

we change the fundamental structure of our brains, and we become different people. Intellectual learning on its own does not have this potential.

Obviously, these two basic approaches are not mutually exclusive; they complement each other, and one should endeavor to practice both. The changes we will see may not be instantaneous, but they are assured. Slowly, over time, as Rav Yisrael promises, a new person will appear.<sup>6</sup>

Let a person's heart not despair if he studies Mussar and is not awakened, or if he feels no impression on his soul motivating him to change his path. Through an abundance of [Mussar] study over an extended period of time, the impressions will accumulate, and he will be transformed into a different person.

#### PRACTICE

Rambam states that comforting mourners is a rabbinic commandment that fulfills the biblical injunction that we encountered in this discussion: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."<sup>7</sup>

If you didn't know that before, you have now learned the biblical source for the requirement to give comfort to those who are bereaved.

To get the spiritual benefit of that *mitzvah* and to internalize its teaching, however, you have to do it. Do you know someone who is mourning a loss? Reach out to comfort that person *in deed*. Pick up the phone, send an e-mail, or better still, pay a visit to comfort the mourner.

## המחכים את רבו

[ 46 ]

## Making One's Teacher Wise

### *Ha'Machkim et Rabbo*

As iron sharpens iron, so does one person sharpen another.

—PROVERBS 27:17

**T**HIS METHOD of transformation literally translates as "one who *sharpens* his or her teacher." Traditionally, that "sharpness" has been understood to mean wisdom, which raises the question: What can a student do to make his or her teacher wiser?

One thing the student can do is ask sharp questions. Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin ruled that it is forbidden for a student to accept a teacher's words when he or she still has difficulties or questions.<sup>1</sup> No question should be ruled out because it is too basic, or foolish, or repetitive. The student is obligated to continue to ask, "I'm not clear on what this means" until it is explained satisfactorily. And the teacher (or parent, or supervisor, etc.) must try to explain again and again until the student understands. Like a blade being drawn repeatedly over a whetstone, each explanation not only clarifies for the student, it sharpens the teacher's wisdom.

“As iron sharpens iron, so does one person sharpen another.”<sup>2</sup> Have you ever seen a chef sharpening a blade by scraping it against another knife? Or drawing a knife against a hardened steel rod? Honing iron against iron creates a sharp edge on the blade, just as the exchange of ideas among people sharpens their thinking.

Or to invoke a different metaphor, in the Talmud we read a teaching of Rabbi Nachman bar Yitzchak, who asked, “Why is Torah compared to a tree? As it is written, ‘It is a Tree of Life for those who hold fast to it.’ This is to teach that just as a small piece of wood can ignite a large one, so too do students of Torah sharpen their teachers.”<sup>3</sup> And Rashi adds, “with their constant questioning.”<sup>4</sup> Sometimes to answer the student’s questions the teacher will need to do further research, and in this way, the student contributes to broadening the teacher’s knowledge and wisdom.

These are all images meant to describe how alert, probing interactions not only generate facts but also serve to sharpen the minds of those involved. A number of Talmudic sages are said to have included in their lessons statements they knew were contrary to the law just to see whether the students were sufficiently on their toes to raise a challenge. Clearly, the student was expected and even encouraged to challenge the teacher, and it was understood that the teacher, as well as the student, would benefit from the challenge.<sup>5</sup>

We need this teaching, because this sort of behavior doesn’t come easily to most of us. If we don’t understand, we’re shy to speak up. If the teacher goes too fast for us, we blame ourselves for not keeping up. If we think of a question, we might well dismiss it as too simplistic, likely to embarrass us for asking about something that everyone else probably understands. Here we are being told not to hold back, because we are not the only potential

beneficiary of our questions. It is also a service to our teachers to ask our questions: They need our abrasion to become sharp.

Sometimes the student even catches out the teacher! Rav Yisrael Salanter would deliver a talk every week, and every week, students would ask him questions. During one such talk, just as Rav Yisrael was concluding a complicated discourse, someone challenged him with a question that destroyed his whole argument. Rav Yisrael paused only briefly, then admitted he was wrong and stepped down from the dais.

It takes a wise teacher to accept the kinds of questions from students that will increase his or her own wisdom. We find modeling for that accepting attitude in a famous story in the Talmud concerning the oven of Achnai.<sup>6</sup> The rabbis align in the argument such that Rabbi Eliezer is the sole opponent to consensus. He doesn’t give up, however, and calls out, “If I am right, let the carob tree prove it by flying through the air.” And it does. But the majority retorts, “We don’t accept legal rulings from trees.” Then Rabbi Eliezer says that if he is right, the stream should flow backwards, which it does. The rabbis also reject basing a legal decision on a stream. Then he orders the walls of the synagogue to collapse, and as they start to lean, Rabbi Yehoshua rebukes them, saying, “If sages argue with one another, what business do you have interfering?” So they don’t collapse but remain leaning. Then Rabbi Eliezer appeals to heaven, and a divine voice replies, saying, “Why are you disputing with Rabbi Eliezar, for the law accords with him everywhere?” Rabbi Yehoshua then rises to his feet and says, “It is not in Heaven,”<sup>7</sup> meaning that rulings on law happen on earth, not in heaven, so even the heavenly voice has no standing in the rabbis’ decisions. At that, the heavenly voice was heard to exclaim in delight, “My children have bested Me! My children have bested Me!”

God's response to the rabbis is a model for how a teacher should interact with students, and that model would apply equally to parent with child, supervisor with staff, and so forth. While we don't have any potential to "sharpen" God, we learn from this story that the teacher ought to delight in the student coming up with the right answer, and maybe even delivering a better answer than the teacher. A teacher's greatest joy ought to lie in being surpassed by those whom he or she has taught, then learning from those students.

Perhaps this idea lies at the heart of the directive we find in *Pirkei Avot* 1:6 to "Make for yourself a teacher." It's important that the teaching says "make" and not "find." It is not enough just to find someone who has the knowledge we seek and to attend that teacher's lectures. Rather, we have a role in *creating* the mentor we need by means of our own efforts to learn, including the questioning we do. We appoint that person to the status of being wiser than we are in the particular area we seek to learn. Then, by relentlessly questioning and seeking to wring answers from our teacher, we make him or her wiser still. Through these efforts we will have "created" that teacher.

Our efforts sharpen the abilities of the one who can teach us, and, in that way, we make that person into the teacher we need. The teacher, the other students, and we ourselves are all beneficiaries, and through that process, more of the wisdom in the world will be opened to us.

#### PRACTICE

Is there someone you can question to help clarify a situation? Bear in mind as you question that you are seeking to sharpen or make wiser the authority in that subject whom you are questioning.

המכוון את שמועתו

[ 47 ]

## Clarifying What One Has Heard

*Ha'Mechaven et shmu'ato*

Let the wise one hear and increase learning. The understanding person shall acquire wise counsels.

—PROVERBS 1:5

WE ARE NEARING the end of these lessons on personal transformation, and it is wise advice to make a practice of clarifying what we have heard. That applies to these lessons but also to things we learn every day. Reality is complex, and it takes some determination to sort through the complexity to clarify for ourselves the essence of the lesson. That's the kernel we need to retain, which can be lost to us if we don't engage in this clarification process.

We may sit in a class nodding in agreement, or we may casually read something; but if we don't make the effort to understand the true intended message, we fool ourselves into thinking that we have learned something when really we haven't. Have you put in the time and effort necessary to truly understand the