**“The Challenge of Creating and Maintaining Personal and Professional Boundaries in the Mentoring Relationship”**

**CCAR Mentors’ Webinar 3/9/15 Ellen Lewis**

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When I think about Rabbinic Mentoring is. I am reminded of the words from Pirke Avot [chapter 3, mishnah 3: ] where *Rabbi Chanina ben Tradyon said:* *… if two people sit and share words of Torah between them, the Divine Presence rests between them.*

It’s an inspiring phrase that lets us know the rewards but hardly hints at how challenging the sharing of Torah can be in a mentoring relationship. We are peers and yet we are also teacher and student. We are both rabbis and yet there is also a power differential between us. We are in it together and yet we have different roles.

It can be confusing but important to figure out which role you are in at any given moment. When are you supposed to share your wisdom as a teacher? When are you supposed to exercise restraint and just listen? How do you know when your words are welcome and when they are not?

Today’s title, "Sharing our Wisdom, Not our Baggage," speaks to the challenge of creating and maintaining personal and professional boundaries in this mentoring relationship. When I was mentoring, I found that it helped to develop my own mental mentoring framework so I could be clear on my own methods and motivations. Today I want to offer ten ideas that can be used to develop a mentoring frame that works for you.

1. **If Momma ain’t happy, ain’t nobody happy.** You all know that Self-care is an ever-present issue in the rabbinate. We experience that conflict between caring for ourselves and caring for others. That makes it all the more important how you handle yourself as a mentor. It is your job as a mentor to keep yourself comfortable. If you don’t keep yourself comfortable, your mentee isn’t going to be comfortable. This means you have to be aware of what makes you uncomfortable. For example, if your mentee wants to meet on Friday at 4 pm and that is when you are planning to finish your sermon or cook Shabbat dinner, take a moment to reflect before you make a decision. How would you feel if you agreed to this request? How would you feel if you didn’t accommodate this request? If you are feeling pressured to agree to something that will leave you feeling resentful, how would it benefit either of you to do something against your better judgment? The task is to respond in a way where you stay within your comfort zone but also attend to the mentor/mentee relationship. “I wish I could meet with you then, but I’m not available. Can we find another time?” This approach models taking care of yourself and lets the mentee know indirectly that he/she should attend to self-care.,
2. With a nod to James Carville, we might say, **“It’s the relationship, stupid.”** No matter what the specific content of the call, each interchange happens in the context of your relationship. Setting up your contract at the beginning is part of that relationship. When are you going to meet? How much time is set aside for each meeting? If one or the other of you needs to change a meeting date, how should that happen? Together, you establish what you need to know to get started. As other things come up, you deal with them within the context of what is best for the relationship. A relationship is always changing, so it is good practice to be continually assessing and evaluating whether the original contract is still working and when it needs revision.

The boundaries of the relationship are clearer in a strictly therapeutic relationship where you establish meeting times and fees up front. This is harder to accomplish in a mentoring environment that isn’t fee for service, but it may be one of the most important things a mentee can learn from a mentor. The mentor is in charge of how this relationship is conducted even though there is mutuality involved. That keeps the mentee feeling safe. That dynamic may change as you get to know each other better and your mentee gains experience, but there is still an unspoken power differential.

There is a potential pitfall here for us, the mentors. Most rabbis are in charge of way too much to begin with and now you are in charge of something you don’t even have to do! It’s always important to be clear on your own motivation for being in this relationship so you can gauge how to manage your own feelings if you start to feel imposed upon.

1. Keeping the relationship in mind also frames what we think of as **boundary issues.** How do we manage our personal and professional boundaries? How do they manage theirs? What happens when their boundary choices differ from ours?

Boundary issues these days get played out in the electronic media. I will use myself as an example – I am a digital immigrant. I know how to use the technology but I’m not a native and am pretty conservative about how I use it. I have a cell phone but I reserve it for personal use since I am usually near a landline I ask people to call me at my office and I check messages frequently if I am out. This is by no means prescriptive, it’s just a description of what I do. What happens when I am dealing with a student cantor whose cell phone is her life? Where texting is the major form of communication? Should I change what I do? When is changing a boundary capitulating and when is it a mark of personal resiliency? Working through simple issues like that can be a model for setting and maintaining boundaries in other areas of the rabbinate.

1. **Do what I say, don’t do what I do.** There is a non-verbal component to this relationship. Mentees learn by watching us. Remember the story about the two disciples going to visit their Rebbe – where one plans to listen to the rebbe’s teaching and learn a great lesson, while the other plans to watch the rebbe tie his shoes to learn a great lesson.  The mentor fulfills both roles, that of offering teachings directly and that of offering teachings by being observed. I once worked with a student cantor who told me she observed how I walked out and talked to people before services. She said she herself preferred some quiet alone time before services. First, I didn’t even know I did that; I hadn’t thought much about it. Second, I began to think: Do I want her to learn to do what I do? Is it because I have been doing this for so many years that I don’t need to? Would it be better for me to do what she does? What am I teaching her by my doing what I do?

Mentoring is a lot like parenting in that way. We think we teach our kids many things by telling them directly but most of what they learn from us is by what they see us do. If you can be self-reflective about your process, it will help your mentees be self-reflective about theirs.

1. **Whose best interest** are you looking out for? For instance, in a therapeutic relationship, we ask: what is in the best interest of the patient? In this context, the question is: What is in the best interest of the mentee? And how do you know the difference between your best interest in that moment and your mentee’s? Sometimes, you just have to ask. For instance, you might think it is in the mentee’s best interest for you to share a personal story. But how do you know? In this moment, I have it in mind to share a personal story that I think offers a relevant example. If this webinar were an in-person dialogue, I might stop here and ask: Would you like to hear a personal story? That gives the mentee a feeling that his or her needs are being considered.

Since I can’t consult with you in this moment, I will risk offering a personal story: I once was assigned a CCAR mentor many years ago when I was first ordained. I was struggling with how to negotiate a maternity leave and I talked to him about it. He looked at me and said, “You think you should get a 3 month vacation? It took me 30 years to get a 3 month sabbatical!” Clearly that mentor let his personal needs supersede my best interest in that moment. That was the beginning and end of that relationship.

1. **How do you know what they want to know?** Will they tell you directly what they want or will their own transference get in the way? For our purposes, let me take a moment and offer a working definition of transference: It is when people unconsciously react to you as if you were a person from their personal past. They transfer old feelings onto you and they don’t know they are doing it. I am sure you can think of a thousand examples of how that happens between you and your constituents every day. I think back to a story a senior rabbi once told me.

He walked into a hospital room to visit a congregant.

Congregant: Rabbi, you look so good and rested. Have you had a vacation?

Then he walked into the next hospital room to visit another congregant.

Congregant: Rabbi, you look so tired. You need a vacation

These reactions had nothing to do with him as a person but reflected some transference they brought to the relationship because of what the rabbinic role triggered in their psyches.

Your mentees can also only see you through the eyes of their own personal history, either negatively or positively. They might relate to you through a negative transference. We can define **Negative transference** as: Whatever the person failed to receive in his/her early years, he/she will now feel is being withheld by you. (Those are always our most difficult constituents. No matter what you offer, it will be wrong.) Your mentee might relate to you through a **Positive Transference:** A person has negotiated early development more successfully and transfers positive feelings onto you. They want to please you, sometimes at their own expense.

This is the reason why it helps to be aware that people never love us as much as they say they love us nor do they hate us as much as they say they hate us. They don’t see us as we are but as they need us to be.

Whatever your mentee’s transference is will color how comfortable they feel in telling you what they need. You might need to initiate that question: “If there were something you needed, how would I know? Are we doing what you need or is there something we’ve neglected or should add?”

1. **What you think they need to know?** You might think you are offering help but unless your mentee experiences it as help, it ain’t help. It’s like love. I might say I love you and bring you flowers, but if you hate flowers, you won’t feel loved. I once knew a couple where he thought that buying his wife gifts would make her feel loved. She told him, if you washed the kitchen floor, I would feel loved. And so he did and she did.

This question of what we think people need to know comes up all the time in pre-marital counseling. What if you think the couple should talk about how they handle money and they want to talk about who’s walking whom down the aisle? Who decides what they need to know and how does that get decided? I have always thought that you need to start with both premarital couples and also mentees “ba’asher hu sham,” as it were. You start with them where they are, not with where you are. If you start with what is important to them, they will feel understood. You will have made an emotional connection and they will be more open to learning something new from you.

Sometimes mentees think they know everything already and are being over mentored. In that case, you might want to sympathize and remember back to the time when you knew everything. Alternatively, if you are really concerned that they aren’t talking about an important issue, you can ask: “what should happen if you want to talk about X and I want to talk about Y?”

1. **Walk the walk**. Mentors need mentors, even mentors who have been in the field forever. There is nothing like being on the other side of the couch, so to speak, to have a different experience. You learn better how to be a mentor when you have had the experience of being a mentee/patient/client/supervisee. And it offers a place to talk and to work on your own counter transference feelings. Counter transference is a reciprocal (feeling) response, either negative or positive, to the other person’s transference. It generally tells you something about your mentee’s emotional experience of you. If your mentee relates to you in a trusting way, the way a child might relate to her parents, you might find yourself having maternal or paternal feelings in response. That would be objective counter transference; anyone in your shoes would likely feel the same way. And it’s just a feeling, requiring no action. If your mentee relates to you in that way and you find yourself feeing annoyed and put upon, however, you need to investigate further whether this is inspired by the mentee (who may have had parents who felt annoyed by his needs) or whether it has nothing to do with the mentee and everything to do with how overwhelmed you feel in that moment by the number of people who are dependent on you (that would be called a subjective counter transference). Again, it’s just a feeling to observe and requires no action. The only way out is for you to talk about it with someone who is trained to have that kind of conversation. It is important to know the difference between what’s your feeling and what feelings belong to your mentee.
2. **There is no thought without a feeling.** All kinds of things benefit rabbinic self-care – yoga, meditation, hiking, playing basketball – you name it. But no matter what else your mentee does, he or she needs to have a verbal experience of self-care. The rationale for your mentee (and for yourself) is this: when you put your thoughts into words, you will begin to have feelings. When you know what you feel, you can make conscious choices instead of acting impulsively or reflexively. So this is why the relationship between mentor and mentee also needs to be verbal. You don’t get the same relationship on email or through texting.
3. **What are you getting out of this?** Some people think of mentoring as paying it forward in gratitude for the good mentoring they have had. You have experienced the positive impact mentoring can have. I still remember the words of my rabbi when I was considering rabbinic school: Learn how to say no and don’t expect anyone to take care of your family but you. I had no idea what he meant at the time but I recalled those words later when they became meaningful to me. Others have a more reparative idea in mind – you’d like to offer the mentoring you didn’t get. You’d like to make your mentee’s experience of the rabbinate easier and more enjoyable. In that way,mentoring is all about the emotional education of both mentor and mentee. Both of you benefit in ways you don’t even always know at the time.

The rabbinate can be an isolating place, a stimulating place, a challenging place as well as a rewarding and joyful place. Sharing the experience with a mentee can make it a better place for you both.