

# Pirkei Avot 1:6

## Translation

**Rabban Gamliel says: Make for yourself a master, remove yourself from doubt, and do not often tithe by estimation.**

## Maimonides

This which he counseled here, "make for yourself a master," does not refer to the subject of "study," but to rendering decision. Establish a preceptor for yourself so that you may rely upon him in [matters pertaining to] the forbidden and the permitted and you will withdraw from doubt. As they said in the Jerusalem Talmud: "Go, bring me an elder from the marketplace that I may rely upon him, then I will permit you." Thus he counseled that one should flee from extracting tithes by estimation, because it is of the doubtful matters.

## Rav Chaim of Volozhin

(Translation: Chanoch Levi in *Ruach Chaim*)  
*Make for yourself a master, remove yourself from doubt, and do not tithe excessively through approximation.* It is imperative to have a teacher available with whom to consult whenever a question of Torah arises. Do not think that you can adapt by simply being stringent whenever you are uncertain, for this approach can backfire. We are commanded to set aside a tenth of our produce as a give to the Levite. One who separates more than a tenth and presents it to the Levite is actually handing him prohibited food, as any produce in excess of the tenth needs to be tithed a second time, *ma'aser sheini*. Thus, by being stringent, one can actually do harm. Therefore, it is imperative to have a teacher available.

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R. Gamliel was the grandson of Hillel, and the "Nasi." The position of Nasi was almost exclusively held by the descendants of Hillel's family during the period of the Mishna and Talmud. Rabban Gamliel's first statement, that we make for ourselves a rabbi, appeared above in Mishna 6. We discussed there the importance of rabbis in general and of bringing the Torah's teachings to life and practical application. Maimonides distinguishes between the earlier message and this one. Above the focus was on having a teacher for the study of Torah, on having a rabbi to take the tradition and pass it along to the next generation -- and to you in particular. Here, however, the focus is on a rabbi to decide matters of Jewish law. Equally important,

רָבֵן גַּמְלִיאֵל הָיָה אוֹמֵר, עֲשֵׂה  
לְךָ רֵב, וְהִסְתַּלַּק מִן הַסְּפֵק,  
וְאַל תִּרְבֶּה לְעֵשֶׂר אֶמְדוֹת:

one should adopt a **single** rabbi rather than choosing from an assortment. People are in the bad habit today of "shopping around" for opinions, searching until they find a leniency -- or a

stringency. The ideal, however, is to select a single and proper mentor for yourself -- and to submit yourself to his decisions. And in so doing he will "remove himself from doubt:" his religious practices will be uniform and consistent. Our mishna continues, one should not give extra tithes due to estimation. R. Samson Raphael Hirsch explains the connection between the earlier part of the mishna and this final point. R. Gamliel is adding a crucial new insight here. A person might very well feel he can get along fine without a rabbi. What about his doubts? There is virtually no one among us who knows all the answers himself? Simple: Just be stringent. Not sure if the chicken is kosher? Throw it out. Not sure if an act is forbidden? Just don't do it. Easier to waste a little money or deny yourself a little pleasure here and there than run after a rabbi, opening up your own life and personal affairs to him. Why bring a rabbi into your life? Life is much easier without rabbis. Forget it; just be stringent. Life may sometimes require just a bit more asceticism, but most of us would much prefer to be left alone. In response to this R. Gamliel introduces the case of tithes. It does not always work to just say no or to round things up; here is a case in which it positively backfires.