

Find a Teacher, Acquire a Friend

Ana Bonnheim, HUC-JIR 2008

Ana Bonnheim and James Gibson, a Mentee/ Mentor pair, co-led a Shacharit Service at our recent Convention.

Often mentoring pairs choose to maintain confidentiality about their mentoring work. In this case, Ana and Jamie elected to share their thoughts about the mentoring program through their leadership of the service and their comments. Here is the D'var Torah Ana wrote for that occasion.

Our Torah portion this week, *Tazria*, describes a woman's sacrifice following the birth of her child. At a moment of life-giving and life-affirmation, a woman is commanded to make an offering to God. In an experience that is so extraordinary and moving as the birth of a child, a woman stops her work of child-caring in order to perform her religious obligation. In Leviticus in general, we read about the various sacrifices and offerings given at lifecycle events and under a wide range of circumstances.

Lately, I have been thinking about offerings in a more metaphoric and abstract sense. I am a fifth year HUC-JIR student, and I have spent the past few months in conversation with my CCAR mentor, Rabbi Jamie Gibson. The CCAR mentor/mentee relationship is unusual. While I have had mentors in my life, I have rarely had such a formalized relationship with one. Mentoring relationships, before and during my years at HUC-JIR, have developed organically. I am proud that I have kept up relationships with role models from my past and tried to create relationships with individuals whom I admire. There are so many ways or reasons to choose mentors: because we admire them, because they are good listeners, because they lovingly challenge, because they can provide needed or desired experience or knowledge, because

they are empathic. But the CCAR relationship is different. Rabbi Gibson and I were assigned to one another, and we have spent time over the past few months intentionally getting to know one another, talking about my goals and the relationship that we are creating.

When I think about an ideal mentor/mentee relationship, I think about it as fundamentally reciprocal. Most of the time, my relationship with my mentors is more of a one-way relationship than a two-way one, with me doing most of the talking, musing and questioning. I think that is the way it usually is, and the way it is intended to be. At this point in my life, I feel most comfortable in this role. But I still think it is important to strive for reciprocity: ideally, the mentee has an ability to reflect, learn, and use the mentor's experience and expertise. And in return, the relationship, and the mentee's questions, goals, and fears bring a liveliness to the mentor that creates excitement for the future and the rabbinate, in addition to a forum to reflect on chosen paths. And as a result, we hope that both the mentor and mentee's rabinates are made stronger. In addition to strengthening ourselves, we strengthen each other. I think of the well-known Pirke Avot text: "*Aseh lecha rav u'k'neh l'cha chaver.*" Loosely translated: "When you find yourself a teacher, then you may eventually acquire a friend." This is the ideal of any mentoring relationship. It does not happen at once—if so, it would not be a mentoring relationship—but it is something to strive for, whether or not we are soon-to-be or newly ordained or we have been in the field for years.

I think that the mentor/mentee relationship creates a kind of "pay it forward" mentality, that the fruits of the relationship benefit

and his love of the Reform movement have been demonstrated in innumerable ways. He has transformed the whole concept of placement and has been pushing us to be more serious about continued professional development. In his richly deserved retirement he will be joining the Reform Pension Board, along with Alice Dubinsky. We wish Arnie and Serena a long, healthy and enjoyable retirement. We are excited to welcome Hesch Sommer as the new Director of Placement. His gifts and talents will enable us to build on Arnie's legacy and at the same time find new and important ways to serve our colleagues and our movement.

This is indeed an exciting time in the life of the CCAR.

others beyond the relationship, too. When we strengthen one another, we strengthen our own abilities to work within our communities. This idea of reciprocity is connected to the concept of an offering, that in these relationships—whether they are organic or more structured—we offer parts of ourselves. How can I be open, straightforward, and thoughtful when I offer my experiences and my questions to my mentor? How can my mentor respond with insight, honesty, and nuance, in offering guidance, the reflections of personal experience, probing questions, or a quiet listening ear? The beauty is that in the many relationships in our lives, so many of us alternate playing different versions of mentor and mentee roles.

My prayer this morning, thinking about my own and my classmates' first years in the rabbinate, and formal and informal mentor/mentee relationships in general, is that we can be open to offering what is truly ourselves and be open to receiving the offerings of others, too.

Amen.