

Mentoring for Ministry in Judaism

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Shalom! It is a delight to share my experience of Jewish mentorship in interfaith settings. Although I am currently the Associate Chaplain for Jewish Life at Wake Forest University, I have prior experience with the Jewish Family Services of the Greensboro Jewish Federation in North Carolina, at the Commission for Jewish Education in West Palm Beach, Florida, and as a volunteer and board member of many synagogues and Jewish organizations. Concurrent with my present work responsibilities, I am attending rabbinical school at the Academy for Jewish Religion in Yonkers, New York.

Rabbinical school, as with divinity school, is an essential step in obtaining ordination. Studying the sacred texts in Hebrew (or Aramaic), learning and practicing the rituals, singing the liturgy, living the Jewish life cycle, and understanding the 5,780 years of Jewish history, Jewish thought, Jewish practice, and Jewish living can take as many as five years of full-time study. Many of you work within divinity schools and religious organizations, so you understand the splendor and complexity of our educational systems and teachings.

One of the beautiful aspects of Judaism is that there is no one single theological prescription for life but rather a spectrum of beliefs, rituals, and values. Judaism is not monolithic. Judaism as a faith is based on challenge. The first patriarch, Abraham, challenged the system of idolatry practiced by his father and others at that time. He challenged G-d to find good within the wickedness of Sodom and Gomorrah. And challenge is at the heart of Jewish education. Within Jewish thought and action, learners are expected to challenge the texts (even the sacred ones), their teachers, their own understanding, and even G-d/the Divine, just as Abraham did. It is through challenge, and reflection, that one learns and grows.

MENTORING ACROSS DIFFERENCE

As the Associate Chaplain for Jewish Life at Wake Forest University, I “minister” to the entire community, not just the Jewish community. I have also ministered and mentored formally and informally in other interfaith settings most of my career. Many of the divinity school, social work, education, and religion department students I mentored over the years were told as children not to challenge their beliefs, their clergy, or their

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G-d. Now, presented with a myriad of ways in which belief and practice are manifested by other students, their teachers, their institutions, and their readings, these students sometimes become anxious or confused. My belief and experience is that such challenges do not in any way diminish one's beliefs or practices but should deepen them. This is important because there are often fundamental differences in the ways Jews and Christians see the world, the Divine, each other, and even the mentoring relationship.

So, how do I define mentorship? As someone who has spent way too much time looking at the definitions of many experts in the field, I do not see the mentor relationship as a hierarchy or as having an innate power differential. I approach mentorship, as I do any relationship with (an)other, as a Buberian "I-Thou" relationship. Martin Buber (1878–1965) was an Austrian philosopher best known for his philosophy of dialogue, a form of existentialism centered on the distinction between the I–Thou relationship (deep personal mutual connections) and the I–It relationship (a transactional impersonal connection). Buber was nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature ten times and the Nobel Peace Prize seven times.

Rescuing human relationships from the transactional I-It paradigm offered by most Western philosophies, the I-Thou paradigm is a horizontal, not vertical, relationship infused with divine energy and interpersonal respect in which both parties listen deeply, care deeply, share deeply, and learn deeply.

APPLYING THREE PREMISES

My model of interfaith mentorship is based on three premises:

1. People enjoy free will and are co-creators in partnership with the Divine (mentorship) at every moment (i.e., are in an I-Thou relationship with the Divine) and with each other (humans).
2. In order to mentor and be mentored, one should aim to embody and live the values identified, shared, and learned within the relationship.
3. In order to mentor and be mentored, one must ask questions and challenge the "Other," whether divine or human.

If I convey this to you, and if you understand these premises in terms of how you can use them to mentor, then I have done my job of mentoring you!

BUILDING THE RELATIONSHIP

In Judaism, a good question is better than a great answer. One learns much from the questions that people ask, sometimes more than the answers themselves provide. When I am first meeting with a potential mentee or intern, I sit down and chat to learn more about them and why they want to enter such a relationship. During the "interview," I sit without a table between us, with nothing blocking our connections. I keep an open stance, in body movements, emotional energy, intellectual curiosity, and divine presence. I invite potential mentees to share their successes but also their failures, as well as their

expectations, so we can build a realistic picture of the present moment and how to move forward. Once agreeing to the mentorship relationship, we use these meetings to write up learning outcomes and an agreement, including a job description, possible assignments, and working hours.

Mentorship tips:

- Be open to new relationships and (divine) presences, changing relationships, hope, and radical love.
- Find the balance between informal connections and formal organizational structures.
- Do not be afraid to tap into your wellspring of divine energy and let it guide you. If you truly listen, people (and the Divine) will open up to you (and within you).
- Having written expectations and agreements and job descriptions is important since it is easier to refer back to a piece of paper than to faded or distorted memories.

OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

While mentoring, it is not uncommon for me to learn that a student has failed in a previous internship or mentoring relationships. When that happens, I find ways to make sure that this previous negative experience does not interfere with our present internship. Therefore, when able, I invite both the student and their previous supervisor-mentor to sit together with me to explore what went wrong, what went right, and what I should be aware of in our present mentorship relationship to avoid those similar issues. In that meeting, it often becomes clear that the student and the supervisor-mentor made assumptions about each other that were not correct and that they did not have the type of relationship to challenge those assumptions or seek a reality check. I find that once the air is cleared between these previous internship relations, a weight is lifted from both parties that carries positively into our relationship.

Mentoring tip:

- Address the past honestly, and do not let it control your present or future.

ASSIGNING POSITIVE TASKS

A mentoring relationship is built on trust. If one member of the relationship feels censored, misunderstood, or disrespected, then the relationship, and the ability to learn, has the potential to also fail. Often the mentee or the mentor wants to show only their positive, or successful, side. But life is not that way. This is the “Facebook syndrome,” where people often post only their best days or accomplishments. As the reader of such posts, it is easy to become depressed when comparing these apex moments of others with one’s normal life experiences. The other side of Facebook is the people who only post their worst days. However, the reality is that most people have both good and bad days.

This is how it is in mentor relationships. The mentee will sometimes compare themselves to the mentor who has much more education and experience, leaving the mentee feeling lacking. That is why it is important for the mentor to praise, not just critique, the mentee and to share about themselves, especially personal stories of overcoming failure.

Once, I handed over my favorite program, an interfaith Bible study (from a Jewish perspective on the Hebrew Bible), to a school of divinity intern, a deeply spiritual Christian woman of color, to lead. We started with discussing how we each facilitate Bible study. I like to give participants different versions of the Bible (Jewish and Christian) with different translations, have everyone read a line and discuss it, look at the commentaries, have group members share their worldviews, and discover if there is a lesson that might apply (or not) to contemporary society. When I facilitate the process, it is fine if we spend the entire time on one line or if we end up reading the entire chapter. My intern, on the other hand, wanted to, instead, choose five stories to elucidate, and she wanted to make sure we covered an entire story in each session. The intern reread the stories from the Hebrew Bible, using the JPS translation, which is closest to the original Hebrew, and then read commentaries from a variety of sources and perspectives. When she read the Jewish interpretations, she ran them through the prism of her Christian and personal interpretations, asking great questions and broadening her perspective. During the process, I asked great questions as well and offered suggestions when appropriate. I also provided loving feedback after the sessions were over and in private. Our job as mentors is not only to find fault but to be generous with authentic praise, pointing out the gifts that our mentee brings that they did not even know they possessed. Although this was not the way that I led a Bible study, I totally enjoyed being a participant instead of the facilitator, and I learned new ways of facilitation and of interpretation, for which I am grateful.

Mentoring tips:

- Develop a caring and respectful relationship.
- Offer continuous feedback throughout the process, affirming as well as critical.
- Ask great questions.
- Be open to incorporating what you learn from your mentee.

DEVELOPING MUTUALITY

I believe that mentorship is a mutual experience. There are times that it is important for me to give up old systems and embrace new ways of doing things. One of the most difficult things for a mentor to do is to share power. But I feel that is part of the process. In allowing students to figure out their best way (not the mentor's) of doing a task more efficiently and effectively, students can try out new ways of doing and being in real time, and both parties can learn from the experience.

As mentors, we often get stuck in patterns that served us years ago when we started a project but are now no longer as effective or efficient. By allowing students to

take over some of our roles and tasks, we actually model ways to receive. Yes, there are bound to be a few bumps along the way. When that happens, we discuss the failure, correct our course, and try again. Often, it is difficult for a mentee to receive criticism or feedback. When they see their mentor accept criticism and feedback graciously and gratefully, however, they can learn new ways to receive as well. In ministry, we often seek to give but not to receive. That is a mistake. Receiving is an important and learnable skill. One should be open to receiving—how else can one accept the divine presence if one is not open to receiving?

This also highlights the Jewish concept of experiential education—“learning by doing.” Telling a mentor what to do is not enough; it is only through the act of doing that one can truly learn and incorporate the learning. And we often learn more from our mistakes than our successes. It takes a special mentoring relationship in which both mentor and mentee can fail in a safe and loving environment to transcend that failure individually and collectively.

Mentoring tip:

- Be open to experience, receiving, failure, and gratitude.

PROJECTING, OBSERVING, AND/OR INTERACTING WITH THE “OTHER”

How does one navigate the space of an “Other”? And how does one navigate the space of one’s mind in projecting one’s experience onto another group of people?

When I was in elementary school, we were the only Jewish family in our neighborhood in Oklahoma. Every year, our neighbors invited me to join them at Christian summer Bible camp. I attended and loved it! When I listened to their prayers and songs, I could hear the Hebrew Bible passages, Hebrew prayers, and liturgical songs that I learned in Jewish Sunday school. It was beautiful! It was my first taste of interfaith connection. I could have been considered an outsider by my friends, their classmates, and the administration. And, ironically, I could have also considered myself an outsider. Thankfully, we all felt comfortable. However, I think about how my identity at that moment shaped my experience, and that informs me to check to see how my interns/mentees see themselves in these interfaith situations.

I can understand when non-Jewish students feel initially “on the outside” with events or interactions with Jewish students or people. I remember a particular social work student who joined us at Jewish Family Services. She was delightful, and our Jewish elders loved her. But there was an underlying problem. She feared that the elders would stop liking her if they found out she was not Jewish, and that inhibited her from bringing her authentic and whole self to her internship. I sensed a hesitation at times, so I asked. It turned out that she was projecting onto the elders how she perceived her grandmother might react to learning that someone helping her was Jewish. That was because her grandmother had a negative, suspicious viewpoint of Jews, a view that the intern did not share. Yet, thinking about her grandmother’s reactions unconsciously affected this

intern's interactions until we talked about it. In our caring environment, we chatted until she realized that she feared that the Jewish senior citizens would not love, or worse yet, not respect, her if they found out she was Christian. She had projected onto them something not real. The elders did not think about her or act any differently upon learning that she was not Jewish; they loved the services and interactions she offered. Thereafter, this social work intern shared her background without embarrassment or apology. Religion should not be an obstacle to seeing one's humanity.

Indeed, I have seen other interns and students sit in the corner and observe when first interacting with Jewish students or people, especially when the intern is of a different race. The mentees sometimes project onto themselves a negative vibe from the students, projecting how they might feel if someone else was in "their space." And yet, the Jewish students do not feel this way. Eventually, the interns/mentees leave their self-imposed space and join the group. In doing so, many amazing connections occur.

Mentoring tips:

- Stay in the moment and interact authentically within groups.
- Do not exempt yourself from the group. Be aware of your own projections, stereotypes, biases, and religious prisms.
- When in doubt, ask! Remember the importance of great questions.
- Appreciate your background and allow your interactions with other religions and denominations to deepen your faith and the respect you have for other faiths, as well as your own.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Judaism is about action and doing. It is important to me as a mentor to be a good role model as well as a good peer in a respectful, caring, and authentic relationship. My Jewish mentorship paradigm is based on the Havruta model. The word *Havruta* derives from the Hebrew root for "friend" and is a special dyadic relationship in which each partner offers feedback to the other's interpretations (of text and) of life. When two people learn together, it is better than learning alone. If one makes a mistake, the other can correct. And as we know, it is easier to see mistakes in others than in ourselves. The mentor relationship works like a mirror, reflecting the humanity of the other person.

It is also important in Judaism to tell stories. Stories remain one of the best ways to teach—across cultures, religions, and time. In classic mentoring, the stories about the mentor's experiences are a guide for mentee learning. Remember to use stories whenever possible for mentees to explore options they had not previously considered. The Jewish tradition has always valued learning with others, whether with teachers or other students.

As it says in Pirkei Avot, "Sayings of our Ancestors," which is a compilation of the ethical teachings and maxims in the Talmud passed down through the generations, from Moses to the rabbis:

Rabbi Yishmael used to say: He who learns in order to teach will be enabled both to learn and to teach. But he who learns in order to practice will be enabled to learn, to teach, to observe, and to practice. (Pirkei Avot, 4:5)

SUMMARY

- Ask questions and challenge yourself and your mentee.
- Truly listen carefully and caringly.
- Give and receive in order to model.
- Be authentic in your humanity.
- Show respect to all.
- In order not to assume or project, ask questions and challenge.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Question and challenge: How do you challenge yourself? How do you allow others to challenge you? How do you hone your ability to ask great questions?
2. Authenticity: How do you show your authentic self? What masks do you use to cover your vulnerabilities? Why?
3. Power: How do you see your power, both within yourself and outside yourself and also in the mentoring relationship? How does one “share” power? What are the benefits (and drawbacks) of you sharing your power?

SUGGESTED READINGS

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