All Jewish Communal Professionals Are Mentors

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Although my experience as a student at the Hebrew Union College School of Jewish Communal Service was marked by many memorable moments, I was perhaps most proud of the opportunity I had to celebrate my own mentor publicly. During the spring of 1996, I was asked to speak when Sally Weber, then Director of Jewish Community Programs at Jewish Family Service, Los Angeles, received a Career Achievement award from the Jewish Communal Professionals of Southern California. I was flattered to be asked and to be considered one of her mentees, a relationship I cherish to this day. On that evening I said, "There are two types of leaders. The first type is a charismatic leader, someone whose students are left in awe, saying to themselves, 'Isn't it amazing that my teacher knows all the prayer and rituals for Shabbat!' The second type of leader, however, is the true leader, whose students are left thinking, 'If my teacher can do that—so can I.'"

As I said these words, I was grateful to be part of an intergenerational professional community and intently aware of my obligation to mentor others as effectively as I had been mentored during my years at Hebrew Union College. Having the opportunity to present an award to my mentor just before my own graduation enabled me to see what was possible in my career, not just as a Jewish communal professional but also as a role model for other professionals.

I have been fortunate enough to have been mentored by four inspiring professionals during my thirteen years in the field. From them I have learned that all Jewish communal professionals are mentors. Whether we actively seek this role or whether it occurs by chance, each of us has countless opportunities to teach our colleagues, particularly those newer than us, and to strengthen their work with our example. The skills of mentoring can be learned and should be emphasized both in our formal educational training and as part of our ongoing professional development.

This article examines the role of a mentor, where and how mentorship can be found, and the characteristics that mark excellence in mentoring. It also underscores our obligation as Jewish communal professionals to fill this need.

WHAT IS A MENTOR?

The word "mentor" has many different definitions. At its most basic level, it involves "a relationship between an experienced professional and a novice designed to induct the novice into a profession" (Zeldin & Lee, 1995, p. 12).

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If such relationships are carefully managed, "great mentors extend the human activity of care beyond the bounds of the family. They see us in ways that we have not been seen before. And at their best they inspire us to reach beyond ourselves; they show us how to make a difference in a wider world" (Zachary, 2000, xiii). In our field, the frequent overlap between our professional work and our personal community means that mentors are also those who help us to envision all what we can become and who are with us to celebrate with us when we succeed. A mentor is differentiated from a close colleague by the intentionality of the relationship and frequently by the pairing of a veteran professional with a novice. Although a mentor might be one's supervisor, this need not be the case, and often stronger connections are forged outside of supervisory boundaries.

WHY MENTOR?

Novice Jewish communal professionals need mentors more than ever in today's world of "flattened organizations [where] career ladders [have] no apparent rungs or have wider rungs with more people standing there with you" (Boags, 2008, p. xix). As more of us telecommute and work across organizational and geographic boundaries, our work becomes more isolating, and we find ourselves in greater need of these carefully nurtured relationships. In the best circumstances, mentoring relationships can provide a safety net and a sense of community as we grow in our careers.

One of the most useful ways a mentor can support a novice professional is by helping the mentee cultivate what academic psychologist Carol Dweck has termed "a growth mindset." Through many years of research, Dweck has demonstrated that what may distinguish those who reach their potential in any area from those who do not "isn't ability; it's whether you look at ability as something inherent that needs to be demonstrated or as something that can be developed" (Krakovsky, 2007, p. 1). Those with growth mindsets believe that success is a result of effort rather than aptitude. This belief enables such individuals to focus on developing "learning goals [which] inspire a different chain of thoughts and behaviors than performance goals" (Krakovsky, 2007, p. 2).

The mentor's role in developing learning goals cannot be overstated. Although many novice professionals have a general sense of what they might like to learn, a skilled mentor can help the novice create learning goals that are well defined, specific, and written. These goals can then be reevaluated by the mentoring pair throughout the relationship and adapted as necessary (Zachary, 2000, p. 96). "Mentors with well defined...goals tend to have a heightened sense of their own learning needs and offer themselves as exemplary models of self directed learning" (Zachary, 2000, p. 79). This learning from the mentor's example provides a rich opportunity for the mentee.

Although a mentoring relationship might emerge by happenstance, such relationships are stronger when they are established proactively. I learned that a mentor would be essential to me during my first position after graduate school, when I was working in a large organization, in a new city, where I did not know the culture and did not yet know how my skills and contributions would be received. Within my first few months on the job, I was fortunate enough to have two senior professionals, neither of them my supervisor, proactively approach me with feedback and offers of support. I learned tremendously from both of

them, but it soon became clear that my personality was a better fit with one, who encouraged me to be proactive about seeking her support and guidance in a wide variety of areas. In hindsight, what I learned—and have since learned again as a mentor myself—is that every relationship will not be a perfect fit. Those we seek to mentor are not always responsive to our efforts. However, this does not lessen our responsibility to seek out novice professionals who can benefit from the lessons we have already learned. The familiar teaching of Rabbi Tarfon enjoins us, "Lo alecha hamlecha ligmor, v'lo alecha ligmor: You are not obligated to complete the task; nor are you free to abandon it" (Pirke Avot 2:21). Every mentor I know who feels obligated to this task also believes that he or she is enriched immeasurably by the experience of identifying and building relationships with mentees, many of whom offer a fresh perspective and inspire a sense of renewed commitment to our work.

Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi observes, "[Mentors] impart lessons in the art of living" (Zachary, 2000, p. xiii). The lessons I have been taught by my mentors include appreciation for the subtleties of work—life balance, support in identifying how to live a meaningful Jewish life personally while serving the community, skills to distinguish the urgent from the important, guidance in choosing when to begin a new position (and when to leave one), and an abiding sense that educating others and engaging in lifelong learning are at the core of who I am as a Jew and as a professional.

WHAT IS EFFECTIVE MENTORING?

How does one develop such a relationship? What are the critical characteristics of an effective mentor? There have been many attempts to identify key characteristics and skills of outstanding mentors; however, the following are the ten I believe are most relevant to the needs of today's novice Jewish communal professionals.

- 1. Commitment to lifelong learning: By definition, a mentor leads by example. After leaving graduate school, novice professionals may have a well-earned sense of competence that precludes them from seeking continued learning opportunities. By demonstrating their own ongoing growth and professional development, mentors may help mentees identify the need for additional learning and how to gain access to it. In my experience, mentors also are able to answer any question with, "I don't know, but I will find out," and follow up appropriately with an answer.
- **2.** Reflective listening: The ability to listen to a mentee with empathy and to respond appropriately with a clear understanding of what the mentee has said is more challenging than it might appear at first. "Having a mentor is like having a mirror that talks to you" (Boags, 2008, p. 81). Asking clarifying questions, uncovering hidden challenges, and gently guiding a mentee toward more self-awareness are all central to reflective listening.
- **3.** Ability to use teachable moments: Mentors can spot the learning opportunity in every challenge, large or small. They help us see where we might have used a different word, tried a different strategy, or thought a little differently about something. Good mentors not only possess a problem-solving orientation but also demonstrate by their own example how to approach a situation. As Zeldin

and Lee write, "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" (Zeldin & Lee, 1995, p. 19). I often find myself thinking of one of my mentors in particular when I am struggling with articulating goals. She is masterful at this task, and as a result of learning from her I am able to ask myself the same questions I know she would ask me were she present.

- **4.** *Skillful use of "tochecha"*: The art of gentle rebuke is not only a skill; it is a critical Jewish value. For a novice professional, the ability to receive critical feedback that is offered gently with the mentee's interest in mind is essential to growth. In turn, the ability of a mentor to offer observations about a significant mistake, poor judgment, or small misstep is a gift. In my own early experience, I vividly recall receiving such feedback in a manner that not only changed the way I conducted myself in that role but that also conveyed such obvious good intent that it stays with me to this day.
- **5.** *Interest in nurturing the mentee's passion*: Mentors must enable their mentees to develop "stretch goals, [those] that result from reaching to broaden one's base of experience" (Zachary, 2000, p. 79). They are able, through reflective listening, to hear what the mentee has not yet learned and to see what type of opportunity would allow the mentee to build the needed skills while engaging his or her own passions. Finally, "the mentor's task is to encourage the protégé to emerge in his own unique way, not as an imitation of the mentor" (Zeldin & Lee, 1995, p. 19).
- **6.** *Desire to serve as a connector*: Once clear learning or professional goals are articulated, good mentors actively use their own network of colleagues to serve the mentee. This skill has a ripple effect and enables the novice professional to meet and learn from other veterans, who in turn will continue to support the mentee themselves. I have found this to be true in my own experience, particularly with my mentors among Hebrew Union College's alumni, who have consistently extended their own professional networks for my benefit.
- 7. Intention to be fully present: There is tremendous value for the mentee in hearing from a veteran professional that he or she is sufficiently committed to the role of mentor to dedicate protected time to the relationship. I recall a meeting I attended as a student during which the professional took a series of phone calls, pointing out to me that she would not have done so had I been a colleague, rather than a student. Although this was an example of a teachable moment, as a novice professional I also sensed that it reflected a lack of valuing the conversation. Conversely, I have joyfully experienced being invited to the homes of my mentors for Shabbat or holidays and been warmly welcomed into their families and personal lives. As a result I am committed to inviting my own mentees for Shabbat and do so regularly.
- **8.** Logistical compatibility: In a "flat" world where technology enables our relationships to span time zones, locations, and organizations, the strongest mentoring relationships are still those in which there is logistical compatibility. Do both partners prefer to use e-mail or to meet in person? Are nights or days more accessible? Do meetings need to be regularly scheduled, or can they take place as needed? Such agreements about the optimal structure of the mentoring relationship are key to the mentee feeling supported and to the mentor not feeling

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overburdened by the relationship. One of my most valued mentors is one with whom I speak infrequently, but who I can be certain will call me back immediately if I ask for her help.

- **9.** Shared interest and experience: To state the obvious, any mentoring relationship is enhanced by the mentor and mentee's shared interest in discrete areas within our field. Although a novice fundraising professional may certainly benefit from the wisdom of a seasoned congregational school director, the more common the experience, the richer the exchange of ideas may be.
- 10. Humility: Although I placed it last, I believe humility is the most fundamental mentoring characteristic. Being a reflective practitioner, acknowledging one's own strengths, challenges, and ongoing professional struggles, is perhaps more inspiring to mentees than anything else a mentor might say or do. Mentors are able to share a literal or figurative list of "the most important things I've learned and how" with a mentee. A story about "the worst mistake I ever made" will go a long way toward improving a mentee's sense of his or her own potential for growth. Ultimately it is this type of humility on the part of the teacher that enables a novice professional to successfully cultivate the desired growth mindset.

I have been blessed to be mentored by individuals who possessed all these skills and characteristics and enabled me to articulate them by their example. They sparked my enthusiasm for mentoring in countless ways. Those whom I have sought to mentor have, I hoped, been the beneficiaries.

HOW CAN THE FIELD DEVELOP EFFECTIVE MENTORS?

Given the essential role of mentoring for success in our field, mentorship training should be a required part of our formal graduate programs, our regional professional associations, and our programs of ongoing organizational development in the Jewish communal world. Although many of us are deeply committed to mentoring as a practice and an obligation, few formal structures exist to support this commitment. Novice professionals would surely benefit from knowing where to find mentors once leaving school. Mentors themselves would benefit from a formalized structure for discussing their mentoring practice with others. It is often only when we take the time to step back and consider our work with our colleagues that we are truly able to be the reflective practitioners we wish to be.

Both our graduate institutions and our communal organizations have roles to play in ensuring that this occurs. Graduate institutions should require faculty to engage graduate students in their research and to create opportunities for them to serve as teaching assistants, even in small classes. As students begin to discover their own particular areas of interest within the field, faculty should be asked to identify professionals within these areas of practice and make the necessary introductions so students can meet these potential mentors. Our schools can provide regular opportunities such as informal lunch and learn sessions or roundtables that allow veteran professionals to speak directly to students and share their past experiences as mentors and as mentees. Finally as students graduate, each should be connected to an alumni mentor in the field, on the basis of personality, interests, geography, or all three.

As they enter the field, newer professionals should make the commitment to serve on their alumni association boards and encourage their employer organizations to host regional alumni gatherings. Employer institutions should not

Humility is the most fundamental mentoring characteristic. only permit employees to attend such programs during their working hours but should even encourage them to do so. In larger organizations, human resource departments must view connecting new professionals with mentors (alumni or otherwise) as a critical component of new employee training. With graduate institutions and communal organizations working in partnership, the potential for rich relationships to develop is virtually limitless.

CONCLUSION

All Jewish communal professionals are indeed mentors. From my perspective, the ability to participate in these relationships as both mentor and mentee is the true gift of our profession. As former SJCS director and mentor of mine, Marla Eglash Abraham, said, "When we engage each other in mentoring, we learn together; we gift ourselves to each other; we add to each other's life narrative" (Abraham, 2008). Such relationships are the embodiment of the words we read in Kohelet on Sukkot: "Dor holech, v'dor bah, v'ha-aretz l'olam omadet: One generation passes away and another generation comes, but the earth abides forever" (Eccl. 1:4). Commitment to the field of Jewish communal service will endure because of the actions we take to ensure others will continue our work into the next generation.

In the very first chapter of Pirke Avot we are enjoined, "Aseh lecha rav, u'kenay lecha chaver, v'heveh dan et kol ha'adam l'chof zachut: Choose for yourself a teacher, acquire for yourself a friend, and make it your habit to judge every person favorably" (Pirke Avot 1:6). My experience has taught me that when a professional of any age is fortunate enough to encounter someone who is both a teacher and a friend, he or she should steadily nurture this relationship. For if well cared for, effective mentoring relationships will not only enhance our ability to judge all people favorably but will enrich our careers and commitment to Jewish life immeasurably.

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