

Touching the Future:
Mentoring and the Jewish Professional

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Touching the Future: The Promise of Mentoring

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A graduate student studying to become a Jewish educator works closely with an experienced professional directing a congregational religious school. A young rabbi works alongside a senior rabbi for two years after ordination. An aspiring agency executive consults regularly with a senior colleague at another nearby agency. These situations provide opportunities for mentoring, a relationship between an experienced professional and a novice designed to induct the novice into a profession.

In recent years both the Jewish community and the education profession have begun to explore the potential of mentoring in the preparation of professionals. This heightened interest in mentoring stems in large part from disenchantment with traditional forms of professional preparation. Universities, seminaries, public schools, and private foundations have come to recognize that mentoring can lead aspiring professionals further than academic training alone. Traditional modes of professional preparation place heavy emphasis on academic course work, occasionally supplemented by field experience. This field work may or may not be monitored by experienced professionals. Students are expected to learn theory and acquire skills and knowledge in their course work, and then apply what they have learned in class to professional situations. This technical-rational model of learning assumes that the situations which professionals encounter are clear and unambiguous, and that addressing them is merely a matter of selecting the appropriate theory and then applying it skillfully. But most situations which professionals face are fluid, ambiguous, heavily contextual, and indeterminate. The key to professional action lies not in finding

the right solution to a problem and applying it, but in asking the right questions, analyzing the situation in productive ways, and making sense of the situation one is facing. Hermeneutic ways of knowing, reflective practice, and cultural and conceptual sensitivity are the keys to understanding and knowing how to act.

Traditional modes of professional training informed by the technical-rational mind-set are thus ill-suited to preparing professionals to act intelligently. Adding a mentoring component has the potential to move the preparation of professionals beyond the technical-rational model by stressing the values of a profession, helping novices see multiple realities, and encouraging them to ask productive questions of situations they encounter. Beyond that, including mentoring relationships in professional training can bring wider change to the professions in the Jewish community by highlighting the textured nature of professional life. Professional authority can become grounded in the capacity to reflect and act wisely rather than in technical expertise or personal persuasion.

This paper outlines a vision of the mentoring relationship between senior professionals and novices that can help novices develop the abilities they need to confront the indeterminate, multi-layered situations they will face as professionals. This vision is based on an understanding of professional life that treasures individual insight and wisdom and exalts intelligent action over mere instinct, on the one hand, or blind application of theory, on the other. Senior professionals who become mentors in the image envisioned here can touch the future by raising a new generation of professionals prepared to succeed in an unknown tomorrow. They can also touch the present, in their own institutions, by sharpening their awareness of the contextual richness of their decisions and actions. It is hoped that by reading and reflecting on this paper and the commentaries which follow readers will evolve their own values and aspirations about mentoring and that they will leave with confidence in the potential for the type of mentoring relationships described here.

What readers will not find here is a "how to" manual instructing them in what to do to establish or maintain a mentoring relationship. Indeed, to provide such a set of prescriptions would run counter to the values and assumptions on which this paper is based: that all situations are unique, fluid and ambiguous and that they require reflective professionals to take into consideration a holistic understanding of their context in order to

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act in a wise and prudent manner. Any “tips” or “rules of thumb” about what to do in a mentoring relationship run the risk of being inappropriate to specific, concrete situations. Rather, the heuristics outlined here encourage mentors to develop their own unique responses to mentoring situations.

The understanding of mentoring presented here grew out of the experience of ten senior Jewish educators working with graduate students preparing for careers in Jewish education. Their stories are interwoven throughout this paper.

Recovering the Power of Mentoring

While the origins of mentoring predate technical-rational modes of thinking (going back at least as far as Odysseus in Greece and the wisdom literature of Proverbs), the current interest in mentoring stems from a number of contemporary factors. First and most important, there is a general disillusionment with technical-rational ways of thinking and a realization that mastery of technique does not, by itself, lead to effective professional action. Coupled with this is a recognition of the power of personal models in the development of professionals. An appreciation of the unique and unrepeatable has opened this generation to the power of personal stories and the wisdom they contain. Finally, in a society so prone to depersonalization, mentoring exalts the power of personal engagement and involvement.

Mentoring can make an important contribution to the preparation and maturation of professionals because of the way it links theoretical study with professional experience. Contextual factors play a significant role in mentoring relationships and provide a counterbalance to the broad generalizations that dominate learning in the academic classroom. The emphasis on context which is a crucial element in mentoring includes a consideration of the emotional, ethical, and spiritual dimensions of professional activity. Developing a world view, a personal style and professional values are accomplished more easily in a one-on-one relationship such as mentoring than in the group setting of a classroom.

Student interns often confront the problem of how to relate the theory they learn in class to the requirements of everyday life in educational institutions. For novices just beginning their careers, this tension is acute and most often arises from the conflict between their idealism and the

constraints of daily professional pressures. The problem persists, though in somewhat different form, for professionals not enrolled in programs of academic study. The insights and experiences presented here, though drawn from the work of senior professionals working with student interns, have implications for professionals working with younger colleagues who have completed their training and have begun their careers.

Mentoring has been described and used in many ways over the course of history, including the following:

- The Odyssey describes how Odysseus was left in the hands of Mentor to be raised and taught the ways of the world.
- The wisdom literature of the Bible outlines the teachings of educators charged with helping young people learn how best to live their lives.
- Hasidic rebbes were (and still are) sought out by their disciples for advice on practical and religious matters.
- Business leaders take younger colleagues under their wings, guide them, introduce them to other significant people, and provide opportunities for them.
- Professors serve as gatekeepers and guides to graduate students maneuvering their way through the labyrinthine path to the completion of their dissertations.
- Adults look back on relationships they had in the past which, at the time, may not have seemed particularly significant but which, with hindsight, they identify as having had profound impact on the direction their lives subsequently took.
- Adult educators help students returning to school after a long hiatus orient themselves to a world of new ideas and transform themselves as they engage with new studies and new ways of looking at the world.
- Successful adults agree to spend time each month with underprivileged teenagers in order to monitor their academic and social growth and to provide them with models to which to aspire.
- Master teachers assist younger colleagues embarking on their careers in learning the tricks of the trade so they can survive and thrive in the classroom.

Each of these relationships captures some of the power of mentoring. Mentors are, first and foremost, conveyors of wisdom in practical matters. They give advice about how to get on with life and how to succeed in one's endeavors; their authority stems from their own success in living and working. Mentors also take a proprietary interest in their protégés' success. They may open doors, make contacts, smooth things over after failed attempts. Mentors help transform protégés who, in some sense, come to the mentor unformed and full of unrealized potential.

In a mentoring relationship between a senior professional in Jewish life and a novice, all of this is possible—and more.

Laura, a Jewish educator with more than 20 years experience, has been the field supervisor for ten different graduate students. Some of them began and ended the year seeing Laura only as the person who supervised their work. Others, however, developed a deeper relationship with Laura, one in which both Laura and the student opened themselves to each other and shared their thoughts, aspirations and values. When these students became professionals, they maintained their relationship with Laura, at first calling her for advice and later sharing with her as colleague. For these students, Laura became a mentor.

Five concepts will help elucidate how a professional relationship between a senior professional and a novice can develop into a rich, textured and mutually fulfilling mentoring relationship: the purpose of mentoring (the deliberate induction of novices into a profession), the developmental cycle of mentoring (from dependence to independence and interdependence), the nature of the mentoring relationship (mutual and reciprocal), the content of mentoring (the sharing of expertise and wisdom), and the facilitating moves of mentoring (challenging, supporting and providing vision). By traveling across these five bridges together, mentor and novice can share a journey of mutual transformation.

The Purpose of Mentoring

Mentoring is aimed at the deliberate induction of novices into a profession. Novices learn the skills and techniques of the profession, and they practice them under the guidance of an experienced professional. They are encouraged to reflect on their own development, both in terms of what they are learning and how they are growing.

Mentoring moves beyond the technical-rational model, in which a skill is first learned and then applied, when the mentor introduces contextual issues in a process of joint reflection. Discussions between the mentor and the protégé deal with more than just “what works” as the mentor helps the novice become sensitive to the cultural context in which decisions are made and actions are taken. The mentor encourages the novice to examine the daily decisions and judgments he makes, to evaluate the value-stance he takes towards the profession, and analyze his interactions with the people around him. Most important, the mentor helps the novice discover what Thomas Green (1987) calls “the point of the profession,” the mooring which anchors professional practice in its most noble purposes.

It is often not apparent that the mundane tasks of professional life can be opportunities to examine and express the larger values of a profession. Janet, an education intern responsible for the retreat program for two local synagogues, came to understand this through her work with her mentor, Bill. While she had been a staff member on many retreats she had never been the person in charge. She talked with Bill several times in the weeks leading up to the first retreat. He outlined her tasks and responsibilities, and every now and then she checked in with him to report on her progress. On one of these occasions, she seemed particularly bogged down in details. Bill initiated a discussion with her about the aims and goals of the retreat program, and then they began to work together on her next task, dividing the participants into groups. Bill took the lead in this task, and “thought aloud” as he explained each decision he was making about the placement of participants. As he was explaining his decisions to her, his reasoning reflected the goals and aims they had just discussed and, by inference, the “point of the profession.”

The Developmental Cycle of Mentoring

As the mentoring relationship proceeds, the protégé travels a path from dependence to independence and then on to interdependence. In the beginning, the protégé depends on the mentor to set direction, establish expectations, and provide feedback. As the two grow closer through the openness, sharing and trust that develop between them, they encounter one of the painful realities of mentoring: In the end, mentor and protégé part company. The mentor gives the protégé advice, support and feedback, thus responding to the protégé's dependence, but simultaneously prepares the protégé to act autonomously. While the mentor shares her

wisdom and helps the protégé develop the ability to function competently in professional situations, she does so in such a way that the protégé does not become dependent on her presence in order to succeed. It is difficult to strike an appropriate balance between guidance and support, on the one hand, and *tsimtsum* (withdrawal), which encourages independence, on the other. (The parallels to parenting a teenage child in preparation for her departure for college are suggestive.)

Phil tries to strike this balance in working with his interns. Each year, Phil assigns them the task of preparing an "interactive bulletin board," a display at the entrance to the temple which invites passersby to answer a question, try an experiment, or contribute in some way to the display. None of the interns has ever heard of an "interactive bulletin board" before their internship, much less prepared one. Each year, Phil begins by explaining the task and its goals and purpose. Phil and the intern spend many hours working together to plan the first display. They bounce ideas back and forth, and Phil simultaneously models the process of thinking through the task and encourages the intern to express her own ideas. The second time around, the intern brings an idea to Phil, which they then discuss and revise together, but Phil leaves it to her to do the design and implementation - unless he senses from the conversation that the intern still needs more guidance before "going solo."

The departure of the protégé is in some ways the most complex time in the relationship. When the protégé departs from the mentor, he becomes the mentor's colleague and assumes a status and position similar to that of the person who was his mentor just a few months earlier. The cycle of the relationship moves from dependence to greater individuation as the protégé develops his own professional *persona*, to the interdependence which colleagues share.

The mentor, too, has personal goals in this relationship. In fostering the emergence of this new professional, she is fulfilling the developmental task which Erikson (1963) identified as "generativity." She is re-creating a part of herself that will touch the future in a way she herself will not. A Hasidic commentary on Deuteronomy presents a suggestive parallel: "Moses was great, but if others had not kept the Torah after he had departed, of what use would his greatness have been?" The protégé is poised to continue the work of the mentor; it is through the protégé that the

mentor's work, her values and concerns, and her dreams and visions, can be realized in the future. But here a danger lurks. In trying to touch the future, the mentor may be tempted to try and create herself anew in the novice. In mentoring, she can encourage the novice to act as she would and to believe as she would, but to do so would be hubris. The mentor's task is to encourage the protégé to emerge in his own unique way, not as an imitation of the mentor.

Esther, a professional who works extensively with the personnel in her institution, could easily have fallen into the trap of pushing her interns into imitating her own, very effective style. Early one year, Esther noticed that her intern, Sharon, was harsh and confrontational when giving direction to staff members. Esther felt that Sharon had to develop the ability to give staff members guidance and, when necessary, negative feedback, but to do so in a productive manner. Esther decided that it would not be helpful to tell Sharon how to handle these situations, or even to model for her how to do it. Instead, she asked Sharon to keep a log of her interactions with other staff members. Esther then elicited the staff members' reactions to their encounters with Sharon. Through this process, Sharon became more self-conscious of how she came across to staff members, but she often felt that in trying to "be nice" she was not as effective as she might otherwise have been. Esther encouraged Sharon to reflect on the multiple dimensions of these encounters and allowed Sharon to continue to struggle to develop her own style.

In what sense, then, is the protégé a disciple of the mentor and an extension of her life's work? If the mentor's task is to encourage the protégé to individuate and not to imitate, what does the mentor pass on? The mentor passes on the "gift of self as philosopher," the way she thinks about the profession, the values she brings to her work, and the world view which informs her actions. When the protégé moves on and becomes independent, he takes with him an inner voice which can rehearse how the mentor would have identified a problem, asked a question, searched for a solution. The protégé may carry this voice, but he will act in his own unique way. In time he will develop his own voice as philosopher of the profession. The mentor hopes that in the future the protégé, too, will raise up disciples and pass on the gift, and in this way the mentor's voice will echo infinitely into the future.

The Mentoring Relationship

Reciprocity and mutual respect are hallmarks of the mentoring relationship. Both parties are open to giving and receiving; both strive to achieve a taste of what Buber describes as an I-Thou relationship. They are totally present to the communication of the other, ready to listen and understand and respond.

The relationship is complementary, but it is not symmetrical. Mentor and protégé both give and both receive, but the content of what each gives and what each receives is different. The protégé receives tutelage and wisdom from the mentor, and in return gives the mentor new perspectives, helping the mentor see her old life through new eyes. The protégé asks questions about things that the mentor takes for granted, and shares ideas that the mentor may not have thought of for years, if ever. The freshness of the protégé is one of the most precious gifts he can give.

Through their sharing, mentor and protégé are both engaged in learning about learning. The protégé arrives at a better understanding of who he is, how he learns to do things, and how he learns about himself. The mentor learns how to theorize and think aloud, how better to understand the deep contextuality of everything she does, and how to see and hear the essence of what the protégé says and does. And in addition to all this, the mentor learns how to be a mentor in a more profound way.

A young professional can consider herself lucky to engage in a single mentoring relationship during the early stages of her career. But senior professionals who serve as mentors to students in graduate programs find themselves with a different protégé every year. Not every one of these relationships achieves its fullest and most profound potential, but year after year these professionals dedicate countless hours to their interns. When asked why they are willing to give up so much time out of their hectic professional schedules to work with graduate students, they invariably speak of the gifts the interns bring to their institutions and to them personally: the energy and enthusiasm, the freshness and creativity, the insightful questions they ask, the new perspectives they bring, the challenges they raise to the way things are done, and their optimism about the future.

At the heart of the mentoring relationship is a genuine encounter between two human beings, and the primary requirement for building this relationship is a basic trust that each person has in the other. To establish

the foundation, they each come to the relationship with unconditional respect for the other. They strive to encourage the other's sense of confidence in them as dependable, predictable and willing to give time to the relationship. They assure that confidences will not be violated and that within the relationship it is safe to share vulnerabilities.

Building on this trust, mentor and protégé commit themselves to addressing rather than avoiding the difficult questions that will confront them, questions about self and growth and challenge. This commitment to struggle may be as important to advancing the mentoring relationship as trust is to initiating it.

Both mentor and protégé bring generosity and openness to the relationship. The mentor is ready and willing to pass on the gift of self as philosopher, and the protégé is willing to share questions and vulnerabilities. The mentor is open to the protégé's questions and the protégé is open to the mentor's answers.

The mentor, however, goes beyond the protégé in generosity. Because one of the purposes of the mentoring relationship is that the protégé is transformed into an independent colleague of the mentor, he always poses a potential threat: He is a pretender to her throne. The mentor is thus engaged in empowering the protégé to be her replacement in a general sense if not in a specific job.

A Hasidic tale captures the anguish of the mentor's situation. An assessor was informed that he was to be succeeded by a younger man. He was also told that he must teach his successor the regulations concerning his work. Naturally the older man was depressed by the situation. So it is with all of us. The new generation rises up to take our places. All that remains to us is to continue in this world for a time in order to instruct our successors in the ways of the world.

An extraordinary generosity of spirit on the part of the mentor is required in order for her to be willing to give to the protégé even as she is fully cognizant of what the future may bring. She is willing to put her vulnerabilities on display, to show her uncertainties, to share her insecurities.

David had worked for several years before deciding to become a Jewish educator. He was assigned as an intern to Julie, who had just begun her

tenure in this particular school a year earlier. She had many years of experience in education, and spent endless hours sharing her expertise with David. As the year progressed, it became clear that Julie's style was quite different from what her clientele was used to, and although that was part of the reason she had been hired in the first place, by midyear tensions surfaced between Julie and the school board. When the decision was made not to renew Julie's contract, the board approached David to ask him to take Julie's place. He was flattered that the board thought so highly of him and was pleased that he had learned so much from Julie that he was now ready to assume a position of leadership, but he turned down the position.

The protégé has a tremendous burden as the recipient of the mentor's largess. He needs to be tolerant of her imperfections, understanding of her shortcomings, sympathetic to the difficulties she faces. The relationship works best when both mentor and protégé reveal themselves openly and receive each other's revelations sympathetically.

The Content of Mentoring

Sharing wisdom lies at the heart of the mentoring relationship. The mentor has accumulated wisdom through her years of experience as a professional. She passes on this wisdom, cognizant that while she is the *embodiment* of wisdom, she is not its *source*. Her wisdom comes from experience and reflection, from intuition, and from inspiration.

Wisdom includes practical advice about how to get on in the world. Rules of thumb are accumulated through confronting problems and figuring out, often through trial and error, what works and what doesn't. These rules of thumb are then stored in the professional's "memory bank," to be used when facing similar challenges in the future. Often, these rules can be stated in propositional form and conveyed from one person to another. A professional can thereby learn the accumulated wisdom of his or her profession, what Arthur Blumberg (1989) calls its "craft knowledge." The problem, of course, is that "tips of the trade" are decontextualized; what works in one situation may not work in others. Part of the "wisdom of practice," as Lee Shulman (1987) observes, is knowing when to ignore rules, whether they are derived from research or from experience. This kind of wisdom requires a much more richly textured understanding of professional situations than can be contained in a series of propositions.

More important than practical advice is the wisdom that takes the form of the ability to see the world not only as it is, but as it can be. Torah is equivalent to wisdom in Jewish tradition not because it describes the world as it is but because Torah sets out a blueprint for the world as God desires it to be. Wisdom requires an act of "moral imagination," the ability to bring together both worlds, this world and a better world. One must be able to envision a better world, a world in which hopes and aspirations are realized. But moral imagination is not just fanciful dreaming, it is imagining a world that *can* be, and developing a sense of how to work towards bringing about that world. As such, *wisdom is vision balanced by expertise.*

Expertise is the know-how needed to function in the world as it is. The mentor thus devotes considerable energy to helping the protégé develop the expertise relevant to competent professional functioning. Indeed, developing expertise may take the lion's share of their time together, for unless the novice learns how to function competently, he will not long survive in any professional position. But the mentor takes care not to socialize the novice into the way things are now. Rather, she sees her task as igniting his vision.

In working with her interns, Barbara was keenly aware of the need to help them develop expertise and at the same time to kindle their passion for Jewish education. She assigned one of her interns, Karen, responsibility for family education programs. In planning for the first full-day program, Karen and Barbara met together several times. Barbara laid out the purpose of family education, and together they decided that the theme for the first day would be how to bring God into everyday family life. In each subsequent meeting, Barbara raised important questions for Karen to consider in the planning process, focusing each time on different spiritual questions. By the time the day of the first program came, Karen had planned several learning experiences for children and their parents together. Each individual learning experience went well, but at several points during the day there were logistical problems: the chairs were not set up right for one program, materials for another program were missing, etc. In reflecting back on the experience, Karen felt that she developed a wonderful understanding of the potential of family education and a deeper appreciation of the role of God in people's lives. But she didn't have a good sense of the practical skills involved in programming. Barbara said she had focused on the visionary aspects of program planning with Karen because she mistakenly assumed that Karen already had the practical expertise.

Wisdom, as the balance between the functional and the visionary, has deep roots in Jewish tradition. The Book of Proverbs balances pragmatic advice for getting along in the world with spiritual admonitions to live in accordance with God's desires. Pirke Avot, too, mixes practical advice with an awareness of the larger purpose of life. This balance yields decisions and judgments in everyday matters which are thoughtful, moral and effective — in short, which are wise.

The Facilitating Moves of Mentoring

Three rubrics, supporting, challenging and providing vision, provide guidelines for the types of activities mentors engage in. They do not designate techniques that mentors use or recipes mentors follow, but alternative metaphors for guiding the mentor's actions. The mentor reflects on the evolving relationship, listens carefully to cues from the protégé, and decides what mix of supporting, challenging and providing vision is called for at a particular moment.

From the first time Ann walked into the temple office, Mark noticed that she seemed very confident and self-assured. One of Ann's responsibilities was teaching a fourth grade class. She was an experienced teacher and knew the subject matter she would be teaching very well. Mark decided that it would be best if he raised some difficult questions for her to think about very early in the year. At their second meeting, Mark challenged her about the way she was teaching the class and asked her to think about whether she had found the appropriate balance between learning and fun. As he probed her thinking with her, she became defensive. By the end of the meeting, she was responding to his questions with one-word answers and would not initiate any conversation on her own. In reflecting on the meeting, Mark realized that he had challenged Ann without first supporting her, and so for their next several meetings he focused more on her accomplishments. Only later in the year, after he felt he had established a supportive relationship with her, did he return to asking difficult questions, which she then willingly probed with him.

The mentor can *support* the protégé by affirming the validity of his current experience. She can listen sympathetically to his concerns, affirm his actions, and make suggestions in a positive way. She can express positive expectations for him and his work, and make their relationship special by

setting aside dedicated time to focus on him and his interests. In particular, when the protégé is feeling threatened or questions his abilities, the mentor can be there to provide guidance and to reinforce his sense of efficacy. The support the mentor shows for the protégé is most helpful when she is supportive of him as a person and a professional.

By contrast, when the mentor *challenges* the protégé, it is most helpful to challenge specific actions he has taken rather than to challenge his personal competence. She can challenge the protégé by accenting tensions within himself, or between him and his environment. She can highlight any cognitive dissonance he may be experiencing and thus encourage him to re-examine his assumptions and the ways he looks at situations. To do this, the mentor may raise questions about the protégé's current world view, may heat up dichotomies, or may invite the protégé to entertain alternative ways of seeing.

The mentor may *provide vision* by helping the protégé look ahead, form his dreams and set his own direction. She may model a vision, offer a map, or suggest new language and metaphors. She may remind him of the reasons he chose to enter the profession and may help him keep his hopes and aspirations alive. By providing vision, the mentor may help him maintain perspective during moments of triumph and despair.

Touching the Future

Through wise and skillful action, mentors can help the mentoring relationship reach its potential. Mutual growth and transformation is the result: Protégés develop vision and expertise and get ready to leave the comforts of the mentoring relationship and soar into professional life on their own. Mentors become reinvigorated, knowing that they are touching the future by raising disciples who share their deepest convictions and aspirations for improving their profession and contributing to a better world. Lifelong bonds between colleagues are formed. When mentoring "works" two people grow, their constituents are well served, and the most noble goals of their profession come a little closer to fruition.

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