

As a rabbinic student in the early 80's, I was an intern at Hillel at Princeton. My cozy office was at the end of the hallway in the garret of a venerable Gothic building, as removed and safe as any place on campus. Several times I had the same experience—a wonderful, smart, capable, involved student would climb up the three flights of stairs, walk hesitantly into my office, look around to see if anyone was in earshot, ~~close~~ the door, sit down, and full of heartbreak, tearfully confess, “I don't belong here. I'm too loud, too dark, too argumentative, too Jewish.” Or “I don't belong here. I'm not smart enough, witty enough, confident enough, rich enough.” I would listen to their fears, take their hands, remind them of their many gifts, apparent to everyone but themselves, and try to reassure them. While I the benefit of the long view—and indeed, each one of those students graduated and has come into their powers—in those moments of doubt, it was hard for them to believe in their own promise and the promise that their letters of admission held out to them.

Here at Stanford, students sometimes feel an added burden—everyone looks so calm and fit and beautiful here, that they may not be able to share those doubts even behind closed doors. Emeritus President Donald Kennedy coined the phrase, “the Stanford Duck syndrome” to describe students who appear placid on the surface, but are paddling like hell underneath.

We invite you to stop paddling, to live authentically, to be open to others, to make use of the wisdom of religious traditions as you are welcomed to this vibrant community with rich and diverse spiritual traditions.

If I may, I'd like to share some wisdom from my own religious tradition, from Judaism. Learning “beyond the text,” outside of the classroom, learning in relationship has always been valued within Judaism. The biblical Moses is known as *Moshe Rabbenu*, “Moses, Our Teacher,” yet he is first described as a learner. Certainly Moses gained much knowledge and wisdom from his relationship with God, from the burning bush onward. But Moses also learned from a man—one from another culture, another language, another set of traditions. Moses' teacher was the Midianite Jethro, his father-in-law. Moses had reasons born of history and kinship to respect Jethro's wisdom. This respect caused him to listen to and heed his father-in-law, a man from a different culture and background, when he offered advice. “But Moses' father-in-law said to him, “The thing you are doing is not right; you will surely wear yourself out, and these people as well. For the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone. Now listen to me. I will give you counsel, and God be with you!” (Exodus 18:17-19) The counsel Jethro gave was nothing less than the construction of a judicial system. Not only does Moses institute it, but that very system becomes the model for the judiciary throughout the Bible, discussed and reaffirmed in the book of Deuteronomy (1:9-18). That a foreigner thought it up does not diminish its power. But more than the structure that Jethro creates, the

words he speaks teach us yet another important lesson. “For the task is too heavy for you. You cannot do it alone.”

In the best-known book of the Talmud, *Pirke Avot*, the Ethics of the Fathers, there is a teaching that affirms that you cannot do it alone. “*Aseh lecha rav*” “Make for yourself a teacher”. “*Kneh lecha chaver*” “Acquire for yourself a friend.”

Aseh lecha rav. Make for yourself a teacher. Moses chose to find--to make-- a teacher of a person who had neither the appropriate authority nor the pedigree to be his teacher. After all, God made *Moses* the leader of the Israelites, not his Midianite father-in-law. It was *Moses* who responded to the burning bush. It was *Moses* who challenged Pharaoh, It was *Moses* who brought his people out of Egypt, and led them safely across the Red Sea. Yet, when Moses heard wisdom coming from the mouth of this man, he made of its giver, a teacher.

What does it mean to make for yourself a teacher? Didn't Stanford do that for you when they hired the faculty? Already you've heard several times from many corners of the University —“Get to know the faculty”. I'd like to offer you a very old recommendation about this-- from the 12th century in fact.

The medieval philosopher Maimonides focuses on the verb “*aseh*”, “make”. “‘Make for yourself a teacher’: That is to say, even if he is not suited to be your teacher, put him in the position of being your teacher until it seems to you that he is indeed teaching. Thus you shall acquire wisdom, for learning from another is of a different quality from learning on one's own. Learning on one's own is good, but learning from another endures longer and is more clearly understood. This holds true if he is your equal or even your inferior in wisdom.”

This insight is so different than the top-down, sage on the stage set-up we so often take for granted. Maimonides' learner is no empty vessel waiting to be filled by the pearls of wisdom coming from on high. Rather, he or she reaches out to the teacher and takes the initiative. Finding a teacher requires an act of will, and an act of commitment. Maimonides' ideal learner knows that teachers come in all ages, shapes, sizes, cultures, perspectives, worldviews and settings. We can study the knowledge of Nobel laureates, but we can also study the wisdom of noble lives. What matters is the openness of the learner. Perhaps they may choose us as their students, but this text reminds us that we must also choose them as our teacher.

Parker J. Palmer is a well-known educator who cares about the courage of teachers and the authenticity of learners. He describes his first mentor—a man, he said, who broke every rule of good teaching. He would lecture as if he was the only one in the room, totally oblivious to his hearers. He would listen poorly, if at all, to his students. It was as if, this stratospheric mind thought, “Who needs twenty-year olds from the suburbs when you are hanging out with the likes of Marx, Hegel, Durkheim and Weber?” (*The Courage to Teach* p. 21, 137) But it was his teacher's very passion and engagement with ideas that captivated him, the first kid in his family to go to college. So, head over heels, Palmer claimed this socially ill-adept man as his mentor. He writes, “What mattered was

that he generously opened the life of his mind to me, giving full voice to the gift of thought. Something in me knew that this gift was mine.” (22) And now, many years later Parker Palmer often asks people to talk about a teacher who made a difference in their lives. Think who those people are for you. What teachers so far have made a difference in your life? If you are at all like me, with a list of favorite teachers, that question isn’t hard to answer. But he then goes further. He asks a question that when I first heard it, stopped me in my tracks. Not “What made your mentor great?” –that question, too, is easy to answer. But what he asked was, “What is it about *you* that allowed great mentoring to happen?” *Aseh lecha rav*. What is it about you that caused you to make this person your teacher, to be open to the wisdom that he or she could impart, to pronounce this person your teacher, your *rav*? Think a moment. When you envision your mentors, when you remember the people who taught you and touched you, what did they see in you? Was it your curiosity? Your perseverance? Your humor? Your promise? What did you give to them that caused them to become your teacher?

We are all moved by stories of people whose lives have been altered by the faith a teacher has placed in them. Some of us here today, many of us, I would argue, are those people. I certainly am. But that faith would not have come into fruition, had those students not been open to making for themselves a teacher, had they not been willing to take the initiative and offer something—curiosity, passion, willingness to work-- to that teacher.

Teaching is a sacred enterprise. Making one a teacher is an act of holiness, of finding and affirming not only the humanity and gifts of teachers, but also of the divine presence. “When two sit and study Torah together, the *Shechinah*, God’s imminent presence, dwells among them.”

“When two sit and study...” Learning is not solitary; it is communal. As Jethro taught Moses, “You cannot do it alone.” *Pirke Avot* recognizes this, by pairing *aseh lecha rav*, “make for yourself a teacher” with *kneh lecha chaver*. “Acquire for yourself a friend.”

There is a story in the Talmud that is a kind of Jewish Rip Van Winkle tale. It is about Honi the Circle-Drawer. One day when Honi was travelling, he saw a man planting a carob tree. He asked, “How long will it take for that tree to bear fruit?” The man answered, “Seventy years.” So Honi asked, “Are you expecting to live another seventy years?” The man answered, “Just as my ancestors planted carob trees for me, so I plant these for my children and grandchildren.” Then Honi fell asleep, and he continued to sleep for seventy years. When he awoke, he saw a man gathering the fruit of the carob tree. “Are you the man who planted this tree?” He replied, “I am his grandson.” Then Honi knew he had slept for seventy years. He went home and asked, “Is the son of Honi the Circle-Drawer still alive?” “No, but Honi’s grandson is still living.” When he told them, “I am Honi, the Circle-Drawer, no one believed him. So he went to the study house, the *beit midrash*, where he heard the scholars say, “The law is as clear to us as in the days of Honi the Circle-Drawer, for whenever he came to the *beit midrash* he would settle any difficulty the scholars had.” So he called out, “I am he!” but no one believed

him. This hurt him greatly and Honi prayed to die. Raba said, “Hence the saying, “Either friendship or death.”

The story of Honi, the Circle Drawer concludes, “Either friendship or death.” A life without friendship is surely one of deadness of spirit. How many of us can imagine experiencing the crises of our lives—illness, accidents, disappointments, losses without the stalwart support, care and attention of our friends? How would we manage without their wise counsel, their generous laughter, or their rock solid affirmation? What would it be like to have our achievements uncheered and unwitnessed by those who know how much we struggled to attain them? Honi could scarcely imagine living in a world where nobody shared his experiences and where all of his memories belonged to him alone. The scholarship that he knew, the Torah that he once taught was still within him, but unshared, it lost its value. Psychological research confirms what we intuitively know. Not only do friendships enrich our lives; friendships prolong them. People who have a best friend live longer than people who don’t, giving new meaning to “either friendship or death.”

“*Aseh lecha rav*”—“Make for yourself a teacher” “*Kneh lecha chaver*”—“Acquire for yourself a friend.” In commenting on *aseh lecha rav*, Maimonides focused on the active verb, “*Aseh*”—“Make”. Similarly, he interprets “*Kneh*”—“Acquire”, with equal agency. Now “acquire” may be an odd word to use to describe making friends. But the word has particular resonance in Hebrew, because it is the same root used to describe how one enters into marriage, *kinyan*. *Kneh* has overtones of fierce loyalty, honesty, commitment and even of love.

Maimonides teaches, “*Kneh lecha chaver*”—“Acquire for yourself a friend”: Note the language of acquisition. It does not say, “Make for yourself a friend” or “Become friendly with others.” The point is a person must acquire someone who will love him, who will correct his deeds and all of his matters. As the Talmud teaches, “Either friendship or death.” (*Taanit* 23A)... When you love, do not love on your own terms, but rather love on the terms of your beloved. And when both friends act according to this principle, each will seek to fulfill the will of the other and they will share a single intention. How fitting are Aristotle’s words in this regard, “A friend is a second self.”

Maimonides is teaching that it is incumbent upon us to forge a friendship with the same tenacity and passion with which we would court a sweetheart. Like a marriage, a friendship creates obligation and enables self-understanding. To acquire a friend is to be claimed by another, to make her our second self, as close to us as our heart, as familiar to us as our own face. When Maimonides describes the energy with which a person should pursue friendship, he describes a very particular kind of friend. And here, the parallelism and proximity to “*Aseh lecha rav*”—“Make for yourself a teacher,” conveys what kind of friend this person ought to be. “This kind of friendship”, Maimonides writes, “is similar to the friendship which a teacher feels for her student and a student feels for his teacher.”

Indeed, many commentators understand that the Talmud is calling for both teacher and friend to be one and the same person. The rabbinic ideal of a *rav/chaver*, of a

teacher/friend is a study partner. When two study together, they share physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual intimacy. Such a friendship is based on something larger than either person. No wonder that it was in the study house that Honi felt the most isolated, the most alone. No wonder that it was in the place of friends who are study partners, of *chaverim*, that the absence of a friend was most painful.

In the Bible, the place that the Israelites build to be close to God is called the *mishkan*, the Tabernacle. The word *mishkan* is from the same root as *Shechinah*, the name for God addressing God's closeness. The *mishkan* is a place of holy connection. So it is fitting that the word used in Hebrew to describe the proximity of curtains of the Tabernacle has the same root as the one used for friend-- ch-b-r, *chaver*. The curtains of the Tabernacle are *chevrot isha el achotah*, "joined one to another", as friends, too, are joined together at the boundaries. *Chaverim*, study partners, close friends are not fragmented beings; rather they are whole and connected—second selves. They argue with one another. They push one another. They question one another. They struggle with one another. They rebuke one another. They find insight through one another. Their connection is as deep and sacred because it is filled with God's words, with God's teaching and with God's presence.

Aseh lecha rav. Kneh lecha chaver. "Make for yourself a teacher. Acquire for yourself a friend." This is powerful model for valuing friendship. To remember that in the mundane is the sacred--that God, and friendship is in the details. To criticize with love and to hear that criticism with grace. To be founded on what is larger than ourselves. To transcend the smallness that so often limits our vision and our spirit.

Aseh lecha rav. Kneh lecha chaver. "Make for yourself a teacher. Acquire for yourself a friend." As we celebrate the freshness of this new year, as many here today embark upon a new educational venture at Stanford, let us seek out new teachers, new friends, new study partners. Let us ask ourselves, "Whom might we learn from in this new year? With whom will we reveal our souls? Whose souls might we nurture? Who will recognize and encourage the divine spark in us? With whom will we become *chaverim*, connected selves? Let us discover and treasure the power and profound wisdom of a true friend, of an intimate study partner. May we be nourished by those who claim us as their students and their companions. May we be filled with gratitude for those who make us their teachers and their friends. May your learning be exciting and your relationships built through shared study endure. Welcome to the Farm.