

## IF THEY CALL YOU REBBE...

### PRECIS

It is safe to say that attempts to define the balance between charisma and inspired teaching in Judaism on the one hand in relation to the teachings which the teacher imparts on the other, fits the definition of an honest controversy. This is what the Mishnah calls a *machloket l-shaym shamayim* / controversy for the sake of heaven. A primary sign of such an honest difference is that it is continually revisited and refined, rather than resolved. Both those who believe in the greater significance of the teaching over the teacher as well as those who favour the indispensable need for a living teacher to impart the teaching, have much in common with one another. All share the pain of confronting the reality of abuses of power that occur within the larger worlds in which Torah is taught and, indeed, in the whole world of spiritual practice.

### FRAMING THE ISSUES

Recent events have illumined the need for an open discussion of the role of the rabbinic leader. The accusations of abuses of power currently directed at Mordechai Gafni surface challenges to Jewish renewal's focus on the teacher and in preventing such abuses from taking place. This is a legitimate challenge for us to undertake and I wish, with the clarity of hindsight, that we had been able to address this issue some time ago. This essay seeks to begin this process now by placing the issue within the framework of Jewish tradition and in the context of Reb Zalman's thinking. It is the author's hope that it will serve the purpose of helping to reframe the issues and stimulate conversation and awareness.

How do we make the distinction between an authentic teacher of Torah for our time and one who is using Torah for self-serving purposes? What is it that makes the teacher so important? These questions need to be answered from two perspectives, from that of the teacher and from that of the student.

Reb Zalman spoke from the perspective of the teacher as follows in a class on leadership:<sup>1</sup> “[T]here are abuses that come with hierarchy. What's the alternative? The alternative is everybody is equal; [but] if everybody is equal, [then] there is no flow. There is stagnation. One of the things that Alan Watts used to call the Tao was the water courseway, how the water flows: *min makom gavo'ah l-makom namuch*, it flows downward. Now if you understand how this goes, there has to be a certain amount of that.”

Mimi Feigelson spoke from the perspective of the *talmid* / student in her presentation called “Am I My Rebbe's Keeper? Hasidic Models of the Rav/Talmid Relationship and Their Leadership and Ethical Implications:”<sup>2</sup> “Why talk about *Rav/Talmid*? Because I think that spiritual development and evolvment cannot happen outside of a relationship of *rav/talmid*. It cannot grow alone and on some levels we are our own teachers and on some levels we're our best teachers and on some levels we're really not....How did I know that God loved me? Because I had a teacher from the age of sixteen.”

The emphasis placed on the need for a living teacher and the importance of the relationship

<sup>1</sup> Given at Elat Chayyim (EC) in 1996.

<sup>2</sup> “Awakening, Yearning & Renewal: A Conference on the Hasidic Roots of Contemporary Jewish Spiritual Expression” sponsored by The Spirituality Institute (held in New York, 26-28 March, 2003).

between teacher and student can lead to abuses. This is the subject of an ongoing discussion in the rabbinic tradition. This discussion uses the speech impediment which the Torah attributes to Moses, the ultimate example of prophet and teacher, as its metaphor: “Moshe said to YHWH: Please, my Lord, no man of words am I, not from yesterday, not from the day-before, not (even) since you have spoken to your servant, for heavy of mouth and heavy of tongue am I! (Ex. 4:10)”<sup>3</sup>

The Talmud, on the other hand, lays out the following conditions for being a prophet: “Rabbi Yochanan said, The Holy Blessed One only allows the Shechinah to rest in someone who is strong, rich, wise, and humble. And we learn about all of these qualities from Moshe” (N’darim 38a). This teaching implies that the prophet must be physically appealing in order that his words be acceptable and, if so, how could it be that God would have chosen for Moshe to have had such a noticeable “flaw?” Indeed, Maimonides (as cited by Adin Steinsaltz in his note on this text), spiritualizes these attributes in the way that the Mishnah renders them; namely, that one who is rich is one who is satisfied with what s/he has, one who is strong is the one who has self-discipline and control (Avot 4:1). However, Rabbi Nissim ben Reuven of Gerona (1320-1380), in his third homily, insists that these conditions for prophecy must be taken literally because, under normal circumstances, the presenter of the prophecy must appear to be credible in order for his words to be acceptable. God made an exception in this one aspect of Moshe’s appearance because of the enormous significance of receiving Torah and the need to be sure that the people would not accept the Torah because of Moshe’s eloquence and charisma.

Returning to the side of this discussion grounded in the Talmud’s criteria is the following text from the Midrash Rabbah (Deut. 1:1): “For see, of Moses before he was privileged to receive the Torah Scripture writes, I am not a man of words (Ex. 4:10); but after he had proved himself worthy of the Torah his tongue became cured and he began to speak words. Whence do we know this? From what we have read in the passage under comment, THESE ARE THE WORDS WHICH MOSES SPOKE.”<sup>4</sup>

If we now fast forward to the first decades of the Hassidic movement of Eastern Europe and to their opponents, we come to a teaching of Rabbi Menachem Mendl of Vitebsk on the Torah portion of Va’era in the Book of Exodus.<sup>5</sup> After citing the opinion of Rabbi Nissim, he goes on to say that, since everything that has been created has been made according to a particular *middah* / quality, that it is inevitable that we will become habituated to it and lose the connection between that *middah* and God. Therefore, it is necessary to have a teacher who is able to emulate the way Moshe taught, namely, beyond all *middot*. He concludes this teaching by saying: “And everyone who speaks words of Torah in this way is like him (like Moshe).”

The conversation between the two opinions about the importance of the teacher’s presence to the teaching is what we are now engaged in again. It is a conversation which fits the definition of an honest controversy, what the Mishnah calls a *machloket l-shaym shamayim* / controversy for the sake of heaven (Avot 5:17). The primary sign of such an honest difference of opinion is precisely that it is continually revisited and refined, rather than resolved. While it is true that both classical Hassidic and neo-Hassidic Jews favour the living teacher side of the argument, that doesn’t mean that they don’t also recognize the power of the text and take time to study. On the other side, it is not

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<sup>3</sup> Translation by Everett Fox.

<sup>4</sup> Soncino translation.

<sup>5</sup> He was a teacher of Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi and a member of the circle of the Maggid of Mezeritch. He went to Israel and his teachings were collected in a book called *P’ri Ha-Aretz* (Fruit of the Land).

uncommon in the Orthodox world for people to make a decision in advance to follow every decision rendered by a particular rabbi regardless of whether one agrees or disagrees with each ruling.<sup>6</sup> Nor is charisma always lacking in that same world, as evidenced by outstanding leaders such as Rabbis Shlomo Riskin and David Hartman. There have also been exposures of abuse of power by other charismatic figures in that world. There is no less pain in confronting this same phenomenon on the other side of the imaginary fence dividing the Orthodox and Hassidic worlds.

I write this thirty-four years after I first hitchhiked over 1500 miles from the interior of British Columbia to Winnipeg in search of my rebbe. Reb Zalman and I had crossed paths twice at Camp Ramah when I was a high school student and once again at Havurat Shalom in Boston when I had just begun rabbinical school, but we had not yet spoken to one another. As we got to know each other, I chose him as my rebbe for three primary reasons. The first was that he offered me a rabbinic ordination based on the study of mystical and moral writings rather than Jewish law or academic scholarship. Second, he had more faith in my abilities than I had and that confidence allowed me to open to fulfilling my potential. Third, I loved the way he recovered quickly from his mistakes by owning them without an extra layer of guilt and then moving on. Thus, Reb Zalman became and remains my rebbe because together we opened a new path for becoming a rabbi, because he trusted me to become a good rabbi, and because he showed me a better way to accept myself as a normal, imperfect human being with a love for God and Torah.

## REBBE AS FUNCTION

I used to study with a Chabad rabbi. One day, when we were schmoozing, I mentioned how much I appreciated studying the teachings of Rabbi Elimelech of Liszensk. He was, in our frame of reference, a congregational rabbi. He spoke often of his own mood swings and the meaning he gave them was that, after a period of feeling down, he could bring some of his Hassidim with him as his mood improved. The Chabad rabbi looked at me and said, “Daniel, you don’t understand. When Reb Elimelech was down, he was so much higher than you are when you’re up, that there’s no comparison.” My response was that, if he were right, then I had no interest in a rebbe whom I had no hope of emulating. I needed an accessible model, not someone who could make decisions for me because he was an elevated and different kind of human being.

Reb Zalman has spoken often of a major change in conceptualizing what it is to be a rebbe, which is “the rebbe as function rather than person.” Instead of having to think of a rebbe as a fully realized human being 24/7, a person who is in constant direct contact with God (which is the meaning of the Hassidic expression that the rebbe is the “Moses of the generation”) implying that the rebbe is a different kind of human being from the rest of us, Reb Zalman suggests that we think of rebbe-ing as a function which many of us get to fulfill at certain moments in our lives. This means that I can be your rebbe today and you will be mine tomorrow; I can be rebbe in some situations and student in others. Reb Zalman expresses it like this:

So I’ve come to understand that the Rebbe of the future is not going to be The Rebbe. For some time, she or he will serve as a Rebbe and when that’s done that person will have a pizza and go see a flick, and not necessarily be a Rebbe. Do you understand?...

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<sup>6</sup> I remember hearing this approach with a sense of real surprise when it was told to me by a serious and deeply learned rabbi that he had committed himself in advance to accept every ruling given by Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, of blessed memory.

So I want to at this point just make clear that although we are not *Tzaddikim* and we are not rebbes, we ARE called to function as rebbes. We recognize that this is not a permanent degree that we get for ourselves. But rather this is an intermittent function that we allow ourselves, we submit to it, in order to be able to have access to regions that the normal consciousness doesn't have access to. (EC 1996)

On the one hand, then, we are engaged in an old conversation about the meaning of being a teacher of Torah in its deepest sense and the relationship between the teacher and the teaching. From that perspective, it would be acceptable to study carefully what has been preserved in the writings of those who came before us and to become aware of the issues. On the other hand, we are living in a new time period, one which we believe includes a shift in basic paradigms so profound that mastering the wisdom of the past is insufficient. From the perspectives available to us, it is necessary that we also add our best insights into this "controversy which endures," especially the notion of rebbe as function. What, then, are the affects of this approach and how might we seek to actualize it in ourselves?

### SERVING THE REBBE FUNCTION

- One can prepare oneself only for the possibility of being used, or deployed, as a rebbe, but no one can be certain when, or even if, one will be so deployed. Reb Zalman recounts the following story:

There is this wonderful story about the man who came to the Kotzker and said to him: "Rebbe, my father came in my dream and told me I should be a Rebbe." And the Kotzker laughed. The man said, "Well, what's the joke?" The Kotzker said, "If your father would have come to 300 people and told them you were to be their Rebbe, I would take it more seriously. That you had a dream to be a Rebbe, I don't take so seriously." And, in a sense, one could laugh all of us out of this place with that attitude.

During Talmudic times, it was common for the great rabbis to earn their livings at trades. Hillel was a water carrier; Rabbi Jose a shoemaker. More recently, the Hassidic Rebbe Levi Yitzchak was a *rav* / the permanent head of the rabbinic court of Berdichev. In our times, being a congregational rabbi is an example of a profession, involving skills in administration, finance, language, Torah and Haftarah reading, and counselling. When a potential rebbe has other means of earning a living, then there is less pressure to promote oneself, to be concerned with how many people choose to study with him/her, and to constantly be developing new ways to attract students and hold their attention. Such a person may then be called upon to serve as rebbe for certain people at certain moments and, if not, s/he can always practice his/her profession with great skill and sensitivity.

- I remember hearing Reb Arthur Waskow say that we did not create Jewish renewal in order to save the souls of others. We began to develop a spiritually sensitive modern Judaism in order to save our own souls. This leads us to the second way in which we can become open to the possibility of being used as a rebbe, and that is to embrace Judaism as a personal spiritual practice first. Rather than learning in order to teach, learn in order to practice and then allow whatever happens to emerge organically. In his book, *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, Sogyal Rinpoche tells the following story:

Kunu Lama Tenzin Gyaltzen was an accomplished master, who came originally from the Himalayan region of northern India. When he was young he met a Lama in Sikkim, who advised him to go to Tibet to pursue his studies of Buddhism.... Eventually he did return to India...No one knew who he was, or even that he was a Buddhist, let alone that he was a master. They knew him as a gentle, saintly yogin, and they offered him food...But then one day someone happened to ask him a question regarding the teaching of Buddha. The answer he gave was extremely profound. So they went on asking him questions...Yet even when he became well known he did not change. He still wore the same simple old clothes, and he lived in one small room.<sup>7</sup>

- If one wants to be prepared to serve as a rebbe, then one must learn to be humble. Moshe, who is used in rabbinic tradition as a model of leadership at its highest level, is described in Torah as being the most humble person on earth. Helping others is something one can do only by the grace of God. It is always a gift, from God to the helper and then from the helper to the receiver of that help. The rabbis tell us that what Joseph learned during the years between his interpretation of the cup-bearer's dream and Pharaoh's dreams is precisely this lesson, that it is God and not Joseph doing the work (Gen. 41:15). This is why he speaks as he does to Pharaoh, saying that it is God who is telling him what is about to happen. Joseph's mistake was to ask the cup-bearer to remember him to Pharaoh instead of trusting that God would manifest the next opportunity for Joseph to serve. Serving as rebbe comes whenever the Divine needs us to be the vessel for this function and in between those moments we continue to prepare, trust, and do our work in the world.

- Become a *talmid chacham* / wise student in your own eyes rather than a rebbe or even a rabbi. Whenever I think I have an insight, I make a point of corroborating that insight with someone else whose knowledge is greater than mine in that area. I also try to cite my sources rather than take the credit for the insight myself. The rabbinic tradition has been insistent that we always say things *b-shaym omro* / in the name of the one who spoke it originally, sometimes even saying that nothing that cannot be attributed to another is wisdom. While this may seem extreme, it does illustrate how much we can practice humility simply by sharing credit for our inspiration with others whenever possible.

One of the learning opportunities I offer in the ALEPH Rabbinic Program is called "Breaking the Sefer Barrier," where we study a late rabbinic text mostly in order to learn to read unpointed Hebrew and recognize the many abbreviations and book titles used by these writers. This year, we studied a section on the value of *Derech Eretz* and it was amazing to receive advice on how to be a decent and polite human being. One sentence from this unit said, "If someone asks your name, reply with your name only and none of the titles that enhance it, like rav or rabbi." As the story about the Kotzker teaches us, let it be others who add the title to your name.

## BEING A TALMID / CHOOSE YOUR REBBE CAREFULLY

I wish it were sufficient to provide criteria for potential rebbes that would prevent abuses of the influence and power that teachers have over their students. Unfortunately, those who consciously violate these boundaries are not receptive to this advice. For many reasons, they have created justifications in their own minds which allow them to believe that these guidelines do not apply to them or they have fooled themselves into believing that they are honouring these guidelines by

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<sup>7</sup> 2002; Harper San Francisco, pp. 113-114.

violating them. Therefore, I believe that Mimi Feigelson and others are right to say that the *talmid* / student shares in responsibility for the health of this relationship and needs to be alert to the potential for abuse.

As Reb Zalman pointed out in *Renewal is Judaism Now*, our communal spiritual practice is teleological. This means that our belief in a better and perfected future influences our present, drawing us toward the redemptive state which completes this current expression of our collective story. As a result, especially when the present is painful, it is possible for large numbers of people to become convinced that a certain individual is the redeemer for whom we wait.

It seems that the same holds true for us as individuals. We feel that the redemption we seek must come quickly, since we have only this one lifetime in which to experience a release from the suffering we experience. Therefore, it is not surprising that many of us are susceptible to being seduced by the promises of special, secret teachings and techniques, available from only one particular individual, that will release us from our personal suffering. When our lives are difficult on the material plane, we yearn for ease; when our lives are easier on the material plane, we yearn for meaning, purpose, and love. When we are feeling unnoticed, we respond to a teacher who notices us and makes us feel special.

- All spiritual teachers in all spiritual traditions are flawed human beings. In Jewish renewal, we openly acknowledge that we are all *chozrim b-t'shuvah* / repentant returnees. As long as each of us keeps that in the forefront of his/her consciousness, we receive their *t'shuvah* as authentic. When someone cannot admit this truth about him/herself and insists that s/he has nothing for which to do *t'shuvah*, consider that a warning sign of what may be an inflated ego and of teaching that is ultimately self-serving.

This is also an old conversation. The Talmud tells the story of the apostasy of Elisha ben Avuya and then asks why Rabbi Meir continued to call him his teacher, to engage him in conversation, and to try and bring him back. After all, doesn't the verse say "that the lips of the priest will guard knowledge, they will seek Torah from his mouth, for he is a messenger of God" (Malachi 2:7).

Therefore, one should only seek Torah from someone who is clearly a messenger of God and not from someone, like Elisha, who had set himself up as an independent authority by denying the validity of the basic assumptions of Judaism. Resh Lakish responds that Rabbi Meir relied on a different verse which says that "Incline your ear and listen to the words of the wise and you will be drawn to knowledge of Me" (Proverbs 22:17). Since the verse says that the student will be drawn to God's *da'at* rather than that of the teacher, he believed that you could learn things from those whose inner knowledge and [lack of] connectedness you might not agree with.

Any teacher who does not admit to character flaws nor acknowledges past errors (without the need to detail them) is unlikely to be someone whose character can be trusted. There may be many things that one can learn from such a person, but s/he cannot be a model nor relied upon when it comes to an intimate relationship of any kind.

- One who is functioning for another as a true rebbe is one who calls out the best from you. As Sogyal Rinpoche says, the outer teacher is "none other than the embodiment and voice and representative of our inner teacher."<sup>8</sup> Remember that what I still so love about having chosen Reb

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<sup>8</sup> *ibid.* p. 138. See pp. 131-139 for a discussion of the teacher/student relationship from a Buddhist perspective.

Zalman as my rebbe is the way he trusts me to be myself. He has never asked me to become dependent on him in any way and, in so doing, inspired me to discover my own way. The purpose of serving as a rebbe is to help another discover the best version of him/herself, to fully support the unfolding of the other, and not to use the adoration of the student as a tool for self-fulfillment. This is the most difficult part of this essay to write. There is, undoubtedly, a pleasure and inflation of ego/self-worth along with an experience of power which comes from teaching in such a way that people's lives change. It is easy to confuse that transformation with love for both the teacher and the student. Since so many of us on the spiritual path have experienced this either as teacher or student or as both, it is the place where remembering to acknowledge one's status as a *chozayr b-t'shuvah* is essential.

- It is only through the active participation of the student in the *rebbe/talmid* relationship that the rebbe gets to be rebbe. In Reb Zalman's words,

The notion that I'm speaking in the active form and that you are merely passive is wrong. You are very active. Your active listening creates in me the will to continue. If there were a conspiracy in which all of you decided to shut your mind against what I had to say, in two minutes my energy would be gone I would be totally disconcerted, I won't know what I'm doing. I'd go nuts, it would be crazy-making for me. How can I teach if I don't have you paying attention. You're playing into the process by giving your attention. I don't yet know what the group mind will want to reveal. And I've dedicated myself for at least the time we are going to be doing this together to be a keli, a vessel for that to come through. If you would withdraw your energy, I would run away. I wouldn't have anything to do here. I'm here only because you help me with your energy. Get this, this is a very important part.

I do want to stress that the responsibilities which fall on the students do not absolve the teacher of his/her responsibility to respect the boundaries which preserve the integrity of the relationship. Consent on the part of the student to violate the boundary is not permission for the teacher to do likewise. Further, any effort on the part of the teacher to convince a student to violate the boundaries on the assumption that this will aid the student's growth is also grossly unethical and is independent of the student's willingness to be convinced that this is truth.

Despite the risks, I still believe that the *rebbe/talmid* relationship is necessary when it comes to spiritual growth and development. Building on Reb Zalman and Mimi Feigelson's suggestions, I would add that the boundaries necessary to maintain a healthy *rebbe/talmid* relationship can better be set and maintained by adding a more feminine model to the masculine and hierarchical model with which we are more familiar.

- A first step in this process would be for both teacher and student to be aware of the the practice which the Ba'al Shem Tov suggested precede the teaching of Torah.

When one is about to speak words of Torah before others, first one should tie one's thoughts to the Blessed Creator, realizing that the soul of the friend is also equally tied to the Creator. Everyone lives only by virtue of the abundant emanation from the Divine, which pours out to all creatures.

Therefore, the one sharing Torah should imagine that s/he is speaking only before

the Blessed Creator, to give God pleasure, and not before my friend.

For what difference is there in whether s/he praises me, the teacher, or not?<sup>9</sup>

- A second step would be to reinforce using the circular seating arrangement with which we are already so familiar and which allows all participants to look at one another.
- A third step would be to establish a set of guidelines for balancing the contribution of the teacher with the thoughts, questions, and wisdom of the participants. The mishnah in Avot (6:3) says that one who learns only one or two things from another should call that person “teacher.” The Ba’al Shem Tov explains that this means that when one learns from someone who is not a true teacher of Torah, then each thing one learns from that person remains a discreet datum. However, when one learns from a true teacher, then the Torah learned is literally fruitful and multiplies.<sup>10</sup> Thus, creating guidelines for sharing the speaking time will give both teacher and students opportunities to share insights and allow the teaching to grow.
- Yet another step might be to have a clear and ritualized ending to a learning session in which people thank each other for being teacher and student for the duration of that particular period of time, allowing everyone to let go of these roles until the next time they are appropriate.
- Finally, imagine that the *Sh’chinnah* herself sits in the middle of this circle, with all spoken words passing through Her. The Divine holds us, permeates us, and is our centre. When this is made manifest in the physical reality in which we are learning and teaching, then it can become the spiritual reality which guides us as we learn and teach. In this way, learning Torah can become what it truly is, a conversation based on mutual respect and love whose purpose is spiritual growth for all participants.

I am deeply grateful to the ALEPH board for encouraging me to write this essay at this time. I am especially grateful to those who reviewed this essay and made many helpful suggestions, including Rabbi Steve Silvern and Shulamit Fairman. In particular, I thank my beloved life-partner Hanna Tiferet, who read this so carefully, made dozens of improvements, and reminded me of *Sh’chinnah’s* need to be present.

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<sup>9</sup> *Ba’al Shem Tov al he-Torah*, Deuteronomy, *Parashat Va-Etchanan* 41.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* 61.