

Developing Genuine Relationships With Your Students

A Rebbe's job can be daunting. From the outside, it may seem simple: prepare shiur and advance your talmidim's ability to learn. But a Rebbe's job is so much more. A rebbe is the living, link in the mesorah for his talmidim - he is the connection that ties them back to Har Sinai. It is HIS job to impart to his talmidim an all-encompassing love and passion for Yiddishkeit. So how does a rebbe accomplish this? The first step is really simple: build a genuine relationship with your talmidim. Love them, and they will love you. But how does a busy rebbe go about developing a relationship with his talmidim? There are four basic elements to creating a successful rebbe-talmid relationship: 1. View your talmidim with an ayin tovah; 2. Spend time connecting with your talmidim; 3. Be friendly and approachable; 4. Follow up on their problems.

Ayin Tovah

Rebbeim are human beings, and it is natural to like some talmidim more than others. But a rebbe cannot "play favorites," and all his talmidim must equally feel that he appreciates their qualities. It is often precisely the talmidim that the rebbe finds grate on his nerves or aren't particularly likable that need the most validation and positive attention. A rebbe must train himself to find and appreciate the positive qualities in all of his talmidim. If you look, you can find amazing and admirable traits in just about everybody. Children and young adults are perceptive and can quickly tell if a rebbe looks down on them or has no interest in them. This emotional dynamic can be devastating. Being able to love and appreciate your talmidim is vitally necessary for being a successful rebbe.

Spend Time Connecting

While learning to love your talmidim and view them with an ayin tovah is the basis of developing a relationship with them, engaging with them is what creates the relationship. This idea expresses itself in a number of forms. Having an interactive shiur is a vital way to connect with your talmidim and begin building a strong relationship with them. By including your talmidim - asking for their input and responding to their thoughts - you are engaging with them on a deep level. This creates a sense of connection that endures long after the shiur is over. Then, make sure to spend some quality time with each of your talmidim. It may not be easy, but set aside a few minutes each day to schmooze with your talmidim. A good rebbe knows what is going on in his talmidim's lives - what their challenges are and how they feel about themselves. Even a shy talmid often needs little prompting to open up and share how

he is doing. Take an active interest in their personal lives, and be available to help them with whatever they are struggling to overcome.

Be Friendly and Approachable

The adage amongst older Melamdin was that an effective rebbe would not smile at his class until Chanukah, thus creating an appropriate sense of intimidation in his talmidim. This approach may have worked at one point in our history, but it absolutely fails in this generation. Teachers are scared of being too friendly because they are concerned that they will be turned into a 'doormat' by their talmidim. Obviously, a well-established structure is important to the success of any classroom. A rebbe must lay down a few firm rules and expectations and establish the consequences for breaking them. But the necessity of having rules does not detract from the fact that a rebbe should always be as friendly and approachable as possible. Even when you are administering consequences, be genuine and sympathetic. Applying this approach will engender loyalty and love in your talmidim. They will value your relationship and will do everything to avoid damaging the bond that they have with you.

Follow Up With Them

If you have a conversation with one of your talmidim in which they discuss an issue they are dealing with, follow up on that conversation. Taking one minute to call your talmid over and ask him how he is managing with whatever issue he had brought up previously will go a long way toward showing that you care about him. This form of follow up sends the message that you were thinking about him and are concerned for his success and well-being. Conversely, by never following up on their issues, you send the message that your talmid's struggles aren't important to you; that even if you will listen to them the first time, it is only out of a sense of obligation and not due to a genuine feeling of concern. A talmid once called Rav Chaim Pinchas Scheinberg zt"l to ask him if he was allowed to wear leather shoes on Yom Kippur. He was feeling unwell, and it was going to rain heavily. He did not think that he could wear wet, soggy shoes the whole Yom Kippur. Rav Scheinberg rendered a halachic ruling for the talmid and wished him a good year. That Motzei Yom Kippur, the talmid's phone rang. It was Rav Scheinberg. The Rav was calling to check up on how his talmid was feeling. The memory of that simple phone call stayed with that talmid for years as an example of how much a rebbe should care for his talmidim.