

# TORAH WEEKLY

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## Rabbinic Counsel

By: Rabbi Ari Aragon (Originally Published 2016)

How does one become a rabbi? The obvious answer is semicha! You study the relevant areas of Jewish law, get tested by a qualified rabbi or institution, and you get semicha – you are ordained as a rabbi.

Simple, right? Actually, there's a lot more to semicha than that, and the best place to discover more is in the Torah. The verse in this week's parsha (Pinchas 27:18) states, "Hashem told Moshe, 'Take Yehoshua Ben Nun... and you shall place (samachta) your hands upon him... and you shall give of your splendor upon him...'" The word samachta, related to the word semicha, is the origin of what we call semicha. The definition of semicha is that the teacher places his hands on the student's head and gives over his spiritual splendor to the next generation.

The Rambam tells us (Laws of Sanhedrin 4:1), "Every one of the Sanhedrin must have semicha from someone who had semicha..." To put it into our terms, if you don't have semicha, you ain't a rabbi! We may ask, "This is a very interesting ritual, but what does this have to do with making someone a rabbi? Surely, if one knows the necessary information, that ought to suffice to allow him to become a rabbi!"

It gets even more puzzling, because the process described above is not done today, and if someone does study the pertinent portions of halacha and has proven that he knows them, he can receive what we now call semicha and function as a rabbinical figure. Why is what we have today called semicha if it seems to have nothing to do with the actual procedure of semicha laid out in the Torah?

The aforementioned passage of the Rambam continues, "And Moshe Rabbeinu bestowed semicha upon Yehoshua... and all the seventy elders, he bestowed them with semicha [as well], and Hashem's Shechina (Divine Presence) dwelled upon them..." Why is the Rambam telling us about the Shechina here in the laws of semicha? Shouldn't his focus be on the knowledge and scholarship of the students? Why does the Rambam focus on a side issue and completely ignore the main point?

The answer is that the bond between a teacher and his student is not about giving over information, it's about giving over the path to bring Hashem's presence into one's life.

Why is this the main thrust of the relationship? To explain, I would like to ask another question: What is the difference between the Torah and self-help? If the Torah is supposed to make us better people, what difference does it make if I open up a section of the Talmud or a Stephen Covey book on the seven habits of the highly successful? To put it more bluntly, many people recover from being alcoholics without the Torah, and many people with the Torah don't change at all!

The answer is that the point of the Torah is not to merely make you a better person - it's a guide on how to change yourself so that Hashem enters your life, allowing you to become a living Bais Hamikdash (Temple)! The reason one shouldn't be an alcoholic isn't just because it's destructive, it's because an alcoholic can't properly bring Hashem's Shechinah into one's life. It's taught that at the building of the Mishkan (Tabernacle) in the desert, the only way Hashem's presence was able to rest upon it was if all of the vessels were in their proper places. One inch too far to the left or right for one item – no Shechina. Similarly, for a person to allow the Shechinah to dwell in one's life, that life needs to be in the right place. Of course, one needs to be a good person, but that is part of a much bigger context - that the Torah demands a certain goodness of a person. Stephen Covey's works may be wonderful, but they can never tell you what you need to do to bring Hashem into your life. The starting point is figuring out where the Torah tells me to go and what the Torah instructs me to do to get there. When that course is determined, a person is walking on the King's highway. The only way to become Hashem's emissary is through His Torah. To make up what spirituality means on our own simply doesn't work!

This is why a person needs a rebbe, a teacher. Granted, without a rebbe, a person can know the information, and he can even be a professor in Biblical or Talmudic studies, but as long as he's not part of that chain that goes back to Moshe Rabbeinu, he can't translate that information into life. He can't pass the Shechina on to the student. Judaism is not a religion of ideas – it's a way of life with Hashem. And only with a rebbe is a person able to truly live in that reality of life. Even today, ideally, semicha should come through a rabbi with whom the student is connected. The relationship with a connected rabbi is not only integral, it is one of the most pleasant and meaningful relationships that we can cultivate.

## Alumni Focus

Rabbi Ari Aragon

PAST



Rabbi Aragon, learning in Kollel, 2016

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Rabbi Aragon, 2023

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Denver, CO

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