

The Real McCoy

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“The people said to Aharon, ‘Make us a god who will lead us because this man Moses, who took us up from Egypt – we don’t know what happened to him’” (Exodus 32:1).

I’m often asked about the importance of having a rebbe. I’m also asked, what *is* a rebbe? What does it mean to have one? How does one go about finding a rebbe, and how does one know when he’s found *his* rebbe? (I’m asked a lot of questions!) Let’s try to begin answering these questions, but please remember this is only a beginning. The subject is a profound one, touching as it does (a) on the heart of one’s life and destiny, and (b) on the entire premise of the existence of the Jewish people. (Important note: In Breslov literature, the words *rebbe* and *tzaddik* are often synonymous.)

What is a rebbe? A rebbe functions as a teacher, guide, mentor, counselor, and more. Previously, we discussed what it means to have and be attached to a rebbe. One looks for a rebbe by doing any or all of the following (if possible): reading or listening to a “candidate’s” teachings, observing his behavior and that of his most advanced* chassidim/students/followers, speaking with him, and praying a lot to God that you find one! You know you’ve found your rebbe – or, at least, a temporary rebbe – when your connection with him causes an inner shift that moves you to any or all of the

following: stronger Jewish faith, a greater and more honest desire to behave Jewishly, study Torah, *daven* (pray) well, and be more charitable and do more kindness.

The importance of having a rebbe cannot be overstated. Although we Jews have had *emunat chakhamim* (faith in Jewish sages) from at least as early as when we were still slaves in Egypt, before Moshe Rabbeinu arrived there on his mission to take us out, one of the primary tenets of *chassidut* is that each person, not only a community, needs a rebbe. Just as we never would have been freed from the bondage of Egypt without Moshe Rabbeinu, none of us can be freed from his personal bondage without a rebbe.

Reb Noson puts it this way:

“One who hasn’t yet found his rebbe needs to crawl on his hands and knees his entire life, from one end of the earth to the other, to seek and hunt for him with all his strength, so that maybe, maybe, a day or an hour before he dies, he will discover the teacher who will help him find eternal life.”

Ah, you’re saying to yourself. I’m one of the lucky ones. I already found the tzaddik/rebbe. I know who he is. Reb Noson continues:

“If you imagine that you’ve already found your rebbe, you have to search much, much more. Because even if you’re sitting right next to your rebbe, you may not be getting all you can from him. You might not fully appreciate the richness of the truth of his advice. Because of that, you are still far from your *tikkun* (rectification).”

Sometimes I wonder why the Israelites were so culpable for having made the Golden Calf when they thought Moses had died. It was the first time a rebbe had died! Their error was three-fold. First, they should have realized that even if Moshe’s body died, his *da’at* (knowledge of God) did not. It was still accessible. Second, they should have realized that they were

still so lacking in that *da'at* that they needed to cry out to God, "I've strayed, like a lost sheep. Seek Your servant!" (Psalms 119:176). Third, they slacked off in their pursuit of Moshe's *da'at*. Instead of seeking out the closest of Moshe's students who had that *da'at*, they took the easy way out: They gave up, saying, "Moshe is dead. There's no more hope of growth."

Giving up hope, Rebbe Nachman says, is the worst of all. It is spiritual suicide, draining *da'at* from the *neshamah* (soul). Giving up also implies that the tzaddik's teachings are, God forbid, ineffective or untrue. Finally, giving up says that God's compassion is limited: "He cannot help me or take me back."

If Purim teaches us nothing else, it teaches that when we follow a tzaddik like Mordekhai, no situation is hopeless, and no effort to better Jewishness is unrewarded. Remember that next time your "Moshe Rabbeinu" disappears on you, and you won't make a "Golden Calf."

*The least advanced are often crude in thinking and/or behavior because they have not sufficiently absorbed their rebbe's lessons.

a gutn Shabbos!

Shabbat Shalom!

Based on *Likutey Halakhot, Shluchin 5*