

Jewish Insights into Friendship

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Our society often judges people by the friends they choose. A good friend can help make life more meaningful and worth living, but most people who we call "friends" are actually only acquaintances, not true friends. How does one discern between who is a true friend and who is a mere acquaintance? What type of relationship should true friendship look like? How important is friendship? Does the Jewish view on this topic coincide with or differ from the norms of western society?

True friendship in Judaism, is much more than an acquaintance, and is not mere companionship in Judaism, or a casual relationship, according to some opinions. Based on the Mishna that urges each person to acquire a friend,¹ Rambam-Maimonides, in explaining friendship in general, states that a true friend is someone who is involved in every aspect of that friend's life, similar to the person who cares for a very expensive item that was purchased. Friends should help one another in every aspect of each other's lives. And if a person does not yet have such a relationship with an individual, continues Rambam, a human being should continue to seek out associations with other people until he or she has found that one individual worth having this very special relationship called friend.²

Yet there are a number Jewish sources which seems to contradict each other with regard to friendship and its precise Jewish definition. For example, one Mishna says that a Jew should give a friend as much respect he or she gives to himself or herself.³ Yet another Mishna, just two chapters later in the same tractate, says that the respect for a friend should be equal to that of a teacher,⁴ quite a different relationship and level of respect. So which is it? How does Judaism specifically define friendship and the relationship between friends? The fact that the Code of Jewish Law rules that legally Jews should greet friends differently, based on the closeness of their relationship,⁵ demonstrates that there are indeed many different levels of friendship and different kinds of friends in Judaism.

FRIENDSHIP IS A UNIQUELY HUMAN RELATIONSHIP

The concept of friendship, i.e. a mutual relationship or close attachment, does not exist in any other species on earth, except among human beings. While some species, especially mammals or primates, often assemble in groups or herds, and even though it appears that sometimes two of the species seem to be closely associated, there are no true friendships among animals. The special intimacy of human friendship cannot be found anywhere else. This is proven from a Torah commentary. When the Torah speaks about the responsibility of payment when one ox gore's the ox of one's friend⁶, technically the verse can be read

¹ Mishna Avot 1:6

² Maimonides, Commentary to the Mishna, Avot 1:6

³ Mishna Avot 2:10

⁴ Mishna Avot 4:12

⁵ Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 225:1

⁶ Exodus 21:45

either that it is the ox of the human owner's friend, or that the two oxen are friends. Ibn Ezra⁷ cites and mocks the explanation of Ben Zuta, a Karaite, who claims the Torah's intent was that the two oxen were friends. Ibn Ezra says that this is impossible since animals cannot be friends, only human beings. He adds that the only "friend" that Ben Zuta had was the ox in the verse!

THREE SPECIFIC AND DIFFERENT KINDS OF FRIENDSHIP IN JUDAISM

Based on the view of Aristotle, Maimonides quotes three kinds of friends who a person acquires in life.⁸ First, Rambam-Maimonides redefines these in Jewish terms, and then Rabbi Soloveitchik in the twentieth century again explains these types of friends from a contemporary perspective, as we will see below. All three can legitimately be called friends, and some aspects of these relationships are uniquely Jewish.

OHEV, ACQUAINTANCE, TO-ELET (HELPER) FRIEND

The first kind of friend, quoted by Maimonides, is a friend he calls "*To-elet-Practical*."⁹ He defines this relationship as friends between two partners or the relationship between a king and his advisors. Rabbi Soloveitchik defines this as a *Friend Who Needs Help*, and explains that both friends wish to help each other whenever one is in trouble or in a place of difficulty.¹⁰ Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch explains¹¹ the word "*Ahav-Love*" as the two words "I give," and thus, this relationship is based on each party giving to each other, and fulfilling their needs in various situations. The author would call this friendship one of *Ohev-Acquaintance*. Not an acquaintance friend who is merely casual, but one usually based on time and place. They help each other, because circumstances demand it. They know each other because they are neighbors, schoolmates, bunkmates in camp, or share a workplace. They are indeed friends, but once the "need" to help each other dissipates, or one of the individuals moves to another location, the friendship dissipates or is lost. The Mishna says¹² that an *Ohev-Friend-lover* relationship built on this need to help each other is able to stay strong only as long as the need for each other continues, as that which binds them. Once that need is gone, i.e. they are no longer in close or daily contact, the friendship ends and the relationship is usually severed.

RE-A, INTIMATE, MENUCHA, "WORRIER" FRIEND

A second type of friendship is defined by Maimonides as *Menucha-Inner Peace*.¹³ Rambam says this friendship is like a "security blanket," where both friends open up to each other, and speak about all issues, and do not hold back about anything. Even about issues that others might find repulsive. These are "soul brothers" who will reach a stage of spiritual "*Menucha-Inner Peace*." Rabbi Soloveitchik calls this relationship that of a friend of *Daaga-Worry*.¹⁴ He, too, like Maimonides, says that these friends speak

⁷ Ibn Ezra commentary on Exodus 21:45

⁸ Maimonides, Commentary to the Mishna, Avot 1:6

⁹ Maimonides, Commentary to the Mishna, Avot 1:6

¹⁰ Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, *Shana BiShana*, 1982, page 411

¹¹ Genesis 22:1 with commentary of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch

¹² Mishna Avot 5:16

¹³ Maimonides, Commentary to the Mishna, Avot 1:6

¹⁴ Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, *Shana BiShana*, 1982, page 411

about anything and everything, their innermost thoughts and doubts, to one's depths and core.

The author calls this friendship *Re-a*, based on an unusual detail of a Torah verse. When Judah leaves his brothers to live alone, he befriends a man named Chirah the Adullamite. Then, after Judah meets who he thinks is a prostitute, but his actually his daughter in law, Tamar, the next day Judah wishes to return the surety items he took from her in lieu of payment, but Tamar is nowhere to be found. The strangest part of this story, however, is that Judah himself does not go to return the items to Tamar, but, rather, Judah sends his friend-*Re-a* Chirah with the items.¹⁵ Why would anyone who committed a sin and an intimate act that he was ashamed of, involve his friend and send the friend to return these items, instead of doing this himself in a stealthy manner? This implies the deep connection between Judah and Chirah, the friendship of *Re-a*. They told each other everything, even when one person visited a prostitute (which Judah was later ashamed of), and Judah trusts Chirah to return the items to Tamar without breathing a word to anyone else. This is the deep commitment of friends who are *Re-a*, and that is why the Torah calls Chirah a *Re-a* of Judah.

The prophet Zechariah emphasizes this notion when he says that a *Re-a* –Friend speaks only the truth to his other *Re-a* –Friend.¹⁶ In fact, the rabbis envisioned this as the ideal relationship between husband and wife as well. It is a trite expression, “My spouse is my best friend.” But under the Chupah-Canopy when the Seven Blessings are recited, describing the ideal relationship of the married couple, they are called *Re-im Ahuvim*-Beloved friends (*Re-a*).¹⁷ Thus, this is the ideal Jewish couple, not only helping each other and intimate only as husband and wife, but also as *Re-im*-Intimate friends. Maimonides alludes to this as well when he states that one alternative example of his *Menucha*-Inner Peace” friends are those who have a sexual relationship.¹⁸

CHAVER, LEARNING, MAALE (INTELLECTUAL) FRIEND

The third type of friendship may be unique to Judaism. Although Maimonides describes this *Ma-ale*-Friend as one who wants only the good of another person (certainly not unique to Judaism), he then says the relationship is that of a teacher and student.¹⁹ Normally, we do not think of friendships when we describe a teacher and a student. But in Judaism, the relationship between teacher and friend is intertwined. Rabbi Soloveitchik calls this a Friend of *De-ah*-Intellect,”²⁰ a partnership with one goal, and one identical vision of life.

The author calls this a *Chaver*-Friend. In modern Hebrew, the word *Chaver* signifies simply a friend, causal or otherwise. But the Talmud already spoke about learning from one's friends as the greatest source of learning. Rabbi Judah the Prince (Rebbe) said he learned most from his colleagues/friends, more than

¹⁵ Genesis 38:1, 20-22

¹⁶ Zachariah 8:16

¹⁷ The Sixth of the Seven Blessings recited at a Jewish wedding

¹⁸ Maimonides, Commentary to the Mishna, Avot 1:6

¹⁹ Maimonides, Commentary to the Mishna, Avot 1:6

²⁰ Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, *Shana BiShana*, 1982, page 411

from his teachers.²¹ The word *Chaver* in Jewish law always meant a Jew who was learned. The Mishna states that a “*Chaver-Learned Jew*” is the opposite of an *Am Ha-aretz-unlearned Jew*.”²² Today, each of the two study partners in the *Beit Midrash*-House of Study is called a *Chavrutah*, the Aramaic translation of *Chaver*. And in the Ashkenazic world, specifically in Germany in recent centuries, the title of *Chaver* was given to distinguished lay leaders who were very learned in Torah (this title would appear on their tombstone as well). Thus, the highest form of friendship in Judaism, are two people who are intellectually compatible, with the same world vision, and who teach each other. When the Talmudic sage Choni slept for seventy years and woke up to find none of his friends alive in the House of Study, it was only then that he declared that he preferred death, rather than living a life without these friends from the House of Study (*Chavrutah*).²³ The Code of Jewish Law actually codifies the relationship of someone who is both a friend and teacher. He says that someone who starts out as a pure student but then ends up as a friend (and almost intellectual equal) of the teacher is called a *Talmid-Chaver*.²⁴ The Mishna, however, makes it clear that a person can befriend another and have that “teacher” relationship with a friend immediately, as it says that even if a Jew learns one verse or rabbinical law from another, he or she must give that “teacher/friend” honor as a teacher.²⁵ Thus, the teacher/friend relationship can begin simply and evolve into a complex and deep friendship.

Now we can understand and resolve the contradiction highlighted on page one above. The Mishna that says a Jew should respect his or her friend as much as himself was speaking about the second type of companion, the *Re-a-Friend*. But honoring a person like a teacher refers to the third friendship, the *Chaver-Friend*.

THE JEWISH OBLIGATION OF FRIENDS TO EACH OTHER

The Mishna uses a strange verb in referring to becoming friends.²⁶ In quoting the statement of Yehoshua Ben Prachya about how to properly behave in life, the Mishna says, "Acquire for yourself a friend." But the literal translation is "Buy yourself a friend." How does one buy a friend? Is friendship, then, a function of wealth? It is clear that the means of buying referred to in the Mishna is not money. Rather, just as a monetary transaction is in reality, an exchange of money for a good or service, so, too, is friendship an exchange. The material used for exchange in a friendship is mutual experience and giving to the other person. Thus, a friendship is "bought" through an exchange of give and take, a giving of oneself and receiving from the other person. Only when each person both gives and receives will the friendship endure. One word for friend described above, *Chaver*, comes from the Hebrew verb *Lechaber*, to unite to blend together.

But friendship in Judaism implies even more than mutual experiences or even giving to the other

²¹ Makkot 10a

²² Mishna Gittin 5:9

²³ Taanit 23a

²⁴ Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De'ah 242:4

²⁵ Mishna Avot 4:3

²⁶ Mishne Avot 1:6

person. The Midrash says²⁷ that to acquire a friend, one must eat with him or her, drink, sleep, learn and even reveal one's secrets to him or her. This implies that a true Jewish friendship can exist only on the most intimate level. Nothing less fulfills the true meaning of the word "friend" in the Jewish sense.

The Mishna²⁸ describes the ultimate example of true friends, David and Jonathan. These individuals had every reason and tendency to hate each other, based on events in their lives. It was David who replaced Jonathan's father as the king of the Jewish people. Jonathan, who might have naturally sought the crown as it was customary at that time (as it is today) for royalty to be passed down within the family, should have hated David for becoming king. In addition, Saul, Jonathan's father, considered David an enemy and tried to kill him. Normally, if a father wishes to kill someone, the friendship of that person with the son will not continue. Nevertheless, despite all these factors, the friendship of David and Jonathan endured and became even stronger. This is true friendship indeed.

DO FRIENDS ALWAYS HAVE TO AGREE?

Do true friends necessarily have similar interests, similar opinions on issues and never disagree? If this were true, what a boring and shallow friendship this would be. Like a good marriage, part of friendship is disagreeing in a respectful manner and coming to some sort of accommodation that both partners can live with. Friends, like spouses, must not be afraid to point out deficiencies (in a dignified discussion) and areas of disagreement. In fact, the Midrash²⁹ points out that any friendship without reproving and without differences is not a true friendship. Issues must be dealt with in order for both partners to grow.

It is said that the opposite of love is not hate – it is indifference. Just as the marriage is often a love-hate relationship, so it is with friendship, according to the Talmud,³⁰ which says that every friendship involves an element of hate. The Talmud³¹ describes the classic relationship of two famous schools in the Mishnaic period, Beit Shammai (The House of Shammai) and Beit Hillel (The House of Hillel). Although they argued with each other vociferously on many pages of the Talmud, they did not hesitate to intermarry, i.e. daughters and sons of Beit Shammai married those of Beit Hillel and vice versa. The passage says that this demonstrates the great friendship between the people of the two schools, and shows the importance of friendship and peace despite argument. From all these sources, it can be seen that Judaism views real friendship as any of the three types explained above, as a very intense relationship in which both parties are intimately involved with the lives of each other, but where there is disagreement which leads to personal growth by each person.

One modern rabbi associated the Hebrew word "*Re-a-Friend*" with the word, spelled the exactly the same, as evil (*Ra*), as well as the *teruah* sound of the shofar.³² He explains that, just like the *teruah* sound breaks up the smooth unified sound of the *tekiah*, part of Jewish friendship is to sometimes "break

²⁷ Midrash, Sifri Nitzavim 2

²⁸ Mishna Avot 5:16

²⁹ Midrash Beraishit Rabbah 54:3

³⁰ Pesachim 113b

³¹ Yevamot 14b

³² Rabbi Yitzchak Hutner, Reshimot Rav, Adar 5734

up” the friend by giving him or her chastisement, and pointing out the person’s faults and areas to improve.

FRIENDSHIP IN JUDAISM SHOWS REAL CARING, EMPATHY AND KINSHIP

Whether the connection is that of an Acquaintance Friend, an Intimate Friend or a Learning Friend, as explained above, true friendship in Judaism, is much more than a shallow relationship, mere companionship, or a causal rapport, according to some modern definitions. When Proverbs says that the worry of a person weighs an individual down,³³ Rabbi Assi in the Talmud,³⁴ in a play on words, explains that this verse signifies that a person should unload his or her problems and worries on others – a friend – implying that this will make the person feel better. On this Talmudic passage, Rashi explains that a good friend might give advice to that worried and burdened individual, and may make him or her feel better.³⁵

IMPORTANCE OF FRIENDSHIP IN JUDAISM

Judaism seems to attach special importance to the friendship relationship than other life relationships. Rabbi Yehoshua stated that the most important thing in life to "cleave to" is friendship.³⁶ Even in Jewish law, friendship is treasured. When a person does not see a good friend for a period of longer than thirty days, upon seeing that friend, he should recite the *shehechyanu* blessing. If it is longer than twelve months, the blessing for the revival for the dead is recited. Shulchan Aruch adds that this applies only for a true friend who is a favorite, a person he is indeed happy to see.³⁷ Friendship is such important part of life that a blessing should be made when it returns after an absence.

It is unnatural for a person to live without true friends or without seeking true friendships. The person who truly does not want to have friends and does not seek friends does not live a normal existence. Next to family, it is the most important human relationship a person can have. When G-d told man, that it is not good that he remain alone,³⁸ G-d meant that man needs a lifelong friend. Hopefully, a spouse fulfills that role, as discussed above, and mentioned in a Jewish wedding ceremony. Sometimes, though, a friend can also act as a helpmate.

Ecclesiastes³⁹ describes a friendship when he says that, "Two are better than one." This means that man's natural existence is in two's, in friendships, and not ones, alone. A friend adds meaning to the life of a person. The verses continue to say that if one falls, the other is there to pick him or her up. And if one is attacked, the other will come to the rescue. This refers not only to a physical fall or physical attack. A true friend is there for support of any type. Friends help each other and support each other through difficulties. Judaism considers a true friend much more than a mere acquaintance, but, rather, a person who will always be there for the other, to help the friend in difficult times, to celebrate in good times and to help the person grow through learning and through guidance. Finally, a good friend cares more about giving to a friend than receiving from a friend.

³³ Proverbs 12:25

³⁴ Yoma 75a

³⁵ Rashi commentary on Yoma 75a

³⁶ Mishna Avot 2:9

³⁷ Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 225:1

³⁸ Genesis 2:18

³⁹ Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

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