

SUPERVISION, RABBINIC STYLE; SOME TEXTS AND COMMENTARY

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*Everything that was made during the six days of creation still needs work.
Even man still needs fixing. (Gen. Rabbah II)*

The rabbis never knew about social work supervision. In classical rabbinic literature, no one even discusses supervision, unless it is supervising something like the killing of chickens. Thus, it is important to understand quite clearly that with the exception of one item which will be touched upon, it is impossible to say, "this is what the rabbis say you should do in your supervision." But the fact that they can't teach us everything doesn't mean that they can't teach us something.

The following discussion assumes that among other things, supervision is about power differentials between people, about nurturance, honest human relationships, personal change and the like and the rabbis did have views of these subjects. Their views are interesting and evocative and we may be able to learn from them.

SUPERVISOR'S RELATIONSHIP WITH THE SUPERVISEE

1. *The one who raises a child is called a parent, not the one who gives birth. (Exodus Rabbah 46)*

The one who teaches assumes a role like a parent. What are the implications for supervision? What is the up side? What is the down side? The support that is expected . . . the constancy . . . the anger that must be absorbed . . . concerns about ex-

cessive dependence or too much independence . . . etc.

2. *Rabbi Shimon, the son of Elazar, said: When dealing with one's passions, one's child and one's spouse, one should push them away with one's left hand and draw them near with one's right. (Sotah 46b)*

Unconditional affirmation and a need for standards and judgments are both necessary to the role and they are mutually contradictory. When you engage in the one, the other one vanishes. There is no way to make the relationship neat.

3. *It is a duty to treat every scholar with respect, even though he is not one's teacher for it is written: "You shall stand up in the presence of the aged, and show respect for the old" (Leviticus 19:33). The word zaken (old) refers here to one who has acquired wisdom. When are we required to stand up in such a person's presence? From the moment he reaches one within six feet until he has passed alongside him. (Maimonides, Mishneh Torah: Book of Knowledge 6:1)*

Note the way in which age and wisdom are identified with one another. How often is that likely to be a fair assumption? Is it complicated when the person you are supervising is older than you are or when the person who is supervising you is younger than you are? When technical skill is what is required, the more recently you graduated from school the more you are likely to know. When experience is what is presumed to make you wise, then age has the upper hand . . . unless you, your supervisor or supervisee are not people who learn from experience. Or are wisdom, expertise

This selection is written as a study guide and guide to discussion on the subject of supervision. It has been used as part of a program of instruction in current social work practices.

and technical knowledge secondary to what may be the real essence of supervision, formal power and authority?

4. *It is improper for a scholar to put the people to the trouble of standing up in his presence by passing before them deliberately. Rather, he should use a shorter route, tending to avoid notice, so that none will have to rise before him. The sages were in the habit of using circuitous bypaths, where those who know them were not likely to be found, so as not to trouble them. (Mishneh Torah: Book of Knowledge 6:3)*

Note the reciprocal obligations of the one who is honored. Is the supervisor's authority best not used or is it there because it should be? When should a supervisor take a circuitous route to avoid receiving excessive deference?

5. *Scholars are not called upon to go out themselves to take part with the rest of the community in such things as building and digging for the state so as not to lose the respect of the common people. (Mishneh Torah: Book of Knowledge 6:10)*

The merit to maintaining social distance: Can you be a good supervisor without it? Is it impossible to supervise friends?

6. *Fortunate is the one whose parents had merit. Fortunate is the one who has a peg on which to hang things. (Jeru. Berachot 4:1)*

The development of the mature and competent adult is not a do-it-yourself job. You need a teacher or model, the peg on which to hang your own growth.

STYLE OF SUPERVISION

7. *One should not threaten a child but should hit him at once or remain silent and not say a thing. It happened once that the child of Gorgos of Lod ran away from school. His father threatened him. He was so afraid of his father that he killed himself by throwing himself into a well. (S'machot 2a)*

There is great virtue to directness, none whatsoever to lingering threats.

8. *Rabbi Tarfon said: "I tell you, there is no one in this generation who is able to give reproof (without embarrassing the other person)." Rabbi Elazar ben Azaria (responded): "I tell you, there is no one in this generation who is able to tolerate being reproofed." (Sifra Kedoshim 2:4)*

Does supervision go badly because, as Rabbi Tarfon says, we are incompetent at it or is it as ben Azaria says, that we are splendid at what we do? Is it they who are the incompetents?

We should note the extent to which we generally judge our own motivation charitably and those of others harshly. We want autonomy for ourselves because we are competent but do not wish to give it to others because they are not. We explain our own bad behavior in terms of understandable factors beyond our control and others' bad behavior as the result of their dubious motivations.

9. *You shall love your neighbor as yourself. (Lev. 19:18) Or as implicitly translated by many of the commentators— You shall love your neighbor—since he is like you.*

Whatever I do not want for myself . . . I ought not want for him (my neighbor). (Maimonides, Sefer Hamitzvot, Positive Commandment 206)

The fact is that the people we work with are no different than we are, neither better nor worse. The issue for both the supervisor and supervisee is how to work together better without excessive concern about blame.

10. *"You shall not place a stumbling block before the blind." (Lev. 19:14) This refers to one who strikes his adult child. (Moed Katan 17a)*

The blind person who is caused to trip is not to be faulted for his clumsiness. This passage suggests that unusually harsh treatment generally has unacceptable repercussions. If the adult child hits back the parent who struck him, it will be the parent's responsibility, not the child's.

11. *A summary of Genesis 38. Tamar has been married to two of Judah's sons, both of whom die leaving her childless. It is therefore Judah's obligation to marry her and have children with her. He does not do so. She then costumes herself as a prostitute, induces Judah (who does not recognize her) to sleep with her. Since he is unable to pay her on the spot, he promises to send her a goat and leaves his staff and seal on deposit. He tries to send payment to the presumed prostitute but she has vanished. Several months later, he discovers that his daughter-in-law is pregnant. He orders that she be brought out to be burned for harlotry. She then declares, "I am pregnant by the man whose staff and seal these are" and exhibits the objects.*

What follows is Rashi's comment on her behavior:

"She did not wish to put him to shame in public by saying "It is by you that I am with child," but she said only "By the man whose these are." She thought: "If he is to acknowledge it, let him acknowledge it voluntarily, and if not, let them burn me and let me not put him to shame in public." From this passage the Rabbis derived the teaching: Far better that a person should let himself be cast into a burning furnace than to put someone else to public shame."

(Note: The Hebrew term for embarrassing another person is P'halbeen panav, literally, to whiten his face. From this the rabbis conclude that to embarrass someone is a kind of bloodshed and is thus comparable to committing a capital crime.)

Preserving a person's dignity is a cardinal responsibility in any human relationship. Few things are more important. One may chastise another, but that is very different from public shaming. This is the one piece of supervision instruction we may clearly take as is from the Talmud.

OUR POTENTIAL FOR CHANGE

12. *You shall not hate your brother in your heart but you shall certainly reprove*

him and on his account you will not have to bear a sin. (Lev. 19:17)

Carl Rogers notes that if you cannot face up to your real feelings about a person, you can never change a relationship. Anger that is not acknowledged freezes it. Rogers does not appear to believe that you have to "let it all hang out," but you do have to admit that anger, at least to yourself.

Furthermore, you probably can't get someone you don't like to change. If reproof is to work, it probably has to emerge from true affection.

13. *Do not chastise a scoffer (i.e., a jerk) lest he hate you. Chastise a wise person who will then love you. (Yevamot 65b)*

Without what is sometimes referred to as an "observing ego" supervision is hopeless. One can only work with people who have both some interest in growth and the ability to stand back and look at themselves from a distance. If they are so well defended that they hate to admit they ever have responsibility for anything that went wrong, it is probably not even worth trying.

14. *In R. Z'eira's neighborhood there was a group of hooligans. He used to try to get close to them in order to get them to turn from their evil ways and repent. When R. Z'eira died, the hooligans said, "R. Z'eira used to seek God's compassion for us. Now (that he is dead), who will seek God's compassion for us." They considered the matter seriously and did teshuvah (repented). (Sanhedrin 37a)*

Ultimately, if there is to be change, people have to change themselves.

15. *The rabbis asked: "If someone stole a board and put it into a building, what should be done?" The School of Shamai said "One should destroy the building and return the board to its owner." The School of Hillel said "The thief only has to pay for the board, in order to make it easy for him to repent."*

Are there ways in which we make it easy for people to change and ways in which we make it hard for them to do so?

16. *There were some hooligans in R. Meir's neighborhood. He prayed that they would die. His wife Beruriah said, "Do you really think that? It says, 'Let the sins die (Psalm 104:5), not the sinner . . . You should pray for heavenly compassion for them that they might turn in teshuvah and repent. (Ber. 10a)*

It is a cute distinction, but is it the way people really are? I should like to change your behavior, but I am not judging you as a person. To what extent are we what we do? Is there a separate inner core that is more than just a theological construct? Chances are, we are more charitable about ourselves in this area than we are about others.

17. *R. Abahu, the son of Z'eira said, "How great is teshuvah (repentance) for it preceded the creation of the world, for it says: Before the mountains were created you turned mankind in contrition . . . you said, 'Return, you children of men.' " (Psalm 90:-3) (Note: The Biblical word teshuvah can mean either "repentance" or "return." The phrase can be understood to mean "Before the mountains were created you told people to do teshuvah". (Gen.*

Rabbah 10:1)

The ability to improve our behavior is presumed to be built in as one of the foundations of the world. Do we really believe such a view? Jewish tradition does. Do we really have experience of people changing in significant ways? Should all staff members be given life tenure or fired after the first 15 minutes? Don't we know all we need to know by then? Is significant growth a real option?

18. *Everything which was made during the six days of creation still needs work. Even man still needs fixing. (Gen. Rabbah 11)*

No one is a finished product, but it is "fixing" that we need, not recreation. That goes for both supervisors and supervisees.

If our goals are modest, if supervisor and supervisee like each other, if they don't engage in threatening behavior, if they don't shame one another in public, if they recognize their mutual similarities as frail and often failing human beings who are doing the best they can, maybe supervisors and supervisees can "fix" each other, at least a little bit from time to time.