

CHAI MITZVAH MUSSAR TOPIC: JANUARY

Spiritual Friendship/*Chevruta*

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JAN

MUSSAR

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notes

The Hebrew word for friend, *chaver* חבר (m) or *chaverah* חברה (f) has an Aramaic cognate, *chevruta* חברותא, which is the term used for the relationship between study partners. While the value placed on friendship originally focused on enabling Torah study, it could easily be extended beyond this to the companionship, support, challenge and comfort that we know friendships offer us. Having a *chevruta* partner is built into the spiritual practice of Mussar. In order to work on developing one's character, it is helpful to be accountable to someone else and to have someone else support you in your efforts (and vice versa). In this fourth session, we will explore the importance of spiritual friendship as elaborated in seven different commentaries (two of which are from an extended teaching on friendship written by Maimonides, the great 12th century Jewish scholar also known as the Rambam), each of which responds to the same teaching "Acquire for yourself a friend." that is found in *Pirke Avot 1:6*.

In light of this session's topic, the text study should be done in paired *chevruta* study, rather than in groups. At the end of the session, the experience of such *chevruta* study and its impact should be explored by the group. Can the participants see how this kind of one-on-one conversation might lead to deeper friendship? Perhaps participants will want to consider finding a longer-term *chevruta* partner for the rest of the program in order to support one another in their Mussar practice. Note that Mussar practice in the yeshiva world entailed both small group (*va'ad*) sessions, as well as *chevruta*.



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introduction

Try this opening exercise to see how the texts below relate to your own experience of friendship.

Every participant receives three blank index cards. On the first card, list the three most important qualities you look for in a friend. On the second card, list the three qualities you bring to relationships as a friend. And on the third card, write down one or two reasons why a friendship you used to have dissolved or ended. Refer to these cards to see whether you are the kind of friend or have the kind of friends that the following texts describe.



text I

How does one acquire a friend? By eating together, drinking together, reading together, studying together...and revealing one's secrets: both Torah secrets and everyday secrets.

Avot d' Rabbi Natan 8

וקנה לך חבר כיצד מלמד שיקנה האדם חבר לעצמו שיאכל עמו וישתה
עמו ויקרא עמו וישנה עמו וישן עמו ויגלה לו כל סתריו סתר תורה וסתר

דרך ארץ
אבות דרבי נתן



conversation

- Are there other ways that one acquires a friend in addition to those listed in this text?
- It is likely that you have shared “everyday secrets” with a friend. How do you understand “Torah secrets,” and how is this a means to acquiring a friend?

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text 2

“Acquire for yourself a friend.” Note the language of acquisition. It does not say “Make a friend” or “Become friendly with others.” The point is you should always have a friend who will help you better all aspects of your conduct, as our Sages commented (Babylonian Talmud Taanit 23a), “Either friendship or death.” If one does not easily find a friend, one must make efforts in this direction. If necessary, one should procure his/her friendship until true friendship is established. One should not cease accommodating oneself to the other person’s nature until such friendship has been established. Thus, the ethical masters have taught, “Do not establish friendship according to your nature; establish friendship according to your friend’s nature.”

Maimonides, Shemonah Perakim, commentary to Pirke Avot 1:6



conversation

- What is the ultimate goal of true friendship according to this text?
- Do you have a friend who “helps you better all aspects of your conduct?” How does s/he do so? (You may wish to share this text with her/him.)
- Are you this kind of friend to others? What do you think some “do’s and don’t’s” for this kind of friendship should be?
- The lesson of “Acquire for yourself a friend” grows out of a desire to be closer to others. It is good to make an effort to bring a new person into your social group, and to judge him/her favorably. What has been your experience doing so?
- Choni the Circle-Maker was a legendary character in the Talmud who fell asleep and woke up in a time-warp seventy years later to find that people no longer knew him or believed that he was who he said he was. He died of a broken heart. “The rabbis conclusion to this story of Choni was “Friendship or death,” a phrase which Maimonides also cited in Text 2 above. In Aramaic, the expression rhymes: *chevruta o metuta*. What would your life be like without friends? What are the larger repercussions of not having friends?”
- Maimonides’ text goes on to say that to be a true friend means to accommodate oneself to your friend’s nature rather than expect a friend to accommodate to yours. Do you have examples of friendships that did not survive disagreements? Can you think of ways you might respond to your friends differently based on this teaching?

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text 3

In general, there are three types of friends: a useful friend [for the sake of “benefit”], a pleasant friend [for the sake of “satisfaction”], and a friend befriended for the sake of a higher purpose, who ethically inspires and instructs...

When both friends yearn for and are directed toward the goal of “the good,” they are ethically inspiring friends to each other. Each one will want to be helped by his/her friend in achieving that good for both of them together. This is the type of friend we are commanded to acquire...

Maimonides, Shemonah Perakim, commentary to Pirke Avot 1:6



conversation

- Consider which of your friends fall into the three categories that Maimonides defines. Do the categories overlap?
- Maimonides actually divides the second category of friendship into two, “a friend whom one trusts and a friend who grants one pleasure.” He writes, “A friend whom one trusts refers to a person on whom one can rely without withholding anything from him, neither deed nor word. He reveals to him all his matters - both good and bad - without worrying that he will shame him – either in private or in public.” What would differentiate this kind of deep friendship, do you think, from the third type of ethical or spiritual friendship?
- The third type of friend is the rarest kind to have, and the hardest to “acquire.” Do you think that age may be a requirement for this kind of friendship? If so, why do you think that would be?
- How might you move a friend from being a “useful” or “pleasant” friend to being a spiritual friend?
- Maimonides says that it is *commanded* to acquire a spiritual friend. What must we do to earn this kind of friendship?
- Maimonides wrote, “A friend befriended for the sake of a higher purpose refers to a situation where both desire and focus on a single objective: doing good. Each will desire to draw strength from one’s friend, and to attain this good for them both.” Before reading this text, was this something you ever thought to attain from a friendship? Is it something you value?

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text 4

Who finds a faithful friend, finds a treasure. *Jewish proverb*



conversation

- What makes a true and faithful friend?
- How do you become a true and faithful friend?



introduction

Yehuda Meir Shapiro (or Shapira), the Lubliner Rabbi, lived from 1887–1933 and was a prominent Polish Hasidic rabbi.



text 5

A real friend feels no need to excuse himself for some failing. *The Lubliner Rabbi*



conversation

- As a friend, if another friend does something that is harmful to you, do you forgive your friend outright or let the person know they have wronged you? What is the responsibility of both parties?



introduction

Ben Sira, or Ben Sirach (fl. 2nd century BCE) was a Hellenistic Jewish scribe, sage, and allegorist from Jerusalem. He is the author of the *Book of Sirach*.



text 6

Be on your guard against your friends. *Apocrypha: Ben Sira*



conversation

- How do you interpret the advice given in this text?
- Should you always be able to trust your friends without reservation?

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text 7

Who tells a secret will forfeit trust, and find no true friend. *Ben Sira 27:16*



conversation

- Is there ever a correct time to betray a friend's trust?



practices

- We learn much from others in our lives. What have you seen modeled about friendship in your friends and family? What might others learn from what you model?
- Make a list of the kindnesses that friends have done for you. Aim to do those same kindnesses for others in the coming month.
- List your advice for friendship and share it with a friend or family member.
- Put one of the following plans into action with one of your spiritual or potentially spiritual friends: go to a museum, take a nature walk or hike together, attend a classical music concert, do a social justice project, go to a lecture, study Torah.
- Consider how Generosity and Compassion, two of the *middot* that we have previously studied, connect to the theme of friendship.



links to additional information

- Much has been written about friendship throughout the ages. Check out some famous quotes on these two websites:

https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/topics/topic_friendship.html

<http://www.yourtango.com/2013190143/37-friendship-quotes-famous-inspirational-best-friends-sayings>

- An on-line article entitled “Havruta: Learning in Pairs” can be found at www.myjewishlearning.com/article/havruta-learning-in-pairs/

Personal Reflections... 

1. How have your friends influenced the choices you have made for your independent projects?

2. How have your independent projects impacted your relationships with friends?



Chai Mitzvah was created as a way to engage adults in a Jewish journey throughout their lives. **Chai Mitzvah** encourages adults to take some time to reflect on where they are Jewishly and what they would like to achieve.

It is our hope that your **Chai Mitzvah** experience will serve as a catalyst and ignite deeper Jewish engagement and continued growth for you. If this experience was worthwhile for you, please consider forming and leading a group next year.