

• SUPERVISION, THERAPY AND THE (MODERN) RABBI

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It's funny the things you remember from your student days at Hebrew Union College. I remember very little of what I wish I remembered - Codes, Talmud, Commentaries, Aramaic - and a great deal of what I wonder why I can't forget. So I am going to begin today by telling you four stories I remember from my student days at the College and then by adding my hindsight understanding as to why I remember those particular stories.

I begin with a story which was told some twenty years ago by a congregational rabbi who was a visiting lecturer at the College in Practical Rabbinitics:

We are sitting in a classroom in Cincinnati while the rabbi shares his experience with us. He tells us that he is careful never to meet alone with a female congregant without being sure that someone else is in the building at the time. In addition, he says, he never meets with a woman alone without leaving the door to his office open a few inches.

Of all the stories I have forgotten, I wonder why my memory of this incident is so clear, why I can picture so vividly the rabbi, the classroom setting, the arrangement of desks, and my classmates' faces. I think it is because something about the story bothered me even then. It didn't bother me the way I was bothered when a different visiting rabbi reminded us how

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important it was to change from wearing your dark tie to a lighter tie on the way from the cemetery to the house of mourning. I had no doubt even at the time as to why that story bothered me. But it took me ten years to figure out why I felt uneasy about the first story.

What I came to understand was that there was a difference between the presenting problem and the problem which lay hidden behind the presenting problem. The problem presented was this: What is the danger involved to a male rabbi if he meets alone with a female congregant? One danger was self-evident to the rabbi who told the story. He rightly felt endangered by the possibility of a female congregant's doing something inappropriate or accusing him of doing something inappropriate. With no witnesses in the building, who would be a voice of truth if worst came to worst? But there is an additional problem hidden in this situation, an additional piece of danger which I believe wasn't self-evident to this rabbi at the time. The very fact that it wasn't self-evident is what made it dangerous. The additional piece of danger was from the rabbi himself. What might he be tempted to do if no one else were in the building, if the door were closed tight?

We know a lot more these days about rabbis and sexual harassment, but that is not my point in telling this story. In fact, this rabbi was ahead of his time in raising the issue at all. My point is that we focus a great deal on the "enemy without" but neglect to consider the "enemy within." Why not consider the possibility that the rabbi himself might have feelings he might not want to have? A vulnerable woman, a closed door, an empty building...isn't it possible for the rabbi himself (or herself, were the roles reversed) to feel aroused and to feel tempted to act on those feelings of desire?

That's story number one. Here's story number two:

We are in a small group discussing our biweeklies with our faculty advisor. We meet periodically, every four to six weeks. The question of supervision comes up. Whatever supervision is, we ask, why don't we have any? The answer offered is this: The only way to do supervision of a biweekly is to fly a faculty member up to observe for the weekend. To do that, you need to have a) time b) money c) a willing - never mind able - faculty advisor. Since we have none of those, we do without supervision. Instead, the faculty advisor makes a phone call to the President of the congregation once a year to see how things are going.

Why do I remember this story? Because even with my then non-existent experience with supervision, it seemed to me that there had to be another way for us to be learning from these new experiences other than trial by error. We clearly had a great deal to learn - we were just students, after all - and you couldn't rely on those small congregations to supervise us ourselves. They had enough troubles of their own. The idea of some "objective" person's having to be there watching me bothered me, too, although I did not know why at the time.

Story number three speaks for itself:

I ask once why our training in pastoral counseling is so minimal. Surely there have to be skills we can learn. I am told: These are not things that can be taught. Either you have it or you don't.

And finally, story number four:

In reaction to story #3, I enroll in an elective at the University of Cincinnati Mental Health Services. At the time, HUC has a Lilly Foundation grant to place a few rabbinical students at their short-term counseling center. We rabbinical students are in there with student therapists, student nurses, and people from other helping disciplines. We have supervisors and actually

see patients whom we call "clients". If you have a good supervisor, you learn something; if you don't, you generally are no worse off than when you began.

But we also have what we call an Integration Conference once every four to six weeks. It is just for the rabbinic students and is run by Dr. Sophia Ralson, a Clinical Psychologist whose job it is to help us figure out the difference between being a rabbi and being a therapist. What I remember is the day she said to us in frustration, "The problem with you rabbis is that, when someone comes into your office and asks you for a book, you think they really want a book!"

I am overwhelmed by a moment of genuine insight; suddenly I am aware that, for some people, asking for a book is a ticket into the rabbi's office, the only ticket they know. We rabbis should at least be aware that there might be more behind the request than a desire for intellectual knowledge. Maybe, just maybe, there's something else they want to talk to us about. When I look back now, I see that I had experienced real supervision for the first time. In addition, I had learned something valuable without having to have the supervisor with me in the room or observing me at the congregation.

Why are these the stories I remember and not others? What I've learned about myself is that I remember situations where there was an emotional component, where I felt something in addition to thinking something. The feeling could have been anything; anger, confusion, passion, understanding, embarrassment. I just know that the feeling kept the story alive in me. And I also know that I'm not the only one who reacts that way; most people do learn and remember better when they are emotionally engaged. That's why I support Hebrew Union College's recent efforts toward developing a serious supervisory program for rabbinical students, although that's not my topic for today. My topic, rather, is this: If you missed getting an adequate emotional education then - as most of us did - how do you get it now?

Let me first tell you what I mean by emotional education. I mean learning which makes you aware of and comfortable with who you are and what you feel. I mean understanding some basic concepts about the feelings people transfer onto rabbis and how those feelings get induced in you. I mean understanding what it means when you get an overwhelming desire to take action instead of sitting with a feeling. I mean learning how to sit with someone and listen, regardless of the feelings that may be erupting inside of you. All of these are ways of becoming comfortable with your own feelings, thus allowing you the gift of helping others to feel comfortable with you.

My sense about our practical rabbinic education was that, unfortunately, it reinforced our areas of discomfort. Evaluation was just another word for criticism. Remember your senior sermon evaluation? There seemed to be a great danger associated with being wrong or making mistakes. The greatest danger to any rabbi, however, greater than delivering a bad sermon, is to lack self-knowledge on a feeling level. It's what gets us into trouble every time. But they were wrong at the College because "lo bashamayim he" - it can be learned. It just can't be learned the way they thought about it then.

Rabbis can get an emotional education through therapy and through the right kind of supervision. I say therapy and supervision because the first step in both is that you have to learn how to talk. That would seem to be a stupid thing to say to a bunch of rabbis. But I don't mean sermon talk or adult education talk - I mean emotional talk. I mean talking about your life freely in a safe environment where it is someone else's job to listen to you. When I say talk, I don't mean having friends to talk to, not an easy thing to cultivate in the rabbinate in any case. Friends are important, but that doesn't do it. Friendships are mutual in a way that therapeutic relationships are not. Many of us rabbis tend to have a hard time considering our personal needs because we are so swamped by the needs of others. Yet we, too, need to have

an experience of being listened to without our having to listen in turn. We need to have an experience of being that comfortable in the presence of someone else that we can say anything without fearing negative repercussions.

Why do we need that primary experience? First, only if we can feel accepted will we learn to listen to ourselves and accept our feelings. I believe that accepting all your feelings is what makes life livable and enjoyable. It makes you a happier person, a better partner, a better parent and sometimes a better child. Second, you can't truly listen to someone else unless you yourself have had the experience of being listened to. How can you teach someone well if you have never been taught well yourself? In the words of our sages, you've got to "acquire for yourself a rabbi." Third, you learn which burdens belong to you and which don't. You learn how to share burdens. You learn how to shoulder only what you have to shoulder. You learn what you have to solve and what you don't. Fourth, you learn how to be appropriately selfish. Fifth, you learn how to set boundaries and limits. In so doing, you model for others how they, too, can set the right personal boundaries for themselves.

A few years ago, I observed how many of the rabbis I knew were suffering and struggling and being asked to do the impossible without their knowing it was the impossible or seeing any alternative. I decided I wanted to run a supervision group for rabbis in the field. I struggled with what to call it and how to phrase it in a letter. Should I call it supervision? Would that word offend my colleagues, imply that they were somehow doing something incorrectly? Should it be called peer supervision? But wouldn't that imply a group without a leader, not the way I conceptualize supervision? What could I write that wouldn't make rabbis feel inadequate but would allow them to consider coming with an open interested mind? When I realized that I pictured other rabbis being suspicious of my offer rather than welcoming it, I realized even more the extent of the need.

For various reasons, the group I ended up running a group turned out to be all female. What I have learned from them in the last two years is that we need lessons in how to feel adequate, in dealing with our own aggression, in allowing someone else to help us, in not feeling like only we can solve the problem, in setting boundaries, in not letting things get decided around us, in not letting our guilt about what we are not doing ruin what we are doing, in learning to be in charge, in learning how not to look for love in all the wrong places.

I remember the first time I entered a supervision group. I sat stupefied. It took me three sessions to open my mouth. You mean I could talk about situations in the congregation to someone else and not violate discretion? I didn't have to figure it all out myself? I could let myself be led or guided by a supervisor? No supervisor had to come and observe me? I had to learn how to talk all over again in that group. And once I learned how to do that, I wondered how I had ever survived without it. Who in their right minds would think any rabbi should work in a congregation or a Hillel or a nursing home or a hospital or a school or an organization without having some place to talk about it? And yet, isn't that what we were taught, at least by omission - that the way to avoid feeling inadequate was to act if you knew it all? That getting supervision was at the least a weakness and at the most hopeless? All I can tell you is that, at the time, I experienced supervision as liberation, and I continue to do so today.

I didn't set out to become a therapist, although I am thrilled to have ended up on this path. I'm a much better rabbi now for my congregants and for myself. But I think the value of emotional education for us as rabbis can't be underestimated. I believe it is not just a tool for our survival in the rabbinate but also for our transforming the rabbinate into the kind of place we want it to be.

