

A Material Matter: Jewish Affluence in Contemporary Times



Knei Lecha Chaver:

True Friendship Beyond Materialism

The Mishna in *Pirkei Avot* imparts profound lessons on various aspects of life, including the importance of friendship. One of the memorable teachings found in *Pirkei Avot* is:

יהושע בן פרחיה אומר, עשה לך רב, וקנה לך חֵבֵר, ויהיו דין את כל האדם לכהן זכות: *Yehoshua ben Perahiah used to say: appoint for yourself a teacher, and acquire for yourself a friend, and judge all favorably.*

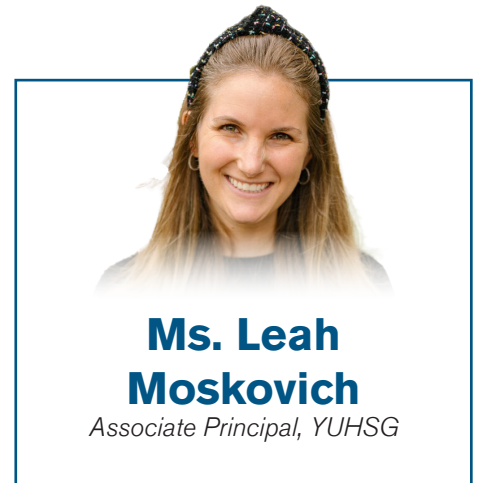
Avot 1:6

"*Knei lecha chaver*" is often translated as "Acquire for yourself a friend." However, this profound saying goes far beyond the superficial notion of buying friendship with materialism or money. Instead, it encourages us to contemplate friendship with the same seriousness and consideration we would give to acquiring a material object. True friendship, as guided by this teaching, prioritizes values, character, and genuine

connections over material possessions and fleeting trends, recognizing that lasting happiness lies not in materialism but in authentic human connections.

The Essence of "*Knei Lecha Chaver*"

To understand the true meaning of "*knei lecha chaver*," we must delve into the essence of the phrase. In Hebrew, the word "*knei*" is derived from the root "*kinyan*," which refers to an acquisition or purchase. While this might initially suggest the notion of acquiring a friend through material means, it actually urges us to invest time and effort in building meaningful relationships. The word "*chaver*" in Hebrew means "friend," but it goes beyond casual acquaintanceship. It implies a deep bond, a companion who shares values, virtues, and experiences on a profound level. Hence, "*knei lecha chaver*" challenges us to invest in



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friendships the same way we would carefully choose and acquire a precious material object, recognizing that genuine connections hold immense value beyond any material possession.

True Friendship & Materialism

In today's society, it is easy to fall into the trap of equating material possessions with happiness and using them as a means to gain popularity and acceptance.

Just walk into a high school cafeteria and look around: many are wearing some type of designer white sneaker, an overpriced sweatshirt, all while holding a Lululemon lunchbag. Students scour the internet searching for the newest trends, at better prices, to come to school in the newest shoe, wearing that new backpack, or using the newest water bottle. However, materialism is a hollow pursuit that often leaves us feeling unfulfilled and disconnected. True friendship cannot be bought or traded like commodities; it is forged through shared experiences, mutual respect, and meaningful interactions.

The pursuit of material possessions as a means to gain friends creates an illusion of connection, but ultimately leads to shallow relationships. When friendships are based on materialism, they tend to lack the depth and emotional support that are fundamental to lasting relationships. We need to think of friends as a *kinyan*: what are we willing to invest, and on what are we willing to invest, to create real relationships.

The Importance of Values and Character

The beauty of the teaching “*Knei lecha chaver*” lies in its emphasis on the significance of values and character in cultivating true friendship. Material possessions may capture attention momentarily, but it is shared virtues, integrity, respect, and kindness that form the backbone of authentic connections. The Mishna itself suggests that with a guiding rabbi and a good friend, you yourself will become someone who judges others favorably, someone with good values and middot. Therefore, in choosing friends, we should prioritize individuals who possess qualities that resonate with our own values. Friends who embody virtues such as loyalty, compassion,

generosity, and those with a non-judgmental nature are more likely to offer genuine emotional support during both happy and challenging times.

Teenagers, in particular, often find themselves swept up in the desire to be “cool” and follow the latest trends to gain acceptance among their peers. However, the pursuit of what’s “on trend” can be an exhausting endeavor. The pressure to conform to societal expectations and materialistic norms may lead to a loss of identity and individuality. In contrast, the wisdom of “*Knei lecha chaver*” reminds us to focus on building friendships based on shared values and character rather than trying to fit into a superficial social circle.

Material Possessions Won't Buy Happiness

Numerous studies have shown that material possessions have only a temporary impact on happiness. Once the initial excitement of acquiring something new fades, we often experience a sense of emptiness and a desire for the next coveted item. The pursuit of material possessions can become a never-ending cycle, leaving us perpetually dissatisfied. True happiness is derived from sincere personal humility, meaningful connections, genuine interactions, and a sense of belonging. The care and support of good friends enriches our lives and contributes to a deeper sense of well-being. As we invest in friendships based on values and character, we cultivate a support system that provides lasting happiness and emotional fulfillment.

Acquiring Good Friends Takes Time and Effort

Overcoming our natural tendencies is hard work. We all want to fit in, be on trend, and have commonalities, no

matter what social circles we fall into. The Rambam himself acknowledges this human nature:

דָּרָךְ בְּרִיתוֹ שֶׁל אָדָם לְהִיטֵב נַפְשׁוֹ בְּדַעְוֹתָיו
וּבְמַעֲשָׂיו אַחַר רָעוֹ וְחֻבְרָיו וְנוֹהֵג כְּמִנְהַג אַנְשֵׁי
מְדִינָתוֹ. לְפִיכֵן צָרִיךְ אָדָם לְהִתְחַבֵּר לְצַדִּיקִים
וְלִישֵׁב אִצְלָם הַחֲכָמִים תָּמִיד כִּדֵּי שִׁלְמוֹד
מִמַּעֲשֵׂיהֶם. וְיִתְרַחֵק מִן הָרָשָׁעִים הַהוֹלְכִים
בַּחֲשׂוֹךְ כִּדֵּי שֶׁלֹּא יִלְמוֹד מִמַּעֲשֵׂיהֶם.

It is natural for a man's character and actions to be influenced by his friends and associates and for him to follow the local norms of behavior. Therefore, he should associate with the righteous and be constantly in the company of the wise, so as to learn from their deeds. Conversely, he should keep away from the wicked who walk in darkness, so as not to learn from their deeds.

Hilchot Deiot 6:1

Because of our human nature to conform, we need to look beyond the material, beyond the external, and truly find friends with values we admire and seek to replicate. It is not just a suggestion, but an obligation to do so. Elul is the perfect month to take some time and introspect on both current and past friendships, on our values and what values we look for in others, to enter this new year with a newfound outlook on our “acquisitions.”

By prioritizing authentic human connections over materialism and trendy popularity, we unlock the potential for lasting happiness, emotional fulfillment, and personal growth. In a world that often emphasizes external appearances, “*Knei lecha chaver*” serves as a guiding light, reminding us to focus on what truly matters: the meaningful relationships that enrich our lives.