Mentoring the Mentors: "After" Education

Hebrew Union College Fall 2011

When I was first ordained in 1980, I took a job at an enormous congregation. It was in Texas, where everything is big. I was hired to be the third of three rabbis and also to run the two-day-a-week Religious School. I really wanted to do a good job and was just terrified. The Education Committee wanted a greater rabbinic presence in the school from all three rabbis. They told me to schedule worship services every Sunday morning during school hours, one for the littlest children, one for the 4th – 6th grades, and one for the oldest kids. I diligently worked out a schedule for the music director and the three of us rabbis. This was in the days before computers, so my secretary typed it out on a typewriter and distributed it to everyone. You might have already guessed what happened. On the first day of the new schedule, I was the only one who showed up. The music director and the other two rabbis had simply ignored my request.

When I look back on that situation, I think about everything I didn't know. I didn't know the rabbis hadn't been part of the Education Committee's decision to include services. I didn't know they weren't interested in the school. I didn't know I was making a change. Even if I had understood I was making a change, I didn't know how to make a change. And I certainly didn't know to expect resistance to change. I also didn't yet know not to take things like that personally; I was simply devastated. What I did know was that I had a passion to improve the school and provide the best

education for the children and their parents. That passion carried me a long way, but what I learned over time was that having passion was both a blessing and a curse; being passionate about Jewish education and change didn't pave a linear path to my goal. There were times where having a passion for change seemed to create more problems than it solved. It also wasn't clear to me that there was any way to change the curriculum or the school without also trying to change the people around me in order to achieve my goal. Now you understand why I started with the text you studied this morning. It illustrates the professional evolution of how I learned to use my passion for change:

> The Rabbi of Zans [Hayyim} used to say about himself: "In my youth when I was filled with the love of God, I thought I could convert the whole world to God, but soon I discovered that it would be quite enough to convert the people who dwelled in my own town, and I tried for a long time but did not succeed. Then I realized that I was still too ambitious, and so I concentrated on the members of my family. But I could not convert them either. Finally, I realized that I must work on myself, so that I might give true service to God, but I did not accomplish even this."
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> (P. 75 Rabbinic Wisdom and Jewish Values, William Silverman quoting Buber)

I learned – sometimes the hard way, as per this story – that the Rabbi of Zans had the right idea. I had to start by working on myself.

I think we can agree that you don't go into Jewish education without being passionate about it. Jewish educators – and I include myself among you – want to lead our people into the Promised Land. We have inherited that messianic impulse. And a messianic impulse is by definition "other-directed." It is about dissatisfaction with the status quo. Most of us don't tend to get messianic impulses to change ourselves; we get a messianic impulse to change the world. It was only after many frustrating attempts at changing the world around me, I realized it was time to try something different because what I was doing wasn't working.

Sigmund Freud referred to psychoanalysis as "after education." He was actually speaking specifically about educational systems and what had to be unlearned from them and relearned in order to have a good life. But for our purposes today, I want to broaden the idea of "after education." Some of what we have learned in life – our "life education," so to speak – has been helpful to us and we can keep on using what we have learned. But some of what we have learned may never have served us well or no longer serves us well. And since as educators we believe people can learn new ways, we have to model what we believe. We don't have to give up on the idea of change, we just have to start with ourselves, as the Rabbi of Zans might say. And that usually means reeducating ourselves and embarking on a course of "after education."

Often people who are leaders are quite self-sufficient. I, for one, was used to figuring out things in my head. If I thought about things long enough, usually I could find a solution. That worked for me for a long time, but eventually it only took me so far.

After five years in Dallas – where I never did get my two senior rabbis to listen to anything I wanted them to do and simply learned how to work around them – I moved to a smaller congregation where I replaced a male rabbi who had been there for 35 years. It was like I walked around with a neon sign over my head that said CHANGE. People looked at me and saw change even if I did everything just the way my predecessor did. I sat in a meeting of the Ritual Committee in which they debated whether during services I had been changing the language of the prayerbook to make it gender neutral. Half the committee thought I was; half thought I wasn't. And no one asked me, even though I was sitting right there. It was as if I were invisible.

When I came I inherited the pre-existing staff. Not surprisingly, my leadership style was different from my predecessor's. I saw myself more as a Carol Gilligan type leader, working more by consensus than by fiat. But that didn't seem to matter. This staff didn't want to do what I wanted them to do either – even if I thought I was including them in the process and it seemed that what I was asking was quite reasonable. I realized that I didn't even know what it was I needed to know and I didn't know where to begin. So I looked around for resources that might help me.

My first exposure to "after education" came in a supervision group run at a modern psychoanalytic institute. I joined this supervision group without knowing what it really was. I actually had never heard of supervision groups. To me, the word supervision implied someone's looking over your shoulder telling you when you were doing something wrong. But I learned from this group that supervision was

anything but. One of my teachers once said that the word supervision should be taken literally – that when two or more people work together on an issue, their vision is "super" because you have not one but two people or more whose vision is focused on the same problem. When I speak about supervision here, I am not talking about task-oriented supervision, although that can be important. I am not talking about supervision that is really just disguised as "constructive" criticism. I am talking about the kind of supervision that helps you figure out who you are in your context and why you respond the way you do. It is the kind of supervision that focuses on resolving what gets in the way of your enjoying your job as fully as possible.

I give this supervision group credit for three profound changes. First, I learned how to talk in a setting that encouraged emotional communication – more about that later. Second, I learned to wonder about myself. I learned in this group that I needed to observe my own feelings when I was with my staff. If I was uncomfortable, why was I uncomfortable? Was it my feeling or was it a feeling induced by one of them? What did I need to do to move myself back into my comfort zone? Why did I seem to have a harder time with some personalities than with others? What were my goals and how could I communicate them effectively? What should be discussed in a group? What would be better individually? (This was in the days before personal computers and email, don't forget, so the choice was either a conversation in person or on the phone.) The third thing I learned was to wonder about them and their motivation. What was it like for them to work with one rabbi for 25 years and suddenly have a new rabbi who had an entirely different leadership style? How did they see me? What were they feeling? Was there another path I could take to enlist their cooperation?

In this "after education," I learned that there were words to describe my experiences, that modern analytical thinking actually was a way of thinking about normal human development. I learned I could ask things I never thought I could ask. Some of the lessons seemed fairly simple although it took time to retrain myself to try the recommendations. One of my teachers taught me, "If you are talking with a staff member and feel defensive, just ask a question. That will take the pressure off of you for the moment and make the person you are with have to consider what she is doing." I never would have thought of that on my own. But it works. I learned that there are all kinds of emotional dynamics going on all the time between people and they are normative. We all have both an ego and an unconscious. We all have defenses we have constructed to protect ourselves. Transference and counter-transference are dynamics that are present all the time, albeit unconscious. We have ideas about other people that often have nothing to do with them; they are ideas that come from within us and stem from our emotional past. I will give you a simple example. When I was a little girl, my rabbi was the late Jack Stern. If you had the privilege of knowing Rabbi Jack Stern, you know he was a small man. But in my mind, he was a giant. When I was ordained, he told me I could call him Jack. But I couldn't. Because when I saw him, my old transference response kicked into place: he was a big grown up and I was a small child. It took me 20 years to call him Jack. My experience has helped me to understand that just as I can only see people through my own emotional history, others can only see me through theirs. I might think I am the nicest most cooperative person in the world, but their transference might lead them to see me as the wicked witch of the west. And it works the other way, too; those two rabbis from Dallas I mentioned carried on a public feud for 13 years. Why

didn't anyone do anything about it? The leadership had a positive transference to rabbis; surely no rabbi couldn't behave that way, they thought, and so redefined the behavior to be something other than it was.

Learning about those dynamics was a way of acquiring tools to be more effective. I resisted some of this learning initially; I now understand that change and resistance go hand in hand. The ways I had used to be effective before were no longer working but I didn't yet have new ways of being. Over time, with my new education, I learned why my old approach hadn't worked. I learned that you can't change people by trying to change them directly. If someone is habitually late everywhere she goes, I am not going to be the one to change her. I can only change my reaction, which then allows her to change her response. I learned that if I adapt my way of working with someone, and help that person feel understood, that approach will go along way to our getting along even when we have differences.

You can see by my bio that I liked this form of after-education so much that I became a psychoanalyst, but you don't have to go that far in order to benefit from the principles of analytic thought and technique. I found a modality that worked for me. There are other approaches that use a different language to describe similar phenomena – the chapter by Rabbi Ed Friedman on family systems theory in congregational life is another way of describing and working with similar phenomena. The idea is to start with yourself and find a way of thinking that opens up your options and increases your own emotional resiliency. What matters is that you find or create a model that gives you a regular opportunity to talk, to observe yourself in the moment, to get help sorting out issues, and to plan strategies for working well with others and for keeping yourself comfortable.

I'd like to look at the chart with you. Think of a challenging relationship in your work situation. What is the challenge? How can you resolve the challenge so that you feel effective and successful in your work?