

## The Definition of “Rebbe”

### Rambam, Mishnah Torah, Hilchos Talmud Torah, Perek V

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#### Halacha IX

“...When are these things said? By one’s *rav muvhak*, from whom he learnt most of his wisdom. But if he did not learn most of his wisdom from this individual he is considered a *talmid chaver* and is not obligated in his honor in all of these ways...”

We learnt many fascinating halachos in this perek of aspects of appropriate respect for one’s rebbe (teacher of Torah). There are laws of how one interacts with one’s rebbe, making halachic decisions or teaching Torah in his presence, and there are even laws for which one’s responsibility to one’s rebbe is higher than to one’s father<sup>1</sup>. After so many of these rules are listed, the Rambam qualifies them in a significant way, by clarifying that these halachos only hold true for one’s *rebbe muvhak*<sup>2</sup>. It is important to note the Rambam’s clarification that if one learnt even one aspect of Torah, large or small, from a rebbe who wasn’t his *rebbe muvhak* he still needs to accord him honor, such as rising when the rebbe enters a room.

What is the nature of the unique dynamic that renders a teacher his student’s *rebbe muvhak*? The braissa in Meseches Baba Metziah, 33a, discusses the mishna which teaches the priority of doing certain things for one’s rebbe over doing those things for one’s father. Rebbe Meir teaches that the type of rebbe being discussed is one that has taught the student understanding of the reasoning of laws, not just information. Rebbe Yehuda agrees that it must be an individual with whom the student had a unique learning experience. He argues that unique experience is not dependent on the nature of what the student learnt from the teacher, rather the amount. Therefore, whichever teacher taught the student the majority of his Torah knowledge has special status. Rebbe Yosi argues that every rebbe who taught someone something in Torah should be treated with this level of respect. Rav Yochanan decides the halacha is like Rebbe Yehuda, and that is the codification of the Rambam.

If one thinks about Rebbe Yehuda’s definition of *rebbe muvhak* one might very well wonder how common it is today to have such a relationship with a Torah teacher. Indeed, the Darkei Moshe (Yoreh Deah, 242, 14) cites the Maharai who questions the practice of referring to a teacher as someone’s primary rebbe when he has learnt a relatively small amount from this individual<sup>3</sup>. This would seem to be even more the case with our current educational system. A student embarking on the standard day school or yeshiva system encounters so many teachers over his years. Surely one learns much from each of them, but it would be difficult for any one to say he taught the student the majority of his Torah knowledge.

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1 For example, if one’s rebbe and father were both in captivity and he has the ability to procure their freedom, he should first focus on his rebbe before his father. The reason for this surprising halacha is that one’s father brought him into this World, whereas one’s rebbe, through teaching him Torah, brings him into the World to come (Baba Metziah, 33a).

2 See the Kesef Mishnah at the beginning of the perek for an interesting discussion if indeed all of these laws only hold true for one’s *rebbe muvhak*. Though he cites another opinion which resolves a seeming contradiction in the words of the Rambam with this approach, he concurs with the standard reading.

3 It should be noted that the Maharai is accepting of the practice, since it seems to have developed as a common minhag among the Jewish people.

The previous difficulty notwithstanding, one wonders how a given teacher can be credited for the majority of one's Torah knowledge. As with so many other disciplines, the more advanced a student of Torah becomes, the more independent he is in his studies. Once a student has reached a certain point, can any rebbe ever suggest he taught the student the majority of his Torah knowledge? In his comments on Shulchan Aruch the Rema writes (242, 30) that the standards we seek when determining who is an individual's *rebbe muvhak* is not based on who taught him the most *pilpul*<sup>4</sup>, rather which teacher gave him an approach to a sound, straight understanding of halachic analysis. This comment would seem to imply that we identify one's primary teacher not necessarily by who taught him the most actual material. In many cases<sup>5</sup> we would explore who gave him the tools to proceed in his independent learning at a sophisticated level.

As we continue to explore aspects of the study of Torah we see in this chapter an implicit statement of the remarkable impact one teacher can make on a student's growth in Torah study. We have developed a working definition of the *rebbe muvhak* as the individual who uniquely shapes his student's analytic approach. Fortunate is the student who is truly molded in numerous ways by the methodology and life approach of his *rebbe muvhak*. Rav Gedaliah Anemer, zt"l, was proud to be a product of the Telshe yeshiva. That model manifested itself in countless aspects of his conduct. In a sense, as long as we had him in our midst we too were students of a proud Lithuanian tradition. That was only so because he was a devoted student, deeply immersed in the methodology and traditions of his teachers, and their teachers before them.

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4 This term is associated with a conceptual exchange with very little practical application.

5 Such as when the student studied a great deal independently