

## Lessons from a Mentoring at Sinai

### Lois Zachary

For most people, the image of the Ten Commandments comes to mind when they think about the content of Parshat Yitro. There is another image, however, that also speaks volumes. The dynamic interaction between Jethro and Moses described in Exodus 18 offers mentoring partners powerful insights about some of the qualities and characteristics necessary to build and maintain effective mentoring relationships.

Successful mentoring requires that mentoring partners focus on learning and actively work on building and cultivating the relationship throughout the mentoring partnership. Respect, candor, observation, listening, communication, questioning, and feedback are core elements for growing any mentoring relationship.

#### Respect

And Moses went out to meet his father-in-law, and bowed down and kissed him; and they asked each other of their welfare; and they came into the tent.

Exodus 18: 7

Moses' respect for his father-in-law Jethro is awesome. Not only does he step forward to meet his father-in-law; he also consciously greets him, and demonstrates respect with a bow and a kiss. Moses and Jethro respectfully engage in conversation about each others' well-being and enjoy mutual companionship as they wend their way toward the tent. In a mentoring relationship, respect and trust go hand-in-hand in assisting mentoring partners in reaching shared understanding. Without shared understanding, mentoring relationships are rarely satisfactory.

#### Listening

And Moses told his father-in-law all that the Lord had done unto Pharaoh and to the Egyptians for Israel's sake, all the travail that had come upon them by the way, and how the Lord delivered them.

Exodus 18: 8

Authentic communication is difficult without trust. Moses and Jethro had built up a sizeable trust account between them. They had a history of actively listening to one another. Whether the news was good or bad, Jethro was an attentive listener and an appreciative audience. He shared his feelings and rejoiced for and with Moses.

The bedrock of a mentoring relationship is effective communication. Communication is not just centered on sharing knowledge; it depends on many other factors as well. These include, but are not limited, to building the requisite trust to encourage open communication, being authentic, listening effectively, checking for understanding, and articulating what it is you want to say clearly and unambiguously. It also means being able to pick up on what is behind the words being said by another person (the non-verbal cues).

#### Observation

... Moses sat to judge the people; and the people stood about Moses from the morning unto the evening

evening.

Exodus 18:13

Jethro has seichel. He observes as well as listens. He picks up on the subtleties.

Like Jethro, mentors have to have the ability to step back see the big picture, and avoid the temptation of rescuing. Mentoring is the quintessence of self-directed learning. Thus, the role of the mentor is to facilitate the learning. The role of the mentee is to actively participate in and co-author his or her own learning experience.

### Asking Questions

And when Moses' father-in-law saw all that he did to the people, he said: "What is this thing that thou doest to the people? Why sittest thou thyself alone, and all the people stand about from morning unto evening?"

Exodus 18: 14

Jethro sees that Moses is shouldering more responsibility than he can handle. And so, rather than telling him what to do, Jethro asks probing questions, raising the bar for Moses and helping Moses gain new insights.

Broholm and Johnson (1993) remind us, "Mentors are persons who leave us stronger, more confident, clearer thinking and better able to cope after they have met with us. They help us grow in wisdom, not so much by inviting us to adopt their wisdom as by the way they ask questions which move us to deeper places of insight and perspective (p. 8)."

There is an art to being able to ask the right questions at the right time. Savvy mentors master this art. Savvy mentees don't press for answers, but live in the question.

### Feedback

"..... the thing that thou doest is not good. Thou wilt surely wear away, both thou and this people that is with thee; for the thing is too heavy for thee; thou art not able to perform it thyself alone."

Exodus 18: 17,18

Jethro provides candid feedback compassionately. As he holds up a mirror for Moses to reflect on his experience, what he says is perhaps not what Moses wants or expects to hear, but it is honest. He gives Moses some needed perspective while teaching him an important lesson about letting go and delegating responsibilities. The key is that Moses is open to receiving the feedback and acting on it. Jethro embodies Daloz' (1999) words, "Mentors are guides. They lead us along the journey of our lives. We trust them because they have been there before. They embody our hopes, cast light on the way ahead, interpret arcane signs, warn us of lurking dangers, and point out unexpected delights along the way. (p.18)"

### From Yitro to Teacher Mentoring

Obviously Jethro and Moses' relationship extends beyond that of a typical mentoring partnership. What we actually witness in this parasha is a series of mentoring interactions portraying core elements inherent in

effective mentoring relationships.

While mentoring transactions and interactions have been an integral part of teacher education for many years, it is only recently that formalized mentoring relationships have gained widespread currency in public education as a primary means of orienting, acclimating, and professionally developing teachers. This trend also applies to Jewish education, with an increasing demand for mentoring programs as an incentive for teacher recruitment and teacher retention.

Teachers who engage in mentoring report they enrich their teaching experience, gain exposure to new and diverse perspectives, expand and hone skills, become engaged and energized, and find work more meaningful and satisfying.

### Mentoring

Mentoring can be best understood as a reciprocal and collaborative learning relationship between two (or more) individuals who share mutual responsibility and accountability for helping a mentee work toward achieving clear and mutually defined learning goals. The emphasis in this definition is its focus on learning. Without learning, there is no purpose for mentoring. It is the process, product, and purpose of mentoring. The insights from Sinai about respect, candor, observation, listening, communication, questioning, and feedback undergird the learning process and pervade the phases of the mentoring relationship.

Mentoring relationships are composed of four sequential phases - preparing, negotiating, enabling, and coming to closure. The phases, which build on one another, vary in length from one relationship to another. When phases are taken for granted or skipped over, a mentoring relationship can be negatively impacted. During each phase, there are specific questions that can serve as conversational signposts to promote readiness for the next developmental phase of the relationship.

### Preparing

Preparing a relationship adds value to the mentoring partnership for mentor and mentee. Each and every mentoring relationship is unique.

**Self-Preparation:** During the preparing phase of a mentoring relationship, several processes take place simultaneously. Mentors and mentees explore personal motivation and their readiness to be either a mentor or mentee. Individual assessment of mentoring skills helps identify areas for the mentor's and mentee's learning and development. Clarity about expectation and role helps define parameters for establishing a productive and healthy mentoring relationship.

**Questions:** Before an initial meeting with a prospective mentoring partner, mentors should reflect on answers to the following questions:

- Why do I want to be engaged in a mentoring relationship?
- Am I ready for a mentoring relationship?
- What mentoring skills do I have?
- What mentoring skills do I need?

- What are my development goals as a mentor or mentee?
- How will I go about enhancing my skills?

After answering these questions, you may decide that mentoring is not for you. Mentoring is not appropriate for every individual. You may find that you are not sufficiently motivated or prepared for this role at this time.

Preparing the Relationship: The initial conversation, in which potential mentoring partners explore mutuality of interests and learning needs, and determine learning fit, is critical. The outcome of this conversation helps mentors determine how productively they can work with a prospective mentee and to what extent they believe they can honestly further this person's learning. It helps mentees determine if they feel comfortable working with a prospective mentor and gauge whether they can productively learn from this person.

It takes effort to establish multiple and meaningful points of connection. Begin the initial mentoring conversation by establishing points of connection and getting to know one another. Share information about past mentoring experiences. Even at this early point in the relationship, respect, candor, observation, listening, communication, and asking questions are critical.

Questions: Recall an existing (or previous) mentoring relationship. Consider the issues and challenges you faced in the relationship. Develop a list of the challenges both positive and negative. When you meet with your mentoring partner, ask about challenges, both positive and negative, that she or he had to overcome in creating and sustaining a mentoring relationship. Once you have exchanged lists with your mentoring partner, discuss the implications of your experiences (successes and failures) for your mentoring relationship.

A frank exchange about learning goals, mentoring expectations, role assumptions, learning needs, and role limitations helps gauge if a potential mentor's experience or expertise is relevant to achieving the desired learning goals. By the end of the initial mentoring conversation (be it one or several sessions), both parties should know whether or not there is a fit and if they are prepared to move forward in the relationship

Ask yourself the following questions before you proceed to the next phase of the relationship:

- Am I clear about my role?
- Is this particular relationship right for me?
- Does there appear to be mutual interest, respect and compatibility.? Do I have the time to do justice to this relationship?

### Negotiating

During negotiating conversations, depth, specificity, and scaffolding are added to the general goals identified during the preparing phase. This is when details of the relationship get hammered out: when and how to meet, mutual responsibilities, criteria for success, accountability, and how and when to bring the relationship to closure. The outcome of this iterative phase should be a partnership workplan consisting of well-defined goals, criteria and measurement for success, delineation of mutual responsibility, accountability mechanisms, and protocols for dealing with stumbling blocks.

Derailment of mentoring relationships is frequently attributed to lack of time. Regular contact (be it weekly, daily, monthly, etc.) is vital however regular contact by itself won't suffice. There should be mutual consensus  
[www.caje.org/learn/a\\_zachary.htm](http://www.caje.org/learn/a_zachary.htm)

daily, monthly, etc.) is vital, however, regular contact by itself won't suffice. There should be mutual consensus about the meaning of "regular" and a decision to adhere to that agreement. Time also becomes problematic when available time is not used well. A time management discussion is an essential part of the negotiation conversation agenda. Discuss how you and your mentoring partner can individually and collectively maximize the limited time you do have.

Questions: Before you move into the enabling phase, answers to the following questions should be crystal clear to you and your partner.

- What are the learning goals?
- What are the learning needs?
- Is there a mutual understanding of roles?
- What are the responsibilities of each partner?
- What are the norms of the relationship?
- How often will we meet (whether in person or on-line)?
- Who will initiate contact?
- What are the boundaries and limits of this relationship?
- What is our workplan?

### Enabling

Each mentoring relationship is unique and finds its own path during the enabling phase. This phase, the longest of the four, is the most fertile for nurturing learning and development. It is also when mentoring partners are most vulnerable to relationship derailment.

The mentor's role during this phase is to nurture mentee growth by maintaining an open and affirming learning climate; by asking the right questions at the right time; and by providing thoughtful, timely, candid and constructive feedback (Zachary, 2000). During the enabling phase, the learning progress and the learning process are continuously monitored to assure that the mentee's learning goals are being met.

Feedback promotes learning. It is difficult to create a learning environment, build and maintain the relationship, monitor process, evaluate progress, foster reflection, and assess learning outcomes without ongoing feedback. When feedback is given and received in the right way it nurtures the growth of the mentoring relationship. When it is given or received in the wrong way, it can undermine the relationship. Mentors enrich the feedback process when they develop a climate of readiness and expectation. Providing feedback without establishing a climate of readiness can be a frustrating and negative experience for mentees and mentors.

Questions: Regular feedback provides support to meet learning challenges as they occur.

- What are your expectations about asking for, giving, and receiving feedback?
- Are you authentic and candid when you provide feedback?
- Do you focus on behavior, not personality?
- Do you take time into consideration?
- Is the feedback you provide constructive?
- Do you regularly ask for feedback on your feedback?

Whether mentoring sessions are face-to-face interaction, telephone conversation, or on-line communication, evaluation of the effectiveness of the mentoring session should be a priority and part of the relationship routine. Check in at the beginning of your mentoring session. Regularly ask, "How is it going?" Share your observations about how things are going and what concerns you have about the learning process. For example, "I've noticed that our discussions are very general and theoretical. Are you finding that helpful?" Take a step backward before you go forward. For example, "Let's take a look at how we are doing. What is particularly helpful to you in your learning? What has been least helpful? What do you think is going well? What do we need to improve? What kind of assistance do you need?"

More Questions: In monitoring the communication taking place, do you ...

- Actively listen?
- Check out assumptions about what is going on periodically?
- Share thoughts and feelings authentically?
- Maintain sensitivity about the mentee's personal and learning needs?
- Discuss accountability and follow up regularly?
- Reflect on the learning that is taking place?
- Focus on learning goals?

### Coming to Closure

Coming to closure presents a developmental opportunity for mentors and mentees to process their learning and move on, regardless of whether or not a mentoring relationship has been positive. Closure is often overlooked, and when that happens an essential learning opportunity is missed. There are many reasons that this happens. Relationships can end earlier or last longer than anticipated.

Sometimes a mentoring relationship doesn't end because of the emotions and personal ties inherent in any relationship. Sometimes inertia or a sense of comfort sustains a mentoring relationship long after the relationship should have ended. Even emotion (i.e., anxiety, resentment, jealousy, or surprise) can sabotage the closure experience.

Closure involves evaluating the learning, acknowledging progress, and celebrating the learning achievement. When closure is seen as an opportunity to evaluate personal learning and take that learning to the next level, mentors and mentees leverage their own learning and growth and become more reflective practitioners.

Questions: In order to maximize the learning, it is important to be prepared with an exit strategy. A good exit strategy should result in an affirmative answer to each of the questions below:

- What is our learning conclusion? What was learned?
- How can we apply the learning and take it to the next level?
- What would be a meaningful way to celebrate success?
- How can we collaboratively plan a mutually satisfying way to celebrate?
- How are we going to redefine the relationship?
- Do we want the relationship to continue and, if so, in what form?

- What would be a comfortable way for us both to move on?

Mentoring partnerships require an investment of time, energy and effort. Mentoring success results when mentoring partners value the learning as much as the relationship and ask reflective questions that stimulate bold insight and deep understanding.

Teachers who prepare themselves for their mentoring experiences increase their potential to enhance student growth and development, help students maximize education experiences, and enrich their own teaching experience and professional development. Polly Berends makes the point that, “Everything that happens to you is your teacher. The secret is to sit at the feet of your own life and be taught by it.” Mentoring provides a reflective opportunity for both mentor and mentee to learn from life experience, particularly when it is congruent with the lessons learned from mentoring at Sinai.n

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