



Making the Case for Mentorship

By Rabbi Dov Emerson

I could not get out of the car.

It was a bright, clear morning in September, and I was parked in front of the sprawling front lawn of the school. "Just open the door and get out!" I told myself. But my feet refused to move. It didn't make sense. This was supposed to be the moment where all of my efforts over the last 5 years paid off. While I was in college, after spending several summers as a counselor on the NCSY Summer Kollel, I made the decision to focus my life on teaching and impacting young people. And now, here I was. I had the dream job, teaching Torah at a great yeshiva high school. I had spent the previous year reaching out to friends and mentors, picking their brain about what to teach and how to teach it. Over the summer months, I had thrown myself into planning my classes. I was ready.

Or was I?

Looking back, I think my difficulty in getting out of that car was more than just nerves (of which there were plenty!). It had to do with the fact that I had spent so much time talking and thinking about teaching, so much time taking courses in graduate school and trying to learn from others. There was so much activity **about** it, but I had not yet engaged in it. What is my class really going to look and feel like? What if my lesson plan flops? What if I can't gain any semblance of control over my students, and of course, at the worst possible moment, my principal walks in to observe the carnage?

I finally got out of the car that day and faced my new students. Over the course of that year, I had good days as well as truly horrible ones. It was an intense and often overwhelming learning process. I remember this pressure to keep a stiff upper lip, and to not let anyone, the students or even colleagues and supervisors, know that I was struggling. After all, I reasoned, they wanted an effective *rebbe*, not someone whose class always felt like one sarcastic student comment from spinning out of control. With these walls I built up, it was harder to learn, to grow, to acknowledge that I didn't have all the answers.

The irony is that while I felt alone in my classroom, I was not alone in my circumstances. In fact, I learned over time that my experience was fairly normal. Being a new teacher is *hard*. It can be overwhelming and isolating. When the experience is particularly challenging, it can lead teachers to simply leave. They may exit the profession entirely, or maybe they simply look to find another school.

I believe that there is a better way. Fast forward to 2019. I have the privilege of serving in school leadership at the Yeshiva University High School for Boys / MTA, with a focus on helping teachers grow and develop.

One very powerful weapon in our educator support arsenal is mentorship, part of the larger framework for supporting new teachers that is provided by our partnership with the [Jewish New Teacher Project](#) (JNTP). At MTA, each new teacher is paired with an experienced teacher who serves as their mentor for the entire school year. JNTP engages our experienced teachers in an intensive 2-year mentor training program and works with participating new teachers in ongoing workshops both in person and online. But the bulk of the growth happens in the regular weekly mentor-new teacher meetings and observations that are part of the JNTP program. These meetings are designed as a 'safe space' for new teachers, where they can share challenges and be vulnerable with a mentor who will engage them in a confidential and non-judgmental discussion. These partnerships are designed to provide the new teacher with an ally and an advocate who can help the teacher navigate the sometimes-challenging terrain of a new school. The regularity of the meetings, combined with observation data collected and mirrored back to the new teacher, provide a powerful learning cycle that can drastically impact the new teaching experience. I recently had the opportunity to meet with each of our new teachers as well as their mentors, to hear their reflections on the JNTP experience. These rich conversations have reinforced what I, as a JNTP mentor myself, have felt about the power of mentoring in positively impacting school culture and learning.

Why is mentoring such a powerful tool in promoting both individual growth and changes in school cultures:

1. **Healthy PD:** Many stakeholders in schools have come to appreciate that good professional development is less about a one-shot workshop with an outside expert, and more about a structure that gives teachers the time and space to continuously learn from each other. The goals for growth are driven by the new teacher instead of being dictated from the top down, and the mentors are trained to facilitate a reflective conversation. A classroom observation, where individuals open their teaching spaces to someone else, will always be somewhat intimidating. But in a culture of successful professional development, it will be

framed as an opportunity to learn and grow. Critical are the tools for a mentor to observe, collect data that the new teacher is interested in, and serve as the non-judgmental mirror for that teacher, tools like those provided by JNTP.

2. **If It's Broken ... Fix It!:** All schools have dysfunctions. Often, they are overlooked, not because of a lack of desire to fix them, but because those of us who have been in the school setting for a while are used to them or have come up with a workaround. But through the mentoring of our new teachers, we began identifying more problems and coming up with solutions to fix them. My colleague and fellow mentor Ms. Megan HL. Zacks astutely pointed out that having new teachers will often bring into sharp relief some of the problems that an organization may have, since new faculty raise the issues that they don't know how to work around. Having the opportunity to discuss these items with our new teachers through the mentorship process gives us a direct path to make continuous improvements by solving the problems they uncover.
3. **Power of the Network:** There is a fantastic array of opportunities for school leaders at all levels to come together as part of different networks. While these different groups have been absolutely transformational for me and colleagues of mine, imagine what it might look like for a new teacher to become part of a cohort from the time they join the field? The team of new teachers participating in JNTP are grouped together and encouraged to learn from each other. Moreover, in MTA, where we have a critical mass of newer Judaic faculty, we have established a cohort that, in addition to their regular individual sessions with a mentor, also meets regularly as a group. These gatherings are effective in combating the isolation that new teachers can sometimes feel, and they also powerfully model to new teachers the value of these networks as ongoing sources of growth and learning throughout their careers.
4. **Mentors Needed:** I have to admit that when I started training as a JNTP mentor, I had no idea what I didn't know. I thought that we would learn how to offer some words of comfort to a new teacher struggling to make it through their first parent teacher conference sessions, or how to check the boxes on a lesson plan. I did not appreciate the depth and power of mentorship, and the different mental muscles I would need to exercise to be effective in this capacity. I was taught to withstand the urge to simply sit my new teacher down and tell them everything I know about teaching. Instead, I am learning to ask more questions, and approach the new teacher's challenges from a collaborative and curiosity driven perspective. I am learning how to practice active listening, trying to really hear the teacher without turning the wheels inside my head preparing an immediate response. I am so grateful for the skills that I have learned and continue to try and hone as a mentor. It has shown me how to be more collaborative in so many other relationships, with colleagues, students, and even family members. What I also love about this process is that it demonstrates to new teachers how important it is to have mentors throughout one's career. Having a coach can spur on a real paradigm shift in one's thinking and practice, and JNTP

is effective at showing teachers that mentors are not just for administrators and school leaders. They can start right away.

5. **Supercharge Staff Growth:** Part of our job as educational leaders is to invest in our staff. On one level, investing in a program like JNTP is putting our money where our mouth is, ensuring that new teachers are given an opportunity to grow and ultimately succeed in the short and long term in our school. But beyond that, a mentorship program provides another avenue for staff growth: creating teacher leaders. So often in our schools, career advancement is presented as a binary choice, where one can either teach, or enter school administration. In creating a cohort of teacher mentors, we are building a cadre of teachers who lead by example and through collaboration. Having a strong cohort of teacher leaders who are more active and invested in school direction and policy makes MTA a stronger school and gives our teachers a valuable opportunity to grow while still maximizing their impact in the classrooms they passionately lead.

The greatest support we can provide for our teachers is to set them up for success, be it as new teachers or as emerging leaders in our school communities. This in turn makes our schools stronger, and ultimately helps us progress towards our ultimate goal, of educating and inspiring our children. Mentoring programs like JNTP that offer a well-developed structure that can be shared with many schools are valuable investments because they provide a variety of pathways to help provide this support.

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