

A Benevolent Tether: A Mentoring Program for the Jewish Community High School

by Lawrence S. Zierler

The Jewish community should leverage Jewish social capital by mentoring students with role models from within to help guide their future careers and increase their community connectedness.

This is an excerpt from a longer article by Lawrence S. Zierler; the complete article can be found online at www.caje.org.

"Social capital", a term popularized by Robert Putnam in his 1995 trail-blazing work *Bowling Alone*, refers to features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit. For a variety of reasons, life is easier in a community blessed with substantial stock of social capital. Networks of civic engagement foster sturdy norms of generalized reciprocity and encourage the emergence of social trust. Social connections and civic engagement, according to Putnam, can positively influence our public life as well as our private prospects.¹

Princeton sociologist Robert Wuthnow speaks of "loose connections," a phenomenon that is manifest in today's boutique or niche religious groups and expressions.² The communal fault lines, however, are no less pronounced in contemporary American Jewish life. Steven M. Cohen and Arnold M. Eisen in *The Jew Within* describe a new middle ground set apart from the most highly engaged twenty to twenty-five percent of Jews and the twenty percent who are completely uninvolved in organized Jewish life, a group that rests between the poles of immersion and apathy, a class of explorers in Jewish life, people in a perpetual quest for Jewish meaning.³

One must consider the kind of Jewish community and connections that today's youth might be stepping away from as they prepare to leave home and hearth and explore their new educational landscapes upon entering their college years. These emerging young adults who may have received a modicum of Jewish education and socialization, but who now tread on the shifting sands of the earlier described new middle ground, are especially at risk of losing their tenuous, loose connections. One of the biggest challenges we face as an organized Jewish community is figuring out how to relate to this younger generation. The years from age eighteen to thirty-five tend to be a low point for Jewish communal engagement and participation. This is a time when even those whose families have been connected to established communal entities fall off the religious/cultural radar screen. Many of the organizations and institutions of their childhood and youth no longer speak to them as they encounter a period of personal flux and discovery. It is often not until they establish their own home and family, with the security of a developing career, that they reestablish a place and position within the organized Jewish community.

Mentoring through Harnessing Jewish Social Capital

Today's high school upperclassmen are achievement-oriented, see conformity as a motivator, and care most about grades and acceptance into a good university. They are collaborators in and out of the classroom and enter the college campus as part of a new "millennial generation that is distinctively Jewish and universally human".⁴ New research shows today's teenagers are forming "the ambitious generation," a group of young people eager to attend college, determined to get good jobs, but often disappointed by the guidance they receive from parents and schools, which is all the more reason and need for a mentoring program. More than any other group of teenagers in history, these young people are committed to attending college and expect to earn advanced degrees, according to sociologist Barbara Schneider, in her work, *The Ambitious Generation: America's Teenagers, Motivated But Directionless*. She notes how high school students often have insufficient information about the requirements for the jobs they seek and, as a result, do not make practical decisions when selecting and preparing for a career. She then suggests that adults help students develop "aligned ambitions so that they can choose a career while in high school, learn what education is required for the job, and then seek mentoring and internships to learn more about these occupations...Students with aligned ambitions are more likely

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to successfully navigate the transition from high school to college and make choices that increase the chances that they will realize their dreams.”⁵

I therefore propose tying a “benevolent tether” to some of these young people through a mentoring program for high school upperclassmen in order to harness Jewish social capital (*hon chevrat*) or what I would call our “assets in association.” This program will match these students with certain adult role models from different areas of career accomplishment and communal involvement.

It is an opportunity offered by older individuals with experience in career and community who seek to return a measure of their own inspiration and insight that can, in turn, guide young people standing at the threshold of a planned rupture from home and hearth. This form of mentorship can help reduce the impact of the break from rootedness in community and engage the interests of these emerging young adults as they seek ways to form character and design their careers.

The Jewish community has traditionally put its efforts and resources into developing cultural capital, most notably through Jewish education, and not into social capital. In the absence of efforts in this latter regard, we observe many young people who radically break from the organized Jewish community once they are beyond high school and out on their own on the college campus. Once in a situation of flux, it can take more than a decade to repatriate and resituate these lost people. Countless communal resources are spent in young leadership programs for these purposes. But this is a reactive approach. Mentoring, as I envision it, can be a proactive approach to this problem, recognizing the need to pre-empt this rupture on some level and to impart in these young people an appreciation of the many benefits that flow from a fertile environment of Jewish connectedness.

A Dynamic, Two-Way Relationship

Mentoring often is defined as a sustained relationship between a youth and an adult. Through continued involvement the adult offers support, guidance, and assistance as the younger person goes through a difficult period, faces new challenges, or works to correct earlier problems. There are essentially two types of mentoring: natural mentoring and planned mentoring. Natural mentoring occurs through friendship, collegiality, teaching, coaching, and counseling. In contrast, planned mentoring occurs through structured programs in which mentors and participants are selected and matched through formal processes.⁶

In many ways, today's mentoring relationships function quite differently from those of the past. In the traditional style of mentoring, the primary goal was a one-way transfer of a broad range of knowledge and information. The mentor was the authoritarian source of this information and directed all other aspects of the mentoring relationship. Today, many mentoring relationships have evolved to become more focused on learning and are dynamic, two-way relationships that involve critical reflection and full participation by both partners. The mentor assumes the role of the facilitator. The mentee becomes a more proactive and equal partner helping to direct the relationship and set its goals

Mentoring, in the words of Gen. Colin Powell, is literally a “force multiplier” with many strategic advantages. It can accelerate careers, strengthen organizational cultural identity, and preserve knowledge and experience that was won the hard way. Another useful military metaphor, “knowing the ropes,” originated in the Navy. These images graphically support the social capital concept and the wisdom that can be leveraged from another person's view as a result of a longer life.⁷

The mentor is usually a person who is seen as more knowledgeable about, or experienced in, certain areas of living. That, in fact, is where it has its muscle and meaning. Due to this inequity, mentoring is usually difficult to maintain among actual peers. Mentoring has elements of parental love, but does not usually have the long mutual history and, indeed, problems will occur if the mentor becomes too parental. It also should be qualified that the mentor is not molding the mentee or protégé in his or her own image. Rather, the mentor is one who, in an authentic and genuine manner, provides certain functions to an active, discerning participant in the relationship.⁸

The Value-added of Jewish Connectedness

The mentoring concept that I propose is not born out of a situation of crisis or social pathology. It does not seek to replace a “missing adult” in the young person's life. The mentor is not a “rescuer,” as in the Big Brothers/Big Sisters model. Rather, mentoring is part of a program of career enhancement and lifestyle choice and design. Its purpose is to help young people in the Jewish community maximize options for meaningful cultural and professional pursuits.

Its attraction and appeal starts with the opportunities provided these young people to get a leg up on their career plans by connecting with mentors in allied areas of interest who can make the appropriate introductions and open the right doors for them. Its secondary gain of having mentors who are also exemplars of community connectedness, however defined, can result in an enhanced awareness of the current Jewish condition that will keep these young people involved or within reach. It is about all the “value-added” that results from Jewish connectedness.

Mentoring is born out of the primary place of apprenticeship and understudy that we find in Jewish communal and educational history. As Dr. Haym Soleveitchik notes in his seminal article, “Rupture and Reconstruction: The Transformation of Contemporary Orthodoxy”:

A way of life is not learned, but rather absorbed; its transition is mimetic, imbibed from parents and friends, and patterned on conduct regularly observed in home and street, synagogue and school...Words are good for... analysis, but pathetically inadequate for teaching how to do something...One learns best by being shown, that is to say mimetically.⁹

In the words of Abraham Joshua Heschel, what Judaism needs is not only textbooks but “text people.”¹⁰ Mentorship is built and based on the background of the prominent role of *shimush*, *dibuk chaverim*, the *rebbe-talmid* relationship, the Talmudic-halachic concept of *ma'aseh rav* and the role of the *mashpiah* (lit., one who influences) in hasidic literature as organizing principles in the shaping of character. And while the *rebbe-talmid/ador-*

*hasid*¹¹ relational typologies involve a greater degree of surrender to the dominant, the role of the religious exemplar is possible in the contemporary mentoring encounter, even with the mentor's less directive and more equal role. Shared similarities still exist, albeit in a more titrated, limited context. The intimacy and dynamic created by the interaction of two persons giving the mutual respect necessary in the context of mentoring can lead the younger person to appreciate not only the information and experiences transmitted by the older individual, but also, the actual essence of the older role model.

Necessary Anchors Within Modern Society

Joseph Schwab addresses these elements in his discussion of "lineage, peerage, and linkage," necessary anchors within modern society.¹² The notion is amplified by the three levels of friendship that Maimonides describes in *Hilchot De'ot* (*Laws of Ideas*), that of *Davar* (utilitarian), *Da'agah* (emotional), and *De'ah* (ideological), all of which are assumed through the involvement of the caring "elder brother" model of the mentor. The *rebbe-talmid* relationship and the concept of *Shimush talmidei hachamim* (serving or personal involvement with the Rabbis) offer important opportunities for mimetic and text-based learning. Students are able to acquaint themselves with a specific noteworthy life, which could happen only in the presence and purview of the master. Personal attendance on scholars enables students to learn far more of the deeper spirit of Judaism than was possible through conventional *yeshivah* study. And since the Rabbis taught as much by example as by precept, this type of apprenticeship constituted an indispensable means for modeling and attaining a higher ethical, moral standard.

This program seems best suited for high school upperclassmen in a co-ed Jewish community high school, coordinated through its guidance or student services department. Older high school students represent a good age because this is the last real opportunity to effect substantial change in their lives, yet it is a perilous age because of the potential negative influence of the mentor who might attempt to emasculate the mentee. One must take care to create a profile of the ideal mentor to determine parameters including the optimal age cohort of mentors, gender issues, desired level of Judaic background, and communal commitment.

The relational risks in this program involve issues of transference and over-identification on the part of the mentee and exploitation and abuse of a potentially vulnerable population, both physical and emotional, on the part of the mentor. Some mentors will blur and ignore necessary boundaries and seize the opportunity to pursue personal agendas. "*Kiruv* (outreach) types" might introduce and try to impose religious programs and imperatives. Mentor egos and narcissistic tendencies might be indulged in this kind of encounter at the expense of the mentee. It can become a bully-pulpit for the mentor and a way to achieve different types of secondary gain.

Ultimate responsibility should rest with the sponsoring school and its administration, yet some degree of distance and freedom will be important so as not to compromise the nature of the relationship. Pre-program training for both mentors and mentees is necessary to create proper boundaries and reasonable

expectations, best practices, methods of supervision and tests, and measures of success. Log-keeping and periodic retreats with the full program population can create a larger context beyond the taxing one-on-one encounters and provide some breathing space and remove. Also important is program oversight by the program coordinator, (someone specially hired by and assigned to the responsible school department to find the mentors, facilitate the matches, and direct training and supervision), who watches for signs of stress and other problem areas.

My research thus far shows little incidence of formal mentoring programs in Jewish educational settings. Resistance might rest in concerns that parents have with an already overstuffed schedule, as well as possible ideological and doctrinal threats that can surface from such a program. Parents are wary of sacrificing hegemony in these areas to elements that might encroach upon and critique lifestyle and orientation. Safeguards developed through training in a pluralistic context could reduce these concerns in favor of the great gains for career and character development and communal connectedness.

Serious discussion must also be given to the necessary criteria for the potential mentors as exemplars of career and community. What benchmarks must be met *a priori* by the would-be mentor? What is the model of a good Jewish life that mentors are expected to represent? These are not easy questions to answer in a vacuum. Here, too, local cultural and social sensitivities need to be explored in detail as one considers the variables that inform and inspire meaningful Jewish living. It should not only be a product of exterior manifestations, observance, and practice. Dr. Donniel Hartman proposes three essential elements for such a baseline: involvement in *gemilut hesed* (acts of lovingkindness), the Jewish calendar/the rhythms of Jewish life, and the Jewish library/study.

For too long, the question of Jewish continuity has been focused on the problem of Jewish communal survival against mortal threats. Today, the problem instead is one of boredom, irrelevance, and disconnect. It is not the challenge of Jewish survivalism, but what I prefer to call Jewish thrivalism, keeping Jewish people purposefully attached to their tradition and meaningfully anchored in community — to defy the strong personalist pull of American culture and society. Meaningful Jewish life and engagement must be with other communal participants and stakeholders. It must be experienced in a relationship; indeed, there are tremendous assets that can be grown in association. Mentoring, in my mind, is a visceral response to an increasingly atomized and fractured existence. It is available and inexpensive. It begins "at the ground level, in face-to-face communication and engagement where connection is palpable, belonging pays direct rewards and obligation to others is home grown."¹³ While some bonds might break when either pulled or tied too tightly, these proposed "loose connections," this "benevolent tether" can be fortifying and sustaining. It is all about knowing how to tie the knots properly so that they can hold and help. Mentoring is the manual. ❁

ENDNOTES

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