold them to our heart, the further and straighter they go.

Let us extol our young, give them strength, and encourage them to follow a trajectory that is both straight and true.

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