

**LEADERS AND MENTORS  
IN OUR HISTORY, TRADITION, AND LIVES**

Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson

Jewish communal life today is blessed with a marvelous array of informative books, Jewish institutions, and learned scholars. What is missing more than anything else is affective and spiritual leadership: we train our leaders and mentors to convey information but not necessarily to cultivate open souls. We hone the intellect yet neglect to nurture the spirit; and intelligence is never enough.

To give the gift of soul means to cultivate and to serve God's creatures through wisdom and understanding. As guides (leaders and mentors), we assist by embodying the values and practices that Judaism holds dear and by sharing our journey through life with other people, our *talmidim*-disciples. Only by opening ourselves—flawed and striving—to another person's gaze do we express Judaism's conviction that people can change (and improve) and that imperfect people are worthy of love (ours and God's).

It should be noted here that there is no single term in English to describe this model of sharing wisdom, skills, and experience to encourage others to become the best possible version of themselves. The best I can do is use the word *mentor* to cover the range of roles undertaken by one who midwifes cognitive, emotional, and spiritual growth: one who guides, teaches, leads, advises, counsels, instructs, supervises, and coaches. In Jewish tradition, such an integrated model is one's rebbe.

More than mere conduits of information and skills, mentors may offer their love, trust, and affirmation to those willing to accept them. They use their warmth and affection as tools for inspiring passionate Jewish living and leadership. To mentor is to share a passion for Judaism and Jewish communal institutions. To mentor is to open our lives to other people, reach out with affection, and offer ourselves as inspiration,

confidant, and guide. Far from relying on title or institutional affiliation, a mentor uses gifts of soul and heart to encourage other seeking souls, to provide a spiritual context to the knowledge and wisdom offered by the Torah and its traditions. In addition to strengthening communities and institutions, a mentor engages one person at a time. The mentor refuses to divorce leadership from caring, informing from inspiring. Above all, the mentor addresses another's whole self by offering his or her whole self in the relationship.

Anyone in a position to teach, counsel, and advise others is already a mentor. And anyone willing to invest the effort can become a better mentor. All it takes is openness, readiness, and a love of other people. Rabbis, cantors, educators, youth leaders, teachers, counselors, lay leaders, and volunteers—all can fill this vital role. Indeed, the greater our formal education, the greater the effort it may take to learn to mentor, since we have been so blinded and distorted by our infatuation with Western modes of learning. In high schools and universities, we are systematically rewarded for the kind of knowledge that can be reproduced for a test or reduced to a footnote. Jewish learning aspires to a loftier, less tangible goal: crafting a mensch (a good, well-balanced, caring person) in the service of the sacred.

## **AN INVITATION**

Almost all of us who care about Judaism and our community can recall an older relative or neighbor who fashioned our precious memories of Jewish holy days, Sabbaths, and festivals. Whether we were born Jewish or have chosen to be Jewish, we all have been touched by that special someone who invited us to a seder, shared an afternoon to bake challah, or persuaded us to attend a community event. Our Judaism is not merely learned. It is lived.

The foundation of Jewish belonging is built one brick at a time, person to person. However effective our classes on Judaism, however inclusive our institutions, the key component of transmitting a love of yiddishkeit and Torah is one Jew willing to share time and wisdom with another seeking soul. In the

words of a medieval proverb, “What comes from the heart enters the heart.”

The personal attention of a mentor to a willing student has perpetuated Torah and Jewish identity in every age. That power of the individualized transmission makes good psychological sense; we are drawn to communities in which we feel welcomed and valued, particularly if those communities offer profundity, beauty, and goodness. This connection between mentor and protégé is the glue that binds communities, but it does far more than that. Individual connection makes theological sense, too. The Torah portion “Hayei Sarah” begins with the statement that “Sarah’s lifetime—the span of Sarah’s life—came to 127 years. Sarah died in Kiryat Arba.” A few verses earlier in the Torah, we are offered the seemingly unconnected information that “Milkah too had borne children to your brother Nahor: . . . (including Bethuel), Bethuel being the father of Rebecca.” Even though Rebecca and Sarah don’t meet personally, the looming figure of Sarah remains a powerful and nurturing presence through her legacy and example. Sarah’s legacy mentors Rebecca, and the story of the two matriarchs in turn mentors us, their sons and daughters, across the ages.

Why does the Torah tell us about the birth of Rebecca (Sarah’s future daughter-in-law) prior to informing us of the death of Sarah? The sages of the Midrash explain this juxtaposition by referring to a curious line from the biblical book of Kohelet: “The sun also rises and the sun sets.”

Before allowing Sarah to die, God had already assured the steady presence of another matriarch through the birth of Rebecca, indicating that the health of the Jewish community could not continue without the perpetuation of a loving embodiment of its warmth and wisdom. The example set by Sarah—her dedication to her family and her strong-willed personality—is translated and extended by Rebecca.

So it is in every generation. We are Jewish today because of the loving coaches we encountered along the way: grandparents, rabbis, parents, siblings, friends, neighbors, teachers, and acquaintances. Their willingness to reach out to

us, to include us in their holy-day celebrations, to walk us through the labyrinth of communal leadership, to work with us on a worthy project, or to teach us the fundamentals of Torah and its values—those efforts are the reasons we know from the inside how wonderful it is to be a Jew. The people who made those efforts are our mentors.

Because someone cared enough to give us the experiences of Jewish living, our minds are now tuned in to the sacred cycles of the seasons and the Sabbaths. Because someone made the effort to allow us to assume a leadership role, we found a path for activism and belonging. Because someone touched our hearts through Jewish music or drama, the melodies of our Jewish lives resonate so deeply.

How can we ever repay those mentors? Our mentors may no longer be available to us, but we can still show them just how much we value what they taught us. We can pass their gift—the gift of soul—to those whose lives we touch. We can become a mentor to someone else.

Before the sunset fades, the new sun rises. Perhaps you know of someone who is interested in converting to Judaism. Maybe you know a Jew who has never experienced the warmth and beauty of a Shabbat service and a meal afterward. Perhaps your organization needs the skills that a younger colleague or neighbor possesses or you know of a younger person who could use an open ear. You can make the connection. Someone reached out to involve each one of us; now it's our turn to reach out to tomorrow's leaders.

Your warmth can light their path. You can be their role model and friend. You can be their mentor.

Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson ([www.bradartson.com](http://www.bradartson.com)) is the Dean of the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies and Vice President of the American Jewish University, where he teaches Philosophy. He is the author, most recently, of *Gift of Soul, Gift of Wisdom: Spiritual Resources for Leadership and Mentoring*.