m²

Relationships at the Center: Practitioner Research on Relational Engagement

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LETTER OF ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

In July 2018, M²: The Institute for Experiential Jewish Education launched the first of two year-long pilot programs dedicated to training educators in the theory and practice of Relational Engagement.

Designed for senior Jewish educators practicing relational work, the program offered participants the opportunity to experiment with a variety of disciplines, approaches and methodologies, to jointly explore the role and impact of relationships in the evolution of Jewish identity, self-conception and human flourishing.

The program sought to address questions of critical importance about the role and changing orientation of Jewish education and Jewish community:

- What if Jewish education happened through relationships between educators and learners?

- What if learners and educators were transformed through the joint exploration of Jewish ideas and values?

- What if learners and educators together created a shared space for meaning making?

- And what if these relationships opened doors for new ways of forming communities?

Throughout this immersive, 12-month program, participants were tasked with conducting action-based research – to research their own practice, and to write about what they learned. Their learnings, along with the broad outline of M²'s approach towards relational learning, are documented in this publication. It is our hope that this publication serves as a worthy contribution to the field of Jewish education at large, and of relational engagement and learning in particular.

While the impact of relational learning on Jewish life is full of potential, research on both the theories and practices of this work are critical. It is our hope that this publication – the fruit of outstanding relational learning pioneers – will inspire the continuation of this work.

As important as the questions that animated this program were in 2018, they are even more pressing as we confront the challenges of COVID-19 and the evolving implications of an ongoing global pandemic together with social upheaval around issues of equity and justice.

Without large-scale, high-impact educational productions – such as conferences, retreats and travel programs – Jewish education has found itself re-centering around relational learning; learning that is predicated on the building of educator-learner relationships; in which more

is unknown than is known; in which interpretations of reality, guided by wisdom of the past, can become a shared exploration and a collaborative process. In this reality relational learning has the potential to undergo a renaissance, opening opportunities for the inclusion of multiple narratives, of radical interpretation, and of the co-construction of meaning.

Indeed, the virtual nature of educational gatherings can be found with deep roots in our tradition; the Talmud itself is a collection of virtual conversations between educators and learners crossing generations, geographies and time zones.

The world is undergoing transformations of mammoth proportions. Education at large, and Jewish education in particular, are no exception. Now is the time to put relationships at the center of Jewish education; to make space for all learners and educators of all backgrounds and of all identities, to jointly gather to interpret our realities, the meanings these realities may hold, and the way they continue evolving the story of our people.

Shuki Taylor, CEO

M^2: The Institute for Experiential Jewish Education

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Thanks to...

Members of Cohort 1, M² Relational Engagement Circle

Rabbi Julia Appel

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Arya Marvazy

Rabbi Bethie Miller

Rabbi Ari Rockoff

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RELATIONSHIPS AT THE CENTER:

PRACTIONER RESEARCH ON RELATIONAL ENGAGEMENT

Introduction

Relationships are at the heart of what it means to be human and they play an intrinsic role in how we explore the world and discover the meaning in life. The 'other' in a relationship can become, in the words of the Israeli poet Leah Goldberg[1], "a glance, a window, a mirror", ultimately supporting and challenging our capacities for self-discovery and our self-conceptions of authenticity and significance[2]. Relationships are also significant in cultivating, nurturing and sustaining communities through the development of personal connections, often spanning entire lifetimes and lasting generations[3].

Jewish sources also highlight the foundational role of relationships in a vibrant, living Judaism. *Pirkei Avot* (Ethics of our Ancestors), a compilation of teachings dealing with Jewish ethical and moral principles, is relational at its core. In addition to providing guidance for how we must relate to others, our communities and God, many of the teachings in this tractate are presented through the prism of relationships (teacher- student, student-student etc.,). Further, learning in a *chevruta*, the mode of studying through debate with a designated partner in the Bet Midrash (study hall), has long been the exemplary form of Jewish study. *Chevruta* learning is not just an act of transition, through which knowledge is transferred from person to person. Rather, when two people holding different perspectives learn together, creative friction arises, often resulting in innovation through the spark created by their conflict and the sharpening of both partners' insights in the journey to its resolution. In addition, living relationships are created between generations, as these intimate debates are passed on and explored by each generation in turn, contributing to the ongoing and never-ending perfection of Torah[4]. Thus, whether between *chevruta* partners, or between educator and learner, relational learning within the Jewish context is a sacred encounter.

In today's Jewish world, cultivating relationships is perceived as a key strategy for connecting unaffiliated Jews to Jewish community and Jewish activities[5]. Almost two decades ago, a "Relationship Based Engagement" approach came into practice. This approach focused on the development of one-on-one relationships between the 'engager' and the 'subject'

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1 Goldberg, L. (1939), Green-Eyed Spike
2 Taylor, C. (1991), The Ethics of Authenticity
3 Wolfson, R. (2013), Relational Judaism: Using the Power of Relationships to Transform the Jewish Community
4 Silman, Y. (1999) The Voice Heard at Sinai: Once or Ongoing?
5 Uram, M. (2016), Next Generation Judaism

(the object of the outreach) in order to engage the subject in Jewish life and interest them in exploring their role within it. The success of this strategy led to its mainstream popularity. Many institutions currently employ professionals, of varying degrees of seniority, to develop relationships with their constituents as the first step on a pathway of engagement in active Jewish life. Relationship based engagement, thus, sees the development of relationships as a professional strategy with fixed goals and outcomes.

This evolving strategic approach to relationship-building raises many questions. Does the relationship have value and implications in and of itself, rather than just that of its use in achieving a specified outcome? Can we understand relational learning as a pedagogy, thereby understanding the theory and practices of cultivating and experiencing relationships, in order to be able to utilize them more intentionally in Jewish education and communal work? Is there value in relational work that is not, or is not only, strategic? Can our understanding of the dynamic of a relationship and what it can produce be a valuable outcome in its own right? Does the quality of my relationship affect its quantitative outcome?

These questions prompted M²: The Institute for Experiential Jewish Education, to research domains that could shed light on these issues. The result was new thinking, learning and experimentation, and a conceptual paradigm for intentional relationship building, designed for Jewish educational frameworks. Supported generously by the Jim Joseph Foundation, M² pioneered its "Relational Engagement Circle", a cohort-based program for educators immersed in relational work. M²'s first Relational Engagement Circle was a year-long initiative, with three in-person gatherings, in which participants engaged in gatherings, application labs, action-based research, and mentoring. This special publication is the result, a collection of articles sharing the participants' research and experiences of relational engagement and its application to Jewish education and community work. We start with our definition of a relationship and its components, as all the articles contained here are based on this theoretical framework and highlight its application in various settings.

The Components of Relational Encounters

Relationships are the way in which two or more people are connected; a connection formed through what we have termed "relational encounters". Relational encounters can be practical (e.g. going shopping), intimate (e.g. between a spouse or siblings) or vision oriented (e.g. striving for world peace). Our pedagogic approach is based on understanding the different elements that make up relational encounters and being intentional with the significance of each encounter and its potential outcome.

We identified three components in relational encounters[6] that we have termed "commonplaces":

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6 Our work draws on work done on chevruta learning and relational psychology. For further reading see: Holzer, E. and Kent, O. (2013). A Philosophy of Havruta: Understanding and Teaching the Art of Text Study in Pairs. Academic Studies Press (Boston) and Gerson, S. (2004). The Psychoanalytical Quarterly 73: 63 – 98. The relational unconscious: A core element of intersubjectivity, thirdness and clinical process.

"Character", "Self-Other" and "Thirdness"[7]. Each of the three elements are present in any given encounter, they are non-hierarchical and can be explored both individually and in relation to each other. We will describe them each in turn below.

Character: How am I present in my interactions with others?

"Character" refers to the behavioral expression of attitudes that can be nurtured through habituation. Its closest synonyms are personality, traits, attitudes, dispositions and virtues. In Jewish terms, the word "*middah*" comes closest to the concept of character. A person becomes known for distinct moral and mental qualities through the ways they are exhibited in interaction with others.

To successfully nurture co-construction of meaning in a relational encounter, both participants must bring their authentic presence. This refers to their ability to fully express the spectrum of their character, both the more admirable traits such as kindness, passion or humility and the less so, such as frustration, contempt or anger. When there is space for different aspects of character to be present, we have found that it is more likely that meaning, relevance and significance to the participants, will emerge. As one participant in the Relational Engagement Circle discovered:

"What I realized was that I was not only discerning how to best lead with my chaplain and organizer parts, but that there were a whole slew of other parts of myself that I needed to be considering more seriously… I came to believe that if I brought more parts of my character to my relationships, I would feel more grounded and purposeful in my work and it would enable deeper and more layered relationships."

Self-Other: What is the nature of the dynamic when two individuals interact?

This commonplace refers to the complex orientation of self in relation to another person. Relational moments happen when the self continuously interacts with the other and the space between them develops its own distinctive, qualitative properties. The quality of this space is determined by the manner in which two people communicate and is determined by the levels of mutuality, visibility and reciprocity between the parties. For example, if both participants in the relationship feel respected and seen, and if they are equally able to contribute to the encounter and benefit from it, the result of the encounter will be more powerful. This requires that the space in which the relationship takes place is suffused with support and challenge, and each person is self-disciplined in managing the space they take up. This insight helped one participant in the Relational Engagement Circle, who reflected:

In one of my last one-on-one meetings of the school year last year, a beloved student of mine said,

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7 We are open to the possibility that other commonplaces exist and could be added to this model.

"Rabbi Julia, I feel like I'm always coming to you when I'm having trouble. I do actually have my life together!" Instead of deflecting or ignoring her comment, I simply said, "I know you're coming to me to discuss a difficulty, but I want to assure you that despite the fact that we most often discuss your challenges, I see you as a whole, competent, and multi-faceted person." My comment landed. She relaxed and smiled. She was relieved to be fully seen.

Thirdness: What external factors drive and influence the interaction between two individuals?

Thirdness takes account of the relationship's purpose, the professional roles played by the participants and other external factors that may influence the relational moment. It is multidimensional and for the purposes of our understanding here is explored as it relates to culture[8]. It therefore may include context, ideology, social structure and role assignment, cultural reference and language. These external factors permit or prohibit the development of the relational encounter. Acknowledging, understanding and knowing how to introduce and acknowledge Thirdness is essential for navigating and exploring every relationship. It is present in every relational moment.

Both structure and purpose of a relationship are external Thirdnesses that can 'permit', providing the encounter with shape and direction. Thirdnesses that can 'prohibit', such as hierarchy, gender and cultural norms, may overpower elements of the relational encounter, disrupting the ability of participants to be fully present or impacting the dynamic between them. For example, one of the Relational Engagement cohort's participants, a Rabbi, described a Thirdness present in speaking with students, *"I assumed they were tied to my role as the Rabbi, and I was uncomfortable with what felt like the student's desire to prove to me she was worth my individual attention".*

Points of Overlap: Sparks & Conflicts

In addition to the presence of these three commonplaces in all relational encounters, sparks (opportunities) and conflicts (threats) exist in the overlapping spaces between pairs of commonplaces. Delving into the overlapping spaces between pairs of commonplaces allows for a richer development of our paradigm.

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8 Other dimensions are relational thirdness and developmental thirdness.

This model for understanding relational encounters is expressed in diagrammatic form above and provides a conceptual and diagnostic framework with which to analyze the dynamics of relational encounters. It visually represents the relationship between the commonplaces and the nature of their interactions. Analysis may suggest the need for a shift in emphasis within or between them. For example, when a boss and an employee are engaging in an honest negotiation, the presence of hierarchy (a Thirdness) can cause the employee's character (a commonplace) to be diminished and the nature of the space between them to become hostile (conflict). Analyzing the relational encounter and identifying and shifting a Thirdness, (putting hierarchy aside), or a commonplace (asserting one's character), modifies the space between them from conflict to spark, through the shift in emphasis on those commonplaces.

Based on the model described above, we have found that relational practice, the "doing" of relationships, requires an optimal balance between Character, Self-Other and Thirdness. Thus, to successfully nurture co-construction of meaning, where both parties intentionally contribute to meaningful outcomes, both participants must be conscious of their authentic presence (Character), the mutual and reciprocal engagement between them (Self-Other) and the external structures and purposes of the meeting (Thirdness).

Relational Encounters in Practice

The participants in the Relational Engagement Circle researched their own practice[9] and analyzed it using the model described above. As they became more conscious and self-reflective of their own practice and applied the conceptual framework to their own situations, they came to new understandings of their relationships and how to better them. We are delighted to present them here for the first time.

In developing her new approach to Jewish life that prioritizes small groups, **Bethie Miller** realized through her research that a successful launch requires building trust in her own abilities in addition to emphasizing the value of her ideas. Her article surfaces important insights and challenges as she takes us through this journey of self-awareness.

By assessing a multitude of personal interactions, **Ilana Schachter** explored the value of the relational commonplaces as a diagnostic tool and the manner in which it can lead to the co-construction of meaning. Her research leads to valuable insights and tips that she shares with us.

Saul Korin provides an honest and transparent account of his own journey that led to his current role as a fundraiser. His article draws on his experiences with scarcity and his commitment to Jewish causes and articulates his new understandings about the nature of philanthropy and the partnership that can exist between fundraiser and philanthropist.

Gatherings are opportunities to help participants feel empowered and involved in an active Jewish life. **Wendy Verba** provides a thoughtful and rich model of 'belonging' that demonstrates the opportunities that gatherings and social events offer in generating authentic and meaningful connections.

Annie Glickman tackled the challenge of virtual environments in creating significant 'people' moments. Through exploring the idea of 'calling' and 'character' she describes her journey from seeing virtual platforms as transactional moments to viewing them as opportunities for meaningful relational encounters.

Julia Appel focused her research on the phenomenon of credentialing, where people offer evidence of authority, status and other forms of legitimization, during interactions. She describes the shift in her research from noticing the way others credential to the way she credentials. This allowed her to understand this phenomenon as an emotional bid and the opportunities this insight offers in relational work.

David Burstein shares his story of developing a new school that reflects his educational

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9 Participants used an Action-Based Research approach to analyze their own practice. This is a strategy appropriate for all practitioners, including educators, who want to investigate a problem or area of interest specific to their professional context. It provides the structure to engage in a planned, systematic and documented process of research and self-reflection. For further reading see: Cresswell, J.W. (2012). Educational Research: Planning, conducting and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research – 4th ed. Pearson.

vision. He focuses his article on the importance and challenges of shifting the culture of the school from a hierarchical one with him at the center to one that creates relationships based on equality, mutuality, reciprocity and shared decision making.

The inherent tension in wanting to be both a supervisor and a partner in her professional setting lies at the heart of **Rachel Happel's** research. By becoming aware of and acknowledging this imbalance and simultaneously striving for authentic interactions, she articulates the different contexts in which mutuality and reciprocity are more challenging and when they are possible and can be fully in service of her community.

Alex Weissman used his research as an opportunity to explore the value of bringing his *'yetzer hara'* (evil inclination) into his relational work. Using a variety of different examples, and showing the value and risks of this approach, he demonstrates the value of bringing the full diversity of his character to his relational work as a way of engaging others in a full and authentic way.

The Shabbat dinner experience at Hillel is a well-known feature of campus life. Through outlining those elements that permit or prohibit comfortable interactions and a real community feeling of Shabbat **Danielle Kranjec** offers a fresh perspective of this experience with suggestions to elevate it.

Alan Scher offers a relational paradigm in developing initiatives at the 14th Street Y in New York City. By offering participants opportunities to fully share their aspirations and values for these events they were able to foster several thought communities in a variety of settings resulting in a feeling of leadership, participation and involvement for those involved.

The navigation between a commitment to a Torah framework and the ongoing struggles that people are faced with are part of **Noah Cheses'** challenges in his pastoral work. His article helps us understand the magnitude of this task and how by expanding his range of character in his interactions with congregants he is able to stay open and fresh in his pastoral relationships.

Conclusion

At the heart of this initiative is the belief that relational work can, at its core, answer our basic human need to create personal and communal relational moments that are imbued with meaning. We started with a bold hypothesis that it was possible to conceptualize and deepen a pedagogic approach to relational work that would enrich the theoretical framework and practical application of this work. We enlisted thinkers and practitioners to reflect on their purpose and practice, and experiment in their diverse settings. This work led to the development of the three commonplaces and to many new insights. We discovered that this framework offers a diagnostic tool for understanding relational encounters, contributing to our understanding of relationships and our ability to articulate the dynamics and processes involved in them. Navigating the three commonplaces and the ways in which they interact requires the educator to not only understand their role in relational work but to act on it with intent.

Still, many questions remain and we have not achieved all that we hoped. We want to further investigate the practices associated with the conceptual framework, so that practitioners have a clearer pedagogy on which to rely. We want to encourage further discussion and reflection amongst practitioners, and to continue to enrich the field.

In conclusion, we are excited to have begun this journey, to have the privilege to build meaningful relationships with an incredible group of Jewish educators and communal professionals who are dedicated to maximizing the potential of relational encounters. We are grateful to those pioneering participants and faculty of the Relational Engagement Circles and we hope their contributions to this growing field will serve to stimulate, excite and prompt more work in this area and invite feedback and participation in this important conversation.

A STORY AS OLD AS MOSES:
BUILDING TRUST STARTS FROM WITHIN

by Bethie Miller

The Ark of the Covenant in the Holy of Holies is a remarkable image. God instructs Moses in Exodus 25:21-22, "Place the cover on top of the Ark, after depositing inside the Ark the Pact that I will give you. There I will meet with you, and I will impart to you — from above the cover, from between the two cherubim that are on top of the Ark of the Pact — all that I will command you concerning the Israelite people." It is a sacred stage, with the tablets of the Pact (i.e. words of Torah) as the foundation and the faces of the cherubim as the framing.

For me, this is the ideal platform for encounter. For over a decade, this image has anchored my work as a Jewish community builder, elevating what is possible when pairs and small groups of people engage in face-to-face dialogue with a piece of Torah between them as grounding, inspiration, and catalyst for conversation. Personally, I've always been most drawn to the magic and mystery of what happens *in between* those two symbolic faces of the cherubim – how truly encountering another soul can open us to transformational wisdom, to lifelong companionship, and to glimpses of the Eternal Other. In the words of Martin Buber, "Extended, the lines of relationship intersect in the eternal You."

In this ancient architecture for relational learning, I see the cherubim as representing future students of Torah, with Moses in some way as their teacher and leader. But the text is unclear about what exactly Moses is doing in all this. Perhaps for this reason, I've usually positioned myself as one of the cherubim, feeling most compelled by the dynamic between the self and other and most comfortable leading others by asking, "What do you want? What should we create together?" My research, however, has made me realize that my reading of the Exodus text has consistently and problematically undervalued Moses' role. Relational learning involves more than two souls connecting over coffee and a beautiful piece of poetry, and on a good day, getting up from the table knowing God dwelt between them for a few minutes. Most of us need guides, not only partners—at least to get started. I needed to embrace my role as that guide.

Twelve months ago, I set out to build more buy-in for relational learning, and ultimately for a new project I am starting. I wanted, and still do, to create more space for small group learning – for adults seeking genuine connection in a world of rising loneliness and also for families seeking alternatives to mostly mediocre religious schools. I wanted people to embrace new approaches to Jewish life that prioritize small group sizes, decentralize activity, and horizontal relationships. A year later, I better understand my challenge: Not only to describe this simple

yet radical architecture to others, but also to confidently own my roles as educator, facilitator, architect and builder of these transformational, small group experiences. Like Moses guiding from the side, I am part of this, too. I needed to help others trust me, not just the ideas and process.

Data Collection — Round 1

First, I explored how to foster more buy-in and support for my relational learning initiative. I collected data about my communication style, specifically how I describe the power of small group learning and bonding. I slowed down and recorded both *what I said* in conversations and *how it was received*. I found several patterns:

1. Sharing a specific success story really helps others to engage, understand, and support a new initiative.

2. Communicating with a confident tone and transparent posture is consistently well received, even if people do not completely agree.

3. On two occasions, I explicitly asked people to have faith in a new approach. Naming that trying something new is a matter of faith seems to help people venture out of their comfort zones.

After this first round, I realized that I was actually researching trust and character, not simply buy-in and communication. I began noticing what helped others trust me. I also recognized the importance of my trust in myself. I can be quick to share my own uncertainty—a character trait people value about me. However, conveying confidence can more powerfully move people toward change.

Data Collection — Round 2

In my second exploration, I tested the following hypothesis: If I trust myself more, others will trust me more, too. In this round, I noted how different articulations of my relational learning vision ignited my own confidence, trust, and enthusiasm, as well as that of my conversation partner. In addition, I looked for moments in my day when I felt the most conviction, in hopes of answering the question: What restores my trust?

Over several months, I had 30+ meetings about the new relational learning project I was working to launch. Here are the main patterns and insights I discovered:

1. Sharing concrete details seems to nurture others' understanding and excitement. For instance, once I was able to share that my project had a name, "Sanctuary," people would almost always respond positively. Not only did they like the name, but the name also helped them better understand the big idea: creating sacred time and space

through small group experiences. Similarly, when I was able to share that the small groups would center on yoga and meditation, food and cooking, and social justice activism, that concrete information would often be received with resonance and enthusiasm. Overall, the more details I could offer, the more engaged, supportive, and seemingly trusting my dialogue partner would become.

2. Early on, I was highly sensitive to my dialogue partners' reactions. If they were excited about my project, I would feel like anything was possible. If they raised concerns, my self-doubt would grow. I was basing my trust on outside voices, and it felt like riding an emotional rollercoaster. Often, someone's lack of excitement or support has nothing to do with me. It's related to their particular situation, stresses, or priorities.

3. I realized that I rarely earn someone's trust over the course of an hour-long meeting. Most of the time, I earn trust through shared experiences. The more experience someone has with me as their teacher, facilitator, or collaborator, the more likely they are to trust me and my new project.

4. Whether supportive or critical, every conversation has helped me to gain clarity on my ideas and plan. In this way, my process of refining my vision for a relational learning community has itself been an experience of relational learning.

5. What restores my trust in myself is actually doing the work of guiding small group experiences and feeling their impact, rather than simply talking about them.

Interpretations & Conclusions

1. **Trust begins within:** While specific language and concrete examples are assets to all storytellers trying to paint a clear picture, they also communicate confidence and trust. Using my earlier example, when I communicate my project's name and specific small group content, I am conveying an implicit message: "This is really happening. Let me show you how." When people hear that message, they seem to reflect back confidence and trust.

2. **Earning trust requires more than talk:** I whole-heartedly prioritize one-on-one meetings and collaborative processes, because inviting people into the conversation, asking for input, and co-creating content are critical. That said, there is no substitute for lived experiences. At a certain point, we must stop talking about a new idea and just become that new idea. That jump builds the most trust.

3. **This story is really about character:** When a meeting doesn't generate as much support as I had hoped, my inclination has been to focus on the influence of Thirdness—different gender, power, and organizational dynamics. Similarly, I think a lot about the self-other dynamics that may inhibit connection and understanding. Despite these important considerations, I've realized this particular story is really about

character. I will never be able to control everything, but I have the best chances at positively influencing my own self-presentation, trust, and confidence. Thus, the most important change work here has been internal, rather than external. Relational learning has taught me to trust myself more, and that has been transformational!

4. **The story is really about Moses:** I now understand that I have typically analyzed my experiences using the categories of Thirdness and self-other, just as I have emphasized the tablets and the faces of the cherubim in the Exodus image of the Holy of Holies. Given these tendencies, it makes sense that I didn't identify with Moses or examine his role in the Exodus scene. For a long time, Moses' leadership style seemed too hierarchical and not very relational to me. From a different perspective, however, Moses is a self-doubting shepherd moving people through growth and change, regularly in dialogue with an 'Other', and that's a version of Moses I can really relate to. Moses' character clearly influences how he operates as a leader and teacher. I now know that my character influences the spaces and structures I build, too. My task is to continue embracing and even taking credit for my character's influence on my relational work.

This is a story as old as time, or at least as old as Moses, but I needed to learn it as my own story. My guess is that I am not alone in that. We may think the challenge is other people's lack of trust, but we also need to do the internal work of building up our trust in ourselves and in the mystery of life. I am grateful for the ways this research has pushed me to learn about myself and about what it means to lead with trust.

Post-Script December 2019

Three months ago, Sanctuary launched, and the project is generating wonderful excitement, support, and success! I now understand that asking others to trust new ideas alone is not easy, for people's trust grew exponentially once they could actually see and feel Sanctuary for themselves. All of those meetings last year were collaborative and co-creative, but most importantly, they were relational and encouraged self-reflection. One dialogue at a time, I've learned how to lead as a more courageous and confident entrepreneur, and I am amazed how much we can change in one year.

Rabbi Bethie Miller is a native of Newton, MA, a graduate of Williams College, and a community-builder at her core. During her studies at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion (NY '14), she had the fortune to participate in the Wexner Graduate Fellowship and the Daniel and Bonnie Tisch Rabbinical Fellowship. For five years after ordination, she served as a rabbi at Larchmont Temple with a focus on supporting small groups, connecting young families, and launching a social justice initiative. In 2019, Rabbi Miller founded Sanctuary to weave Jewish community one circle of souls at a time.

ASSESSING THE EFFICACY OF THE RELATIONAL COMMONPLACES AS A RELATIONAL TOOL

by Ilana Schachter

Background

Over the past two years, I served as the Director of Community Building for Temple Shaaray Tefila in New York City. As such, my primary role there was to build relationships with congregants and prospective congregants in order to better connect them to their Jewish community. Halfway through my tenure in this role, I participated in the M^2 Relational Engagement Circle, which provided language and theory for much of the work I was doing. Among the many skills and techniques that we explored, a central thesis was that relational engagement and relational learning can be analyzed through the Relational Commonplaces diagram, consisting of three balanced, intersecting circles, each representing a critical component of a relational encounter: the presence of one's character, the mutual encounter between self and other, and Thirdness (defined here as the external factors, forces and dynamics that can enhance or hinder the encounter). After spending time exploring and experimenting with the Relational Commonplaces, I soon agreed that in order for relational engagement to take place in a manner that led to mutual co-construction of meaning between myself and another person, these three aspects of the diagram needed to be simultaneously present and in balance.

Data: What I Learned from 200 One-on-One Interactions

I set out to learn from the Relational Engagement model. I met congregants in coffee shops, restaurants, my office and their homes. Each relational meeting, or one-on-one interaction, was different, as each person brought to the encounter her own character as well as her own external influences. Some conversations reached a place of deep understanding and connection, while others felt limited, filled with distraction or guardedness. In some cases, I was able to be a listening and receptive ear but from a distance, while in others I was able to bring more of myself and my vulnerability. There were other conversations that were distinct in their lack of connection, where for any number of reasons, something did not click.

Most initial relational meetings led to another, deeper conversation, while a few even led to incredible collaborative endeavors, what we might call an authentic co-construction of meaning.

For example, I had an interaction with a woman I met one evening at a small gathering in

a congregant's home. She had been a member of the synagogue for many years but never felt connected there. While she remained a member so that her children could attend our religious school, she was looking for more. She and I had a thoroughly enjoyable coffee date; we connected to one another and exchanged ideas and passions. In particular, she shared with me a commitment to studying the Holocaust and her interest in understanding the nature of upstanders and bystanders. We discussed whether the question of what makes someone an upstander or a bystander would be one worth exploring in a small group. There we could study historical examples together and talk about this in the context of our own lives, as individuals and as parents, hoping to raise upstanders. In our conversation, we were open and honest with one another, and present for one another in a way that invited connection. As we spoke, we explored that connection, and our conversation allowed shared interests to surface. At a certain point, we shifted into a co-constructive place, where our conversation became less of a back-and-forth exchange, and more focused on guiding the conversation together, toward a place of mutual, deeper meaning. It even led to a new initiative, one focused on creating relationships between congregants by being open, curious and vulnerable and fostering a new opportunity for meaning.

Findings

When I look back on examples of my one-on-ones and try to understand how some could be so rich and lead to powerful co-construction, while others simply fell flat, I looked to the Relational Commonplaces diagram, and attempted to use it as a diagnostic tool. I discovered that the extent to which a conversation leads to a place of co-construction can be mapped on the Relational Commonplaces diagram as alignment and balance between the three commonplaces. Conversely, when conversations were not able to reach this place of meaning and connection, it reflected imbalance or misalignment.

I realized that the Relational Commonplaces diagram serves as an incredible diagnostic tool in assessing my relational encounters with congregants. For each conversation I had, I could reflect on what happened through the lens of the three circles. When a conversation lacked cohesion, for example, I could assess which relational commonplace was out of sync. Perhaps I didn't bring enough of my character to the conversation; perhaps the Thirdness of the setting overwhelmed us; or maybe the other person dominated the relationship, and didn't leave room for mutual understanding. In contrast, when I would look back on some of the best one-on-ones, I would observe the synergy of Character, Self-Other, and Thirdness. These three circles were working in partnership with one another to create authentic presence and, in some cases, co-construction.

In considering my work through this lens, I was also able to better prepare myself for future relational encounters. Utilizing the Relational Commonplaces as a diagnostic tool also allowed me to become much more aware of the factors in other relational encounters. Prior to this, I

had always attempted to listen closely to my conversation partner, and to hear who they were through what they said and didn't say. Now however, I started to become more aware of the present or potential Thirdness in situations, so that I could factor them in to the conversation taking place. Moreover, I gained self-awareness about the way I showed up to these relational encounters. I started to realize that being emotionally present with another person is important, but not enough. Rather, I learned that we must find a way to bring our authentic character to every conversation, to bring our solid and vulnerable selves in a way that invites our conversation partner to do the same. This heightened awareness allowed me to have much stronger relational encounters.

Challenges

While the practice of reflecting on relational encounters through the Relational Commonplaces diagram can be an incredible diagnostic tool, there is never scientific certainty when assessing relationships. In order to best prepare for a relational encounter, one must make assumptions about another person's character or about any Thirdness present. In addition, utilizing the Relational Commonplaces requires constant assessment and recalibration. By recognizing its limitations, one can continue to modify relational encounters and potentially improve them.

What I now know…

1. Understanding that the Relational Commonplaces model represents the principles of Relational Learning, relational encounters require a deep understanding of and commitment to:

    a. One's character and developing a solid sense of self;

    b. The mutuality and co-creation of meaning rooted in the self-other relationship; Developing an awareness of 'Thirdnesses' that can enhance and inhibit the relational encounter.

3. Relational learning is a cyclical process that can continue to deepen;

4. The Relational Commonplaces diagram served as a strong analytical tool, enabling me to see where relational encounters were effective, strong, and successful, and where they fell short. In addition, I was able to see how the relational encounters could lead to the co-creation of community;

5. Relational Learning has a greater impact when there is buy-in. The Thirdness of resistance can be a powerful inhibitor toward relational encounters;

6. The Relational Commonplaces model can also be applied to one's relationship with an institution. In order to be in a successful partnership, the institution must also have a solid sense of self, a connection with its character and an openness to mutual

engagement, transformation, and co-creation. This can be especially difficult with legacy institutions. Like an individual, an institution needs to be on firm footing while also open to co-creative change;

7. Relational Learning is powerful, dynamic, and needed today.

Tips for Assessing One-on-One Interactions Using the Relational Commonplaces Model

1. Be honest with yourself about yourself.

2. Understanding where you are in the Relational Commonplaces diagram is crucial to understanding the interaction. When you look back on a conversation you have had with another person, consider the way in which you showed up. Were you present or distracted? Did you come with an open mind or with an agenda or assumptions about the other person? Which parts of yourself did you bring to the conversation and which did you check at the door? How much space did you take up: how much did you share and how much did you listen?

3. Be generous in your assumptions about the other.

4. Everyone is coming to the table with a lot on their plate. They, like you, have to juggle multiple priorities. When assessing your conversation, your goal is to take note of how they showed up, without judgment.

Conclusion

Judaism has at its heart a commitment to building community through being in relationship with one another. Today's renaissance of relational Judaism is at once long overdue and yet still not fully realizing its potential. As such, understanding the Relational Commonplaces model as a diagnostic tool for assessing our relational encounters can allow us to consistently hone our relational skills and commit more deeply to this sacred work.

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BEING THE BEST SAUL: HOW TO DIFFERENTIATE AS A FUNDRAISER

by Saul Korin

"So Saul, what can I do for you today?"

This happens in many donor meetings. Sometimes it is a first time "get to know you" meeting. But, during a meeting where a solicitation is planned, this is an opportunity for a pivot. This is the time if I am making a solicitation, I would discuss the needs of the organization and make an ask. And this is where I often defer and say "Oh, I am not going to solicit you today." During these types of interactions, it is easy to see how the title of fundraiser has an implied outcome which can be an impediment to deep and meaningful relationships. It is the expectation that a request for money will occur at some time. This expectation makes it more difficult to take the relationship from instrumental to meaningful or relational.

As a fundraiser, am I neglecting my responsibilities if I don't make an ask at this time? And if this is a pattern, why am I not making the ask?

I like what fundraising achieves, but don't (or didn't) like asking for money. My lack of comfort with fundraising comes from a personal sense of scarcity. As someone who worries about money, there is an uneasiness with asking other people for money. I cannot put myself "in the shoes" of the donor I am soliciting, who may not have similar financial concerns. I worry about money, and my family has to dip into debt to live the lifestyle at which we are comfortable. I believe in Jewish Education but my kids attend Portland Public Schools. When asked why my kids go to public school, my response is a belief in public schools, with the realization that it would be very difficult to afford the Jewish day school where I work. I want to be generous but a sense of scarcity makes me reluctant to give (while still making me give more than I feel I can afford). Money for me is a difficult subject, and brings up fear and shame. I am afraid to ask as there is a risk of being asked to give in return which is not possible as I am incapable of donating at a "Major Donor" level.

This discomfort regarding money, makes me uncomfortable with the concept of soliciting. In order to "protect" the social nature of my relationships, I avoid possibly uncomfortable moments of solicitation which could actually enhance the relationship. I let trust and rapport get in the way of making the ask. I now know that a deep discussion of philanthropy can enhance a relationship. This relates to Maimonides levels of friendship where the bottom level is instrumental, the second level is developing intimacy and the highest level is pursuing a shared common good. This exemplifies the true definition of philanthropy "the love of people."

If through meeting people, we connect in a meaningful way around a desire to "make the world a better place" or enhance the world, then even a no answer to a solicitation is an opportunity to delve deeper into what matters to the donor. There are always present or future opportunities to help donors engage with a cause that is meaningful to them. "Money is like water. It can be a conduit for commitment, a currency of love. Money moving in the direction of our highest commitments nourishes our world and ourselves."[1]

My participation in M²'s Relational Engagement Circle has allowed me to tackle this challenging area and ask the following questions: If I am a Jewish communal fundraiser and I do not follow through with the solicitation, is this showing a lack of character or integrity? Is there a lack of congruence between what I say and who I am?

I consider myself called to be a Jewish communal professional and to work in the field. I have worked at many of the agencies in the Jewish community (Hillel, American Jewish University, Jewish Senior Care, Day School, JCC, small start-up nonprofit, J-Pro group). I am a Jewish communal professional and leader who has grown communities in Los Angeles and Portland and built relationships that impact the Jewish world. By bringing my values to the table, I can lead a meaningful conversation rooted in building Jewish community.

In my relationship with donors, I saw my character and integrity being overwhelmed and obstructed by my discomfort regarding money. Should I let my discomfort with money overwhelm, and my desire to build the relationship sublimate my character and integrity to fulfill my role? No! My negative discomfort with money can be counteracted by infusing the conversation with meaning. I need to emphasize the context of meaning and have a voice that allows my character and the relationship to flourish.

When Rabbi Zusya grew old and knew that his time on earth was nearing a close, his students gathered around him. One of them asked him if [the rabbi] was afraid of dying. 'I am afraid of what God will ask me,' the Rabbi said. 'What will he ask you', asked the students. 'He will not ask me, 'Zusya, why were you not like Moses.' He will ask me, 'Zusya, why were you not Zusya?'"

I know the key to success in fundraising, and to being the most Saul I can be, is to mediate my discomfort from feelings of scarcity by infusing my relationships with meaning of the causes and nonprofits I fundraise for. If I succeed, what is intended relationship-wise and philanthropically for the agencies I work for will occur. The needs of the organizations I work for (Portland Jewish Academy and the Mittleman Jewish Community Center) will be met. I need to take the next step and bring that information (meaning) to the table in order to better co-create meaning with the donors I meet. I remind myself that my role as a fundraiser does have an implication of a financial request which is understood by the donors. If I focus on meaning and connection, I can differentiate and be my true self.

To fulfill my goals and the organizations' goals, when I am asked, 'Saul, what can I do for you

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1 The Soul of Money, Lynne Twist p.223.

today,' I can follow with these questions: 'What are you passionate about? Why do you support Portland Jewish Academy or the Mittleman Jewish Community Center? What within these causes would you be interested in supporting? If our organization is not a good fit, which organization would be? And, what matters to you? Thereby, I am enhancing and deepening the relationship and growing my chances of success. By bringing myself and my conviction that the organizations I work for positively impacts the community, I can overcome my past discomfort to ensure the future of two Jewish organizations in Portland.

Saul Korin is the Director of Donor Engagement and Philanthropy at Portland Jewish Academy and the Mittleman Jewish Community Center. He is a Jewish community builder and creator who has overcome his fear of asking for money. He is Amaya, Ella and Dorothy's Dad. Ask him about it @saulomite.

BREAKING THE SCHMOOZE HABIT

by Wendy Verba

How do *you* enter the room?

The wine and cheese, the gala, the networking event, the opening reception, the mixer, the oneg.

You might pause at the entrance to plot your route, scanning for opportunities to jump in. People stand in tight clusters, glasses in hand, name tags affixed, forming and re-forming conversation groups like a mysterious algorithm.

Do you, like my extroverted friend Sarah, wade right in, buzzing happily from group to group, gathering conversations and introductions like nectar from flowers, never tiring of new people and repeated questions? Or like Michael, who knows half the people there, are you "working the room," purposefully touching base with key people and making strategic introductions?

Are you more like my colleague Lynn, seeking the people you know, finding one cluster of comfort at a time, half-listening while scanning faces for your next leap, like hopping rocks over lava to safety and counting the minutes until you're seated for dinner?

Or do you take one look, turn around and leave?

The schmooze-fest is such a default staple of Jewish life that we don't notice the way it can undermine genuine connection for some attendees. We ignore the "Thirdnesses" that drive people to their corners: relational hierarchies and power structures; demographics like race, age, or socio-economic status; social norms and expectations; and even the way the room is set and the food is served.

Why Are We Here?

Let's assume the last Jewish reception you attended – say the opening cocktail hour before a conference – was indeed designed with intention to achieve a specific outcome. Can we guess what was the goal and who was the intended audience?

Here's what we might observe: The crowd looks homogenous within a narrow range of ethnicity, age, even dress. The wine is flowing, the noise level is high, lights are dim, there are a few cocktail tables but mostly just open space for mingling.

The most comfortable and engaged individuals in the room are those who already know a lot of people, who have established positions in the social hierarchy, and enjoy the chance to see, be seen, and connect with people they know or want to meet. A small number of full-blown

extroverts are in their element meeting strangers and building conversation circles.

The remaining attendees are either sticking with one person or a group they already know, nervously wandering the crowd looking for a group to attach to, or leaving as soon as they can.

From my own experience, I would posit the following social dynamics in this hypothetical room, not taking into account those who self-selected not to attend in the first place:

- 20% feel mostly comfortable, navigating the room with ease; 50% feel moderately uncomfortable and express difficulty breaking in; 30% feel extremely out of place, sticking with a small known group or leaving early.

- 80% of conversations are between people already acquainted; 20% are among new acquaintances.

- 90% of conversations could be characterized as "surface-level" topics (job or family updates, news about people in common, gossip and humorous stories, light discussion about current events); 10% of conversations feel deeply meaningful in which participants share authentically.

- 20% of attendees follow up after the event to build on a connection; 80% don't.

Clearly, an event with these outcomes must have been targeted to people secure in their social status with many previous acquaintances in the room (insiders), plus a handful of extreme extroverts who thrive in open social settings. The goal could be stated as simply giving those 20% of attendees a space to fuel and expand their networks.

The Case for Design

You might ask, what's wrong with that? We can't have deep, meaningful conversation all the time; and we can't help if some people don't engage. Furthermore, people often request (notably in every post-conference survey ever) unstructured time to schmooze.

The point is to design for intentional outcomes. If strengthening the social networks of the "inner circle" is your intended outcome (and you aren't concerned about the 80% who got little from this event), then your event was a success! I should say, there is, in fact, a time and place for unstructured, "un-designed" socializing: Once a group has already developed connections on which to build conversations. They should have either shared an interactive experience or over time have developed relationships and a sense of being part of a group.

But if you want a deeper or broader impact – so that, for example, you draw a more diverse crowd, everyone attending feels seen and leaves with at least one meaningful new connection -- you might design the experience differently, intentionally structuring it so the target audience has the tools to make deeper connections and to feel like they "belong."

Most Jewish events, however, are designed by and for insiders, with an assumption that simply

being in a room together with some alcohol will magically result in bonding to the group or organization. We plan these events because that's the way it's always been done and because those of us on the inside truly enjoy them. But we don't often enough ask why, for what, and for whom?

We Jews can't afford to keep doing the same old things out of habit. We've seen the numbers and we know there are vast swaths of Jewish people (and their friends and families) who look, think, identify, and act differently from the "vibrant core" in the room. They won't show up or find their place in Jewish life unless we design with and for them, or empower them to create their own communal activities.

Moments of Joy

I'd been steeping myself for several years[1] in designing gatherings around explicit goals to make Jewish life more accessible, when I realized I was ignoring my own advice in planning my daughter's bat mitzvah.

Leah had already decided to forego a big party in exchange for a family trip, so we planned to celebrate with a simple "*Kiddush*" lunch in the social hall following the service.

B'nai mitzvah lunches follow a predictable formula at our Reform synagogue. Guests move from the sanctuary to the social hall slowly, stopping for a piece of frosted challah before getting in the buffet line and then wandering around to look for a seat with people they know at open tables.

The cousins from New Jersey sit with the cousins from New Jersey, mom's work friends find each other, the locals feel at home and the kids group off in their respective cliques. Those without a group sit quietly or try to make conversation with strangers at their table.

It's perfectly nice and it's just lunch, but I had to wonder: "What if we set an intention around our guests' experience and designed for that?"

So, we discussed what we wanted from the day, beyond the obvious goal of celebrating with people we love. Leah wanted all the kids to have fun and didn't care what the adults did, so my husband and I had free reign to articulate a goal for the adult experience.

Here's what we came up with:

Every adult attending will bring their own moments of joy as a gift to Leah, and connect with each other more deeply around their moments of joy. Everyone will make a new connection or deepen an old one around shared stories.

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1 Studying with Dr. Sarale Shadmi-Wortman, community building scholar from the Israel Association of Community Centers; participating in M²'s Relational Engagement Circle, reading Priya Parker's book The Art of Gathering; and building a Culture of Belonging initiative at the Jewish Community Federation and Endowment Fund in the Bay Area.

Once we landed on this intention, figuring out the "how" was relatively easy. The trick was to provide just enough "structure" to break through social habits to encourage authentic interactions, while still honoring different socializing styles. We were inviting everyone in our lives, including non-Jewish co-workers and friends, and people from diverse socio-economic, geographic, and ethnic backgrounds, and we wanted to find a way for every single person to more deeply feel seen and see others.

Authentic Connection by Design

I was halfway through Priya Parker's *The Art of Gathering* at that point and remembered a story about a Christmas party (ironically) in which guests brought photos to decorate the host's tree and spent the party telling stories about their photos.

That sounded perfect. We asked every guest to send 1-3 digital "moments of joy" from their lives in advance. There was a fair amount of reminding and cajoling involved, but eventually the photos started pouring in: Lots of family vacation shots, an empty hammock on a beach at sunset, an old photo of a loved one no longer alive.

We eliminated the buffet line and random seating. Instead, we assigned guests to tables with a few people they knew and a few they didn't, mixing the New Jersey cousins with my best friends or my husband's work colleagues with school parents. Lunch was pre-set family style and the centerpiece of each table was a photo tree hanging with prints of all the pictures they'd sent.

Then we waited to see what would happen.

It was magical. People passed around platters of food, spun the photo trees pointing and telling their stories. Acquaintances learned things about each other they'd never known, while people who had never met learned something meaningful and joyful about someone new. There was a lot of laughter and a few tears.

Later I spoke to a friend who normally leaves directly after services because she doesn't fit into the b'nai mitzvah social milieu as a single, younger woman with no kids.

"You literally gave me a seat at the table," she reflected. "I had as much right to be there as everyone else I was seated with. You gave me permission and made it easy for me to connect. I learned surprising things about people and instead of feeling "different" I realized how much we all have in common."

It was just lunch, but we built something extraordinary and unforgettable out of it, a way for each one of our guests to touch our joy with their own joy and to go beneath the surface with each other.

A Habit of "*Kavanah*" (Intention)

Social events and programs are really just platforms for achieving a set of goals or outcomes for participants – greater knowledge, expanded networks, increased commitment or funding, deeper belonging and meaning. They should never be treated as ends in themselves, or worse – as a perfunctory habit.

Instead, we must build a habit of intention, or "*kavanah*," in designing gatherings that generate authentic, meaningful connection for more people. How?

1. **Start with Awareness.** What are the "Thirdnesses" (external influences) surrounding a group or event--norms, power structures, financial disparity, demographics? What differentiates the people you want to gather? How do YOU and your own assumptions, desires, and traits influence your approach?

2. **Set specific, or measurable goals.** Not how many attend, but who, how they interact, the authentic quality of those interactions, whether they follow up afterwards. Ask: What do we want participants to feel, learn, or do?

3. **Now design around your observations and goals.** Too many planners start with design and skip steps 1 and 2. First, decide if a one-time event is even the right vehicle for the goals you've set. If it is, make deliberate choices from location and room set-up to how people enter and leave, that support your goals and account for the "Thirdnesses" you've observed.

4. **Don't leave connections to chance.** Give your event structure or rules of engagement (like pre-assigned seating or a probing question to discuss in pairs) that will level the playing field for everyone and help them connect in meaningful ways, and more.

5. **Involve participants in design and execution.** Shift the dynamic from a transactional service to an event by and for participants. Invite your target audience to create an experience that resonates, and then deploy them as connectors, table captains, or conversation starters.

6. **Measure success differently.** Measuring attendance or satisfaction treats participants like customers. Instead, pick metrics supporting your relational goals. For example: the people you designed for are in the room (diversity); everyone speaks at least once, meets someone new, or learns something meaningful about others; people step up to contribute, bring friends the next time, or build on their connections after the event.

7. **Design for what's next.** A well-designed event can launch deeper connections over time. Leverage your event beyond that day by reaching out to those who couldn't make it to tell them they were missed or by inviting attendees to help create something new together based on their interests.

Designing for belonging is a mindset shift that requires building new habits, discipline, and skills. It's like putting on "belonging glasses;" once you wear them, nothing will look the same. You'll notice the people left out, the missed opportunities for connection, the same people in the room talking to the same people in the room, the formulaic events that take up huge amounts of staff time but go nowhere. You'll start to tweak and experiment with gathering people in new ways, and you'll be shocked at the results, at how eager people are to belong and connect more authentically. You may decide, to great dismay from your "establishment," that a large event isn't the right strategy to deeply engage more people in Jewish life. And you will never plan or experience a Jewish gathering in the same way again.

Wendy Verba is Managing Director of Community Impact at the San Francisco-based Jewish Community Federation and Endowment Fund, where she leads a major engagement initiative to increase the number and diversity of young people who feel strongly connected to Jewish community. Wendy teaches Jewish leaders how to build cultures of belonging and has never met a gathering or group she didn't want to lead in bonding activities (to the delight and embarrassment of her husband and three children).

CREATING AN ENVIRONMENT FOR RELATIONAL LEARNING USING A VIRTUAL PLATFORM

by Annie Glickman

The landscape of the Jewish world regarding relational work is changing rapidly. When I first began teaching in the field of Jewish education at Beit Rabban Day School on the upper west side of Manhattan in the mid 1990's, my colleagues and students were contained between two floors in the same building we shared with the Spanish Portuguese Synagogue. Twenty-five years later, as Director of School Services for the Florence Melton School of Adult Jewish Learning, my colleagues span the globe with offices in New York, Chicago, and Jerusalem. I happen to be based in Overland Park, Kansas and provide professional development and assistance to our Melton directors who work tirelessly to bring rich Jewish learning to dozens of Jewish communities throughout the United States, Canada, Europe, Australia and South Africa. Given time and space that can separate us, creating an environment incorporating relational learning is growing ever more significant.

There are tremendous opportunities to working remotely. Melton's global impact is palpable, whether I am speaking with a colleague in St. Louis or in Sydney. Our network brings our directors together frequently for webinars to discuss how to strengthen Melton's faculty or how to increase community learning through local partnerships. I love connecting our directors with one another as they serve as each other's support and inspiration.

There are also great challenges to working remotely. I consider myself a "people person," but I spend most of my work-day looking at a computer. When I offer support to directors, I see only snapshots of their stories. Through emails or one-on-one monthly Zoom meetings, as well as group webinars, I learn how director's function in their communities through the vignettes they share. However, my knowledge of the depth of their situations, what they face, how they feel about their work, can be limited. Through my year of learning and growth with M², I have come to understand the significance of creating and maintaining relational encounters through my virtual work with directors.

Relational learning as defined by M² is the contextualized, co-construction of meaning, guided by the intentional expression of middot. As part of the M² Relational Engagement Circle, we explored three main elements which served as the basis for our understanding in any relational encounter: **Character, Self and the Other, and Thirdness**. In my work for the Melton School, I'll define **Character** as my "well" of knowledge, resources, experience, and middot that comprise who I am, all that I have learned, and what I value and bring to each interaction. I

understand **Self and the Other** as the relationships I have with Melton's directors serving in their respective communities. The **Thirdness** here is our virtual platform through which our encounters take place. Over the course of this study, I learned that this virtual platform doesn't need to define my interactions, and it can help or hinder the encounter depending on my use of it.

Except for one yearly conference where I see my colleagues in person, my relationships are all built and sustained online. In my role, I make a time with each Melton director to learn about her particular community, her challenges, and her values. I ask that we have a video meeting so that we can see each other's faces to gauge facial expressions. I send advance questions drawing on our **substantive understanding** of Jewish ideas.

And when our directors speak, I do my best to *listen*. I take notes that I can refer back to in future conversations. I draw parallels between communities and also formulate differences based on each director's insights. When a director shares what this work means to them and what they define as success, I gain great insight as to how I can help them.

Without advance planning, Zoom conversations can spiral into **transactional discourse** centering on enrollment numbers. I try to make good use of a director's sacred time, knowing they have little time to spare, often juggling multiple responsibilities. Through M², I've come to call this a dedication to mutuality. I offer support not as though I have all the answers, but rather to facilitate the director's finding own path of growth most suitable for his values and interests.

Sometimes, of course, we have some transactional work to do in order to sustain our business model. However, a significant portion of the precious time I share with our directors during our virtual meetings must be relational and values-based.

I'll offer an example. For several months, I had been having a difficult time connecting with a director, we will call her Ariel. She wouldn't respond to my emails or phone calls, despite my best efforts to sound inviting. I took this radio silence to mean that I reminded her of what she most likely wasn't doing well. I decided to reach out again, but this time to share with her my observations about the Relational Engagement theory and to gain her insights. She responded, and we set a time to talk.

Ariel, being a distinguished rabbi and educator in her own right, was genuinely interested. And I was thrilled that I had a captive audience. When we connected, I was mindful to use our sacred time as a *Self and Other* encounter. I acknowledged the obstacles facing her community and wondered if we could together utilize what I was learning to helping her move forward in her work. I invited her into a conversation about what I didn't know, rather than what I did, and even what I was questioning in applying this theory to our professional encounter. As I learned during our seminars, "*I said the thing*", and it was refreshing. Ariel, in turn, was appreciative of my transparent nature. In that moment, I believe there had been a repair to the rupture that had grown due to our distance. The remainder of our conversation unfolded into a deeper explanation and understanding of some of the challenges she was facing in her own community.

I didn't expect such a rich response from Ariel! I became vulnerable in those moments when I invited this director into the conversation. The intention, of course, cannot be used to manipulate our relationship in my favor, but rather to be used for the purpose of supporting and challenging in order to grow together. Having worked with directors in other communities for over a decade, the greatest outcome for me was a renewed excitement for my own work. When I asked questions that I was genuinely curious about that focused more on *why* this work was important and not just how to do it, the conversations became more relational.

At first, I wanted the directors to learn something new as a result of my experience in M². The more important realization is that I have changed. At our first M² seminar, my area of inquiry was why some directors succeeded while others did not. Specifically, I wondered if somehow success was determined by being aligned with one's sense of calling. Did the directors who felt most driven in their work, even when they had setbacks, have a sense of stick-to-itiveness because they felt it was what they were driven to do? In my interest surrounding this question, I couldn't escape my own internal searching. Is this the work *I* am meant to do?

Merriam-Webster defines *calling* as: 'a strong inner impulse toward a particular course of action especially when accompanied by conviction of divine influence'. I agree that this urge is derived from two sources- one that is rooted in what we believe and the second, which comes from something beyond our reach, and is a path we are drawn to follow. But how does one know when one is engaged in his or her calling? I sought to explore this question by interviewing over a dozen people, specifically not working in the Jewish community. A theme emerged. In some way or another, most everyone said that they are in their field to improve the quality of other people's lives. This became my working definition of calling. For those of us involved in Jewish education, returning to this definition can get us through the difficult times and constant challenges.

I too felt that the desire to improve the quality of other people's lives was my calling. This definition is limitless and expansive and extends beyond job descriptions. I can see that for anyone, this can be fulfilled in a number of different professional contexts. Now that I have taken a closer look at who I am, what truly motivates me, and what values are most important, I am able to to bring my authentic self into my encounters. It allows me to align myself with my work and to notice when I am most present and feel most fulfilled.

My participation in this initiative started by exploring how virtual communities could be more relational and substantive and less transactional. This ended up being a journey about calling and character, mine included. As a result of this process, I wish to offer a few suggestions for Jewish educators who work remotely, in an effort to create meaningful encounters.

1. **Consider your own character.** What values are most important to you in your work? What is your calling? What excites you and in what ways are you most challenged? Why are you making time for this? Think about this before your webinars, meetings and posts as this will come through to your constituents in your encounters despite the distance.

2. **Listen to the other.** Carefully consider how to use your virtual platform to further the goal of meaningful exchange. Think of questions to which you don't already know the answer. Invite your colleagues to share what matters most to them and listen to their answer. Virtual platforms do allow for real relationships to flourish.

3. **Incorporate values-based ideas.** Focus precious virtual meeting times on reconnecting over the ideas that stimulate and propel your work. This will propel the conversation towards a shared outcome that has substance and meaning.

In today's expanding virtual Jewish educational world, we must strive to incorporate relational communities in our encounters. We no longer have the luxury of time and space for conversations that spontaneously happen over office water coolers. If we overlook our relational work or decide to skip it altogether, we lose the ability to become co-creators in a process that is substantive.   Working in a virtual world can provide fertile ground for relational communities to form that will ultimately increase our calling to do this most sacred work.

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CREDENTIALING AS A BID FOR SELF-REVELATION

by Julia Appel

It has happened to all of us. We're in a conversation at a party or at a work gathering and, seemingly out of nowhere, our conversation partner mentions they were a champion tennis player, or they received an award in something we're discussing, or they got straight A's in college. If we notice it, most of the time we're likely to chalk the comment up to arrogance or self-centeredness, and watch that quality about them as we decide whether to continue to build a relationship with that person. But interpreting these moments as self-centeredness collapses a deep opportunity for relational exploration. There is another way to understand what is happening that opens up relational possibilities.

In my rabbinic work, I work one-on-one with university students on their spiritual questions, life counseling, and mental health first aid. I help them process their next Jewish steps and develop their personal sense of belonging, both in Jewish community and in life. At the beginning of every year, I have many first meetings with students whom I haven't met before. They find me because they are new to campus, through our publicity materials, or they met me at an event and want to talk more personally about their lives. I became interested in looking more closely at these first meetings: How might I best lay the foundation for successful and authentic relational work together?

Inspired by my training in M²'s Relational Engagement Circle, especially around self-presentation and personal character, I began to wonder about the ways students were presenting themselves to me. Were they running the same script they usually present to strangers, and could I as a relational educator helpfully interrupt that script by responding differently from their expectations? What self did they present to me and what wasn't present? How might I create a space for the students to bring their whole selves, even the parts they don't usually share readily, and what might I change in my own behavior to facilitate that sharing? If I were able to do that, we could get to a much deeper, more authentic level of relationship.

Credentialing in One-on-Ones

While more closely observing students' self-presentation during our first meetings, I began to notice a trend. Sometimes, students with whom I met in pastoral settings would mention several times a fact about themselves that was unrelated to our conversation. These were sometimes flattering statements about their academic success--"My professors think I should get my master's in my field" or "I just want you to know that I generally get all A's." Sometimes, they were what I would call "Jewish confessionals--"I had my bat mitzvah and everything, and I observe the holidays with my family, but I don't keep strictly kosher."

I now call these statements "credentialing" – when a person inserts a statement about their own credentials that is unrelated or tangentially related to the topic at hand into a one-on-one relational conversation. It often feels involuntary, like it has bubbled up due to circumstance, as opposed to being something organic and natural to that social interaction.

In our second M² seminar, we discussed the concept of emotional bids – moments of tentative self-revelation a person puts out to her conversation partner, to see if the partner will respond. The bid for emotional connection is there; whether or not the partner responds is up to the partner being observant enough and willing.

I recommend that we not consider credentialing to be a quirk or throwaway aspect of the conversation.

Credentialing can signal a potential obstacle to authentic engagement. Seeing credentialing as an emotional bid, however, invites the credentialing into the conversation instead of ignoring it, which can then lead us to better connection and understanding. The question is how best to do that.

Approaches

Before I began investigating them, I would simply ignore credentialing statements. I assumed they were tied to my role as the rabbi, and I was uncomfortable with what felt like the student's desire to prove to me she was worth my individual attention. After all, academic success or Jewish ritual adherence didn't factor into whether I was fully present with her. I thus thought my mentioning the credentialing might make the other person uncomfortable or embarrassed. My approach was to deflect anxiety around my role by quickly assuring students that sitting with them is my job or by shrugging off my rabbi authority by speaking very casually or making jokes.

However, ignoring or deflecting these credentialing comments felt like I wasn't responding to the emotional bid provided. Credentialing may feel like an involuntary tic, but the person really is choosing to share something about himself with me, and ignoring that potentially shuts down an opportunity to connect.

I wanted to develop an approach to credentialing that didn't ignore it, and instead best utilized it for relationship-building. I turned first to the role of rabbi and the way in which that "Thirdness" – the aspect of roles and power that is present in those meetings outside of our relationship – influences our interactions. I wondered, what might it look like to actually emphasize the Thirdness, to use my power as the rabbi to simply bless my students and tell them they are enough? Could I directly assure them that talking with them is exactly where I want to be right now, instead of merely saying, "Don't worry; it's my job to meet with students"?

Second, I related credentialing to a student's desire for me to see them as a whole self. Perhaps these pieces they repeat are parts of themselves they feel are invisible or peripheral, yet they

are anxious for me to know. How can I convey that in this moment I see them and I can hold all the parts they are presenting?

I developed several approaches to act on the emotional bid credentialing represents, instead of ignoring it. I sought to test which approach might be most effective in helping form authentic relationship. The approaches I developed were:

1. Get curious about what they've said and go into it: "I've noticed you've mentioned x several times. Tell me more about that…."

2. Name it and give an invitation to discuss it: "You've mentioned that your professors think you should apply for a PhD. Is that something that's important to you?"

3. Name it and redirect the conversation: "Academics sound important to you. What else do you put that energy into?"

I looked forward to utilizing these methods, with the intent that I would try all three and compare their results.

Shifts in Inquiry

I didn't end up following through with these research plans. Once I had these approaches in place, I became less interested in studying their efficacy. It seemed clear that this would be an improvement over ignoring credentialing in my relationships with students, and I felt sure that I would see positive results, converting credentialing from an obstacle to an opportunity in my relationship-building.

I decided next to see what credentialing feels like from the inside, to understand what emotional bids credentialing represented for me. I knew that I too credentialed, but I wasn't sure exactly when or why. Maybe this would add insight to the overall picture.

1. What emotions or situations trigger my credentialing in conversations? What might that teach me about myself and others? How does this relate to the discovery I made in our M^2 seminar, that I try to push aside the parts of myself that are "ordinary" or "incompetent"?

2. How can I engage my own and others' credentialing to make deeper, more authentic connections as opposed to setting up false presentations or obstacles to connection?

3. What would be a methodology for myself to engage with my own credentialing, to turn it from obstacle to opening?

4. Is there a difference between how credentialing shows up for me with colleagues and with *congregants/students*?

As the year went on, I began to see the phenomenon of credentialing more clearly. I shifted my view: I no longer understand credentialing as a direct response to role, students attempting to

prove they are worthy of my time.

This shift happened because of my own experiences in a first meeting, in which I was the one seeking help. I began executive coaching in February of this year, a process in which I scheduled to meet with a coach six times to work on improving my workplace collaboration and participation in my organization. Executive coaching, especially when invested in by one's workplace, can be a wonderful and tricky gift. On the one hand, it shows the organization's investment in the employee and belief that she can grow. On the other hand, the content of those meetings rests heavily on areas to improve. In other words, I found myself in a one-on-one meeting with someone I was coming to in weakness, to try to improve myself. And I could not stop credentialing.

New Insights: Opening and Closing Credentialing

I realized that for me, in that first meeting, my credentialing was less about feeling worthy of the coach's time and more about feeling fully seen. As I sat there exploring my weaknesses, I needed her to know about my strengths. I felt vulnerable and wanted to feel strong. And I wanted assurance, to know that the coach saw me as a whole human, not only as a collection of particular workplace weaknesses.

Through this next stage in my research, I have developed new, more precise terms for types of credentialing I think we see in relational work: "opening credentialing" and "closing credentialing." Understanding what kind of credentialing is present can help us turn the emotional bid into a relational opportunity.

As in the party conversation example, a common reaction to credentialing is to assume the person wants the conversation to be about how great she is. Now, sometimes credentialing may in fact be for the purpose of "one-upping" the conversation partner. That's what I will call "closing credentialing": the expression of a credential for the purpose of appearing better than another person or a situation in which credentialing becomes an obstacle to or closes a connection. "Closing credentialing" may also occur in a power imbalance that the person can't or won't address directly, and therefore it may represent an attempt at rebalancing power.

However, if we read credentialing only as arrogance, or only as power assertion, we miss the emotional bid for relationship that is likely present. "Opening credentialing" can be understood as credentialing coming from an intention to be more present, to give more of oneself to the relationship, to offer greater self-revelation in the moment. When this kind of "opening credentialing" is an attempt to convey the whole self instead of part, it is relationship-building and not an obstacle. When understood as a relational intention, the practitioner can embrace the other person's desire for deeper connection and welcome it into the room. The result is an opportunity for connection.

Conclusions

Through my action-based research, I've come to understand credentialing in a new way. Previously, I would ignore it as an embarrassing display of insecurity. By exploring credentialing through observing others and myself, I've concluded that credentialing in relational engagement can in fact signal a power imbalance, but it can also be an emotional bid by a person to be fully seen when she is coming to the relational meeting in a position of personal weakness.

The three responses to credentialing I developed at first are still better than ignoring it. However, there is another more powerful, more truthful, and honestly more vulnerable response. What if we assumed that credentialing is an emotional bid to be fully seen and responded by simply naming that? What if we responded to someone else's credentialing with, "Are there other things I should know about you that would help me be with you right now?" or "Are you not feeling fully seen right now? How might I do that?"

Or if we catch ourselves credentialing, what if we simply shifted and said, "I am not feeling fully seen in this moment and I want to tell you about it"?

The conversation could then shift to the relationship itself, producing mutual understanding, a sense of partnership in improving the relationship, and even relief to simply be seen as whole. In social situations, we are taught to avoid uncomfortable topics. However, in therapeutic or deep relational conversations, it is the vulnerable, sometimes uncomfortable places that can be most fruitful.

In one of my last one-on-one meetings of the school year last year, a beloved student of mine said, "Rabbi Julia, I feel like I'm always coming to you when I'm having trouble. I do actually have my life together!" Instead of deflecting or ignoring her comment, I simply said, "I know you're coming to me to discuss a difficulty, but I want to assure you that despite the fact that we most often discuss your challenges, I see you as a whole, competent, and multi-faceted person." My comment landed. She relaxed and smiled. She was relieved to be fully seen.

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THE EMPEROR'S VILLAGE

by David Burstein

"Teaching holds a mirror to the soul. If I am willing to look in that mirror and not run from what I see, I have a chance to gain self-knowledge, and knowing myself is as crucial to good teaching as knowing my students and my subject. In fact, knowing my students and my subject depends heavily on self-knowledge."

Parker J. Palmer, The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life

In 1519, Captain Hernán Cortés landed in Veracruz in the new world, to begin his great conquest. Upon arrival, he gave the order to his men to burn the ships, to destroy any avenue of return to the old world.

It was June 2018, and summer hit with its usual humidity in Cincinnati. The U-Haul trucks backed up slowly, avoiding the children flitting between volunteers slowly carrying desks and chairs and blackboards behind the congregation to load and send away. I had been talking about changing the paradigm of religious school for months, and we were finally doing it. We were burning the ships, gutting the school both physically and pedagogically to change the way Jewish education could look and feel, and how it could engage both children and adults. So, the chairs and desks went, as did any other semblance of a traditional school. White boards were repurposed, classrooms became centers with new paint and lofts, until it bore little resemblance to the old Hebrew school. We renamed it "Our Village."

Co-Creative Intentions

Change takes courage and a large portion of buy-in. Our Village, our new educational model, needed both.

I had entered the experience as the visionary, the one who would imagine and then create this amazing future. I had been given a blank slate, which invigorated and excited me. And that excitement was mirrored by our congregation.

I began the project in January of 2017 and tried to do the legwork to garner community buy-in. I spent six months as a consultant working with the congregation to learn about its culture, its values, and its former educational pedagogy. I met with a large group of current parents and asked what their goals were for the school and their children's experiences. I met with experts in experiential education and worked with mentors and supervisors on how best to maximize the pedagogical and sociological impact of such an undertaking. As Our Village came to life, I tracked observations of how the children and staff interacted with the new space, keeping a visual and written journal of each step in the process.

Communally, we have done a wonderful job. When I walk the halls, I feel pride and excitement. The rewards have been great: hundreds of tours, a three-year grant, congregants beaming with pride telling me how great it is. The senior rabbi, trusting me and witnessing the magic of Our Village, offered me a full-time position.

The Emperor Has No Clothes

The first year ended in a flash. As the dust settled around me, I sat on my couch and wondered if I had really accomplished what I had set out to do. The halls and classrooms, now empty, challenged me. So much of the year had been me pushing my vision. I felt like I missed something in the hours upon hours of work. Had I actually made space for others to participate, create, and push back if necessary? Was this just a case of the Emperor has no clothes? Had I co-created the project as I had intended, or was I simply a charismatic leader people were happy to follow, without critically engaging my ideas?

There is an inherent vulnerability in the creative process. Once presented to the outside world whether on canvas or written page, or in my case the walls and rooms of our new school, it feels a bit fragile and exposed. Because this school is so representative of my life, I feel vulnerable when I walk into the space. This space is literally who I am come to life.

Looking around, I see that the walls and spaces of Our Village are a roadmap of my ideas, my dreams, and to some extent my own journey. As a child, I always searched for nooks and crannies to be by myself. The school has at least one space in every area in which a child who might feel overwhelmed might find refuge. We built lofts, magical fairy beds, bean bag spaces, and a wellness center with meditation pillows and a swing. The open spaces host couches, a

Bedouin tent, a music nook, and a giant papier-mâché peace tree to snuggle under with a giant teddy bear. The lights are low and all our fluorescents are covered with images of a blue sky, so you can lie on your back and look up, like the meadows of my childhood.

I grew up in a family where social justice was our native tongue, spoken at dinner tables and en route to numerous projects and drives.

Social justice drives Our Village's curriculum, which speaks to fighting for justice and being a change maker. A culture of hope, generosity of spirit, and kindness surrounds our children and adults, both physically and metaphorically.

I took one of my motivating mantras from an early parent meeting: "I want my child to love Judaism and be loved by Judaism." When I try to enact that goal at Our Village, it is deeply influenced by my own ambiguous love of and often seeming rejection by Judaism, or by my disconnection from Israel due to my learning disability with the Hebrew language, my ultra -Orthodox family members, and a certain approach to pro-Israel activity I see in the Cincinnati community.

I think that my personal preferences and idiosyncrasies may be driving the experience for my staff and children too much.

During our latest cleaning day, I had retreated to my office to breathe and recalibrate my ego, as parts of what I had built were being dismantled.

"Rabbi David, can we talk to you?" The teachers entered cautiously, still sweating from a hard July morning of moving and cleaning the school. School had ended in May and we were rebuilding for the new year.

"Sure," I answered.

"Well you know the fairy bed?" they started tentatively.

The fairy bed was of course the mainstay of my magical room for the preschool, twinkling lights draping a canopy bed of carved ornate wood. I loved that bed. It was everything that the sterility of traditional Sunday school was not.

"Yes, of course, the bed." I answered.

"Well, everyone thinks it should go…"

I looked at my preschool teacher and he nodded sheepishly.

"Do you mean to another room?" I asked.

"No. Just go," they replied.

"How about to the meditation room? We could make a platform, like India, and the kids could lay on pillows and…" I trailed off seeing their faces fall a bit.

"No. It just needs to go."

I felt a twinge and agreed, with a smile of the painful variety. But somewhere deep down I knew that this was about more than a fairy bed with twinkling lights. It was about my staff being able to push back and me making space for that.

Putting the "Our" in "Our Village"

It was reasonably easy during this first year to control the process of building Our Village. Everything was so new and shiny. I could do no wrong and my ideas were embraced without pushback. But like a horse with blinders, I could only see in one direction. I know that I will have to open space to let others create freely, without my subtly moving them where I think is best.

This has been extremely challenging and disorienting. I have held onto weird things like the fairy bed and collapsing Bedouin tent exhibit. I have watched as others have taken my inner work on the walls and critiqued it before throwing it--gently I might add--into the recycling bin.

Over the past year, my action-based research project, as part of M²'s Relational Engagement Circle turned out to be less about the kids and the teachers and more about my creation process. As I look to this coming year, my research has enabled me to focus on how I might be holding back the progress of Our Village by maintaining unrecognized biases and blind spots. I want to skillfully move from visionary leadership to co-created community.

As a relationally-based school, I know I need to foster space that embodies equality, mutuality and reciprocity. I also know that just as we need to focus on the self-other relationships with teachers and students, we also need to ensure that the self is present as both learner and educator. My central questions moving forward are: How much should the project reflect me?

How do I bring others in? Is it necessary to have a relational process to end up with a relational learning environment?

This is the core of my tension as we enter year two of our project: between wanting my staff to fly with their own ideas and still holding the container of the original vision and values; between expressing my character through visionary leadership and cultivating the self-other relationship through an independent and empowered staff. In the Talmud, Ta'anit 7b, it is taught, "Much have I learned from my teachers, more from my colleagues, but most from my students." I learn so much from my staff, who embody all three categories in this teaching. They at times have been my teachers, they are my colleagues, and, as a visionary leader, they are also my students.

I want to create a culture that allows them to say no and to say it's not working. I want to shift the culture of this amazing journey from my leading and my staff following to relationally co-creating this school. I need to create more space for people to say no to me, to get out of the yesses and to get to critical co-creation for growth. The emperor has no clothes is about people not wanting to tell him he forgot his clothes. I need to enable my congregants, rabbi, children, and staff to tell me when I forget my clothes.

There are strong influences present in this process that include my charismatic leadership style and the innovative nature of our congregation. My style is to get everyone so excited that they believe we can do anything and there are no limits to what we can accomplish. We have our own liturgy and theological stance that attracts thinkers and intellectuals. I am not sure that gives oxygen to realistic limit setting and or practicality. I want to embrace the tension between fostering infinite possibilities and also honestly and communally evaluating what's working and what's not.

For Our Village to succeed, it is imperative that we have reality checks that are measurable, and clear deliverables. I meet regularly with staff, my senior rabbi, and the executive director to keep an eye on budget and documentation. We as a community are challenging me to take a breath and slow down. This will ensure my own long term sustainability and a relational culture.

The congregation in which Our Village resides is one of the most innovative and revolutionary congregations in the country. It is one-of-a-kind. What I've come to learn is that relational intention and a co-creative process is imperative to this innovation. It is actually the process that is honored, not the outcome.

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FINDING EQUALITY, MUTUALITY, AND RECIPROCITY IN SUPERVISOR-SUPERVISEE RELATIONSHIPS

by Rachel Happel

"Is this person the same on the inside as [they] seem to be on the outside?" Children ask this about their parents, students about their teachers, employees about their supervisors, patients about their physicians...When the answer is yes, we relax, believing that we are in the presence of integrity and feeling secure enough to invest ourselves in the relationship and all that surrounds it...A teacher who shares [their] identity with students is more effective...A supervisor who leads from personal authenticity gets better work out of people…

-Parker Palmer, A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life

I have always believed that relationships are at the heart of learning. The stronger the relationships among learners, the safer they feel and the more comfortable they are to take risks in their learning. The better an educator knows her learners, the better she can support their growth. In Jewish learning in particular, relationships are central in our long history of *chevruta* (paired) learning. While it is possible to engage in Jewish learning alone, it is more meaningful to learn in dialogue with another. Much of my work as a Jewish educator has centered around intentional relationship-building and creating environments that spark and support relational encounters.

While participating in M²'s Relational Engagement Circle, I learned that relational moments are a connection of "equal, authentic subjects" with "full and mutual visibility," where both partners are engaged in the relationship *lishma* - for its own sake, with no external motivations. The quality of the relationship depends on "equality, mutuality, and reciprocity."

Like many who work in the Jewish community, I have always seen myself as working in service of the community. Because of the professional role I play, I am simultaneously *part* of the community and *apart from* the community, and in this way, my relationships with community members are never quite the same as their relationships with each other. After considering the description of relational moments above, the words and phrases, "equality, mutuality, reciprocity, "full and mutual visibility" and "present both as a learner and as an educator" kept replaying in my mind. I began to wonder:

- How can I be both *in service of* and *fully visible* within a learning community?
- When the nature of my professional role creates a power imbalance, how can I foster equality, mutuality and reciprocity, and be fully visible in my communal relationships?

I decided to better understand the impact of my professional role on my relational work with others. The main focus of my current role is supervising and supporting the growth of educators, so I investigated my relationships with those whom I supervise.

I knew intuitively that I had experienced moments of equality, mutuality, and reciprocity with educators on my team. I remembered moments with colleagues where I felt fully visible. But I also experienced moments where I found myself reinforcing the separation between myself and colleagues, naming my role and making hierarchy visible.

I began to examine the conditions allowing or preventing moments of equality, mutuality, and reciprocity. I took notes and reflected on my one-on-one supervisory meetings, full-staff professional development sessions, and team meetings; I began to experiment with some of the ways I engaged with my team; and I asked some of my colleagues for their feedback about my leadership. Here is what I found.

Moments with Equality, Mutuality, and Reciprocity

The encounters where I most easily found equality, mutuality, and reciprocity seemed to fall into two main categories: (1) Co-Creation and (2) Intentional Community-Building.

Co-Creation

In our learning programs, we employ a co-planning model, where grade-level faculty teams work with a curriculum coach to plan their lessons and programs. I serve as one of the curriculum coaches and meet regularly with a team of educators who teach second and third grade. During these meetings, there is no predetermined outcome and everyone has an equal voice. We build on each other's suggestions, offer feedback on each other's ideas, and divvy up the follow-up work equitably. My role is to guide the process, to provide resources when requested, and to participate in the conversation, asking questions and adding my own suggestions and ideas. My opinions carry no more weight than anyone else's, and the final plan always looks much different (and much better!) than what I would have imagined beforehand. These planning sessions feel completely mutual and reciprocal, with all of us participating equally and visibly.

Intentional Community Building

Our full faculty team meets weekly for professional development, announcements, and whole-school planning. As part of each session, we include time for intentional community-building: opportunities to be silly together, share stories, and play. These are important ways to connect, human to human. The goal is relationship-building, with no other motivation. We rotate facilitators, breaking down the hierarchy of professional roles, and we give everyone the opportunity to be leaders and participants.

When we engage in professional learning together, we often bring in outside educators, which allows me to engage as a full participant along with the faculty. My full participation in learning--not as the leader but as a participant—seems to enable others to be fully present, further stripping away the boundaries that come with hierarchy.

Moments Where Equality, Mutuality, and Reciprocity Are More Challenging

The moments where equality, mutuality, and/or reciprocity were more challenging (or entirely absent) also fell into two main categories: (1) Giving Feedback, and (2) Making Controversial Decisions.

Giving Feedback

As a supervisor, I am responsible for fostering the professional growth of each person I supervise. I believe strongly in strengths-based leadership, helping educators further develop their natural gifts, passions, and abilities. I provide both positive feedback (celebrating their successes) and developmental feedback (noting areas that could be stronger and providing support for that growth). My supervisory style is collaborative, curious, and conversational, and I occasionally experience moments of mutuality and reciprocity with those whom I supervise. Sometimes, however, I need to give course-correcting feedback when someone is not meeting the expectations of their role. When I need to put someone on a Performance Improvement Plan, I find myself reinforcing hierarchy and my professional role.

Making Controversial Decisions

When important decisions need to be made in our collaborative team, we usually work toward consensus. Once in a while, there is disagreement among the group that can't be resolved. In those cases, someone needs to make the decision. Due to my professional role, the ultimate decision-making authority usually lies with me. Sometimes I will make the decision directly; other times, I will empower someone else to make the decision. Stepping in as a decision-maker, or even giving decision-making power to someone else, enforces my professional role and the hierarchy within our system.

The Mediating Factor of Character

In exploring the impact of my professional role on my relational work, I was delving into the tension between two of the commonplaces: Self-other (in collegial relationships) and Thirdness (my professional role). The third commonplace — Character (the qualities, traits, leading gifts, abilities, and middot (virtues) of the educator) — can mediate imbalance between the other two.

Although personal, subjective, and distinctive to each person, character is observable by others and guides us in making decisions. It is strengthened by the development of a solid, flexible sense of self. I wanted to be sure that I was authentic, that I displayed a solid sense of self, in moments both with and without equality, mutuality, and reciprocity.

I asked some of my supervisees to share what they thought were my most salient character traits and to reflect on how they saw those elements of my character coming through in the situations described above. They described me as thoughtful, patient, genuine, caring, transparent, and humble. More importantly, they shared that they saw me using the same character traits in all of my encounters, whether they saw me participating in chevruta study during a professional development session, co-creating curriculum during a team meeting, making a difficult decision, or providing challenging feedback. Whether I was stripping away hierarchy or reinforcing it, the consistency of my character was authentic, which made them feel safe.

It turns out that the mutuality in our relationships wasn't as important as my showing up fully and consistently. Bringing an authentic me opens space for my colleagues to bring an authentic them into our relationships as well. When asked to reflect on my relational work as an educational leader, one of my colleagues shared, "I feel like I have a good sense of you and your values and opinions; they are strong and drive your work. I also know about your family and your life outside of here, and you hold that space for the rest of us also - you care about our whole lives. You're known to us, and we get to be known to you."

When we bring our full character into our work, allowing ourselves to know and be known by the other, we deepen the possibilities for relational learning. Professionals in the Jewish community will always experience some imbalance in our communal relationships. This is true for rabbis serving congregations, educators working in schools, Hillel professionals on campus, and more. Investing in our own character development will help us navigate that imbalance, bringing authenticity to all of our encounters and allowing us to be both in service of and fully part of our communities.

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LEARNING TO LEAD WITH THE *YEZTER HARA*

by Alex Weissman

Look at any resource for what makes a good Jewish educator, and you'll likely see some version of such *middot* (soul traits) as *chesed*/loving-kindness, *savlanut*/patience, and *sakranut*/curiosity. What you are less likely to see is the desire for Jewish educators to have a strong *yezter hara*/ evil inclination. After all, who wants to learn from someone with a strong capacity for evil? At a moment when Jewish communal leaders, mostly men, are being called to account for their actions that stem from their *yezter hara*, why might we desire such a trait in our educators?

A little over a year ago, I began my experience with M²'s Relational Engagement Circle with a question about myself and who I am as a rabbi and educator. My first professional role in the Jewish world was as a community organizer. The bulk of my work was to build relationships with people and activate them around their moral and spiritual values to work in community to repair the world. To put it rather simply, I tried to get people to do things. My second role as a Jewish professional was serving as a hospice chaplain. I sat by the bedside of people who were dying in their homes and in care facilities, sometimes with their loved ones and caregivers. In short, I tried to just be with people and do as little as possible.

During my participation in the Relational Engagement Circle, I served as the Senior Jewish Educator at Brown RISD Hillel. In my work, part of my role was very much in the community organizing model. I built relationships with students with the goal of cultivating a thriving, dynamic, and meaningful Jewish community, which meant getting students to act on their values and vision for Jewish life and putting it into practice together. Part of my role was also to sit and listen when students shared about their lives, whether it was the death of a grandparent, an eating disorder, a bad break up, or questions of self-worth in an intense, academic environment. In these moments, I sat and tried to do as little as possible and just be with them. I found myself wondering about my rabbinate, how much do I lead with the part of myself that is a community organizer and how much do I lead with the part of myself that is a chaplain?

This was initially the question that I began exploring in my work in the Relational Engagement Circle. I started noticing when I offered support to students and when I challenged them, what the relationship between these two things were, what impact they had on my students in different contexts, and how I felt as I danced between practices of supporting and challenging. As I spent more time reflecting on which parts of myself I was leading with--my organizer-part and my chaplain-part, I realized, there were other parts of myself that needed more attention and further investigation.

Before I was a chaplain or an organizer, I was a performer. In college, I did children's theater and performed for young kids all over the Boston area. I also took ballet and other kinds of dance. I

was a comic book and Dungeons & Dragons nerd as a child. I loved doing trapeze and cooking and before I was a Jewish professional, I was a queer professional, working in public health where I spent my days talking with research participants about their sex lives and drug use.

My specific quirks and interests were not the important part. What I realized was that I was not only discerning how to best lead with my chaplain and organizer parts, but that there were a whole slew of other parts of myself that I needed to be considering more seriously. Following the advice of one the faculty members for the Circle who teaches at the intersection of psychology and improv, I signed up for an improv comedy class. Here, no one knew I was a rabbi. While my *kippah* clearly indicated "religious Jew," neither my classmates nor I had the expectation that I would act "rabbinic" in any way. To use the language of the Relational Engagement Circle, the Thirdness of me being a rabbi was temporarily removed. As such, it neither requested of me the relational obligation to teach Torah and provide pastoral care nor did it prevent me from acting like a total fool, as it often does. When it came time for my character to get furious, I acted furious. When it came time for my character to be a child who only packed shorts for a trip to Antarctica, I acted like I was freezing. When it came time for my character to be half of an enormous sombrero, I acted like half of an enormous sombrero. The lack of rabbinic Thirdness, and the presence of the Thirdness of the improv class itself, allowed me to draw on aspects of my character that I was not bringing forth on a daily basis.

There are parts of me that are incredibly goofy. There are parts of me that are deeply broken and in pain. There are parts of me that are passionate and parts of me that just want to watch Netflix all day. Mostly, these parts of me do not feel aligned with what I generally imagine as being rabbinic. In truth, there is good reason to keep these parts mostly in the background. When there is a tearful student in my office, bringing forth my goofy part is only occasionally a helpful move for the student.

At the same time, I came to believe that if I brought more parts of my character to my relationships, I would feel more grounded and purposeful in my work and it would enable deeper and more layered relationships. So, I began to experiment and see what would happen if I brought more pieces of my character to my work than I usually did.

In one interaction with two other staff members, we were trying to find a time to meet and having a hard time because my schedule was pretty packed. They teased me about how busy I was and in response, I decided to be playful and play up how busy and important I am. I mimed doing my hair in a way that was over the top, campy, and queer. They joked that my schedule was full of relaxing and silly things like stretching, so I put my leg up on a poll and started stretching. We all started laughing. One of the staff members and I went back to her office. We made jokes about something from earlier in the day and she suggested that I should be crawling more. I crawled my way back to my office. We laughed even more. This experience was both fun and also felt somewhat risky for me as a younger, queer rabbi and Jewish professional.

The internal voice, the part of my character shaped by a culture of homophobia and

femmephobia, the part of my character that says you need to act masculine and serious to be seen as a rabbi, tried to hold me back. It tried to tell me that I would undermine my authority and the respect I had earned from my coworkers. This inner-critic of mine is trying its best to protect me. It recognizes that these are somewhat risky things to do in certain contexts and it wants me to succeed at work and get the respect that I deserve so I can succeed and be happy. The problem was that this self-protective, inner-critic was over-functioning. While I certainly need to be mindful of how I act in a professional context for many reasons, I was holding back parts of myself that limited my own pleasure and self-expression at work as well as my ability to connect with others in a variety of ways.

At one of the final Shabbat dinners of the school year, I was talking to a student who was preparing to graduate. She and I have had a close relationship that has included meditating together, pastoral conversations, and lots of what she likes to call, "Jewish coffee." Somehow, the topic of me having "favorite" students comes up and while I would usually say something politic and neutral like "I like all the students in different ways," I decided to take another approach. Without actually naming names, I playfully indicated I had a variety of favorites and students I did not like and started looking around the room as if to point them out. It was silly. The student in turn responded that she had "never seen me like this," in a way that seemed to indicate that she was a little caught off guard but also enjoying the play. In another interaction with a student in which I decided to be playful, she literally said, "more of this, please."

I entered the rabbinate for many reasons. One of them was that I like building relationships with people. I can only do that if I fully bring myself to that relationship. The *yezter hara*, often translated as the "evil inclination," is the me-centered drive that exists within all of us. While "evil" may be a literal translation of this inclination, our ancient rabbis had a more nuanced view of this part of ourselves. In a *drash* (explanation) on God's declaring the sixth day of creation "very good," (Gen. 1:31), the rabbis taught, "'And, Behold, it was very good,'" refers to the *Yezter hara*. Does that mean that the *Yezter hara* is good?! Rather, if it weren't for the *Yezter hara* no one would build a house, marry, have children and engage in commerce" (Breishit Rabbah 9:7). The *Yezter hara* is very good. The part of us that is about our own pleasure, our own well-being, is very good. We need it to succeed, we need it to know joy.

Unchecked, it can be dangerous and exploitative. If channeled appropriately, I can get in touch with what brings me joy, pleasure, and presence in my relationships. For me, this means not only balancing my organizer and chaplain parts, but also bringing my playful parts, my queerness, my nerdiness--and many other parts of myself that the professional title--the Thirdness--of "rabbi" has sometimes made it hard for me to bring forward. My *yezter hara* reminds me that my work is also about me and what I need from it. It's not that any of these parts of me are "evil"--just that it meets my needs to express them. When I bring these parts of myself into my daily life, I feel more joy and wholeness in work. I feel less disconnected from who I am, less like a tool with a specific function and more like a person with a purpose and with depth. As I know more joy, pleasure, and connection in my work, I am able to encounter students in deeper,

more authentic ways, allowing new parts of myself to be revealed. Without it, educational relationships can be stayed, dry, and impersonal. Too much of it, and the educator can be self-centered and egotistical. Relational learning requires us to be continuously discerning the appropriate use of our *yezter hara* in our work. If we do it right, we can fulfill the promise of God's words that the *yezter hara* is indeed, "very good."

Apropo of his original research question, Alex Weissman serves both as the Rabbi of Congregation Agudas Achim in Attleboro, MA and as the Rabbinic Organizer at T'ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights. Alex received his rabbinic ordination from the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College and lives in Providence, RI with his partner, Adam, from whom he received the title of Rebbetzin.

MAKING COMMUNAL SHABBAT DINNER A RELATIONAL LOCUS

by Danielle Kranjec

Across the centuries, Shabbat has been for the Jewish people the opportunity to restore the individual Jewish soul, knit communities together, and create the opportunity for meaning. One of the most challenging aspects of my work at the Hillel Jewish University Center of Pittsburgh for the past six years has been the Friday night Shabbat experience. Student attendance and participation in Shabbat dinners are key metrics by which donors, parents, and other Hillels gauge the robustness of Jewish life on a particular campus. At my multi-campus Hillel, I have been grappling with whether the Friday night experience could be relational and transformative (as opposed to instrumental and transactional), and whether Shabbat can be a key gathering in the process of relationship building and meaning making. After a year of experimentation and research through my participation in M²'s Relational Engagement Circle, and response to unprecedented tragedy, I've concluded that we must embrace a radical re-envisioning of the process that produces our Shabbat experience in order for Shabbat to fulfill its powerful potential on campus.

Most students at our Hillel do not come to us with a multi-layered, personal understanding of Shabbat. Many of them did not grow up with Friday night dinners or connected to Jewish institutions. Indeed, the fact that our Friday night experience is a weekly mass participation event in an institutional setting has the effect of alienating almost everyone from our current Shabbat offering: multiple service and spirituality options in separate rooms followed by a ritual meal. In the language of M²'s relational commonplaces, the setting's institutional nature becomes an overwhelming "Thirdness," preventing people from feeling comfortable bringing their full character into the space in a way that allows them to connect with others in a self-other encounter.

In interviewing students (and even some Hillel staff), the following comments indicate the types of ideas that participants feel encapsulate their experience:

> *If there are lava cakes [for dessert], I will definitely be there.*
>
> *I can't stand to be in a room with that many people.*
>
> *[I did not come because] I took a nap and did not wake up until 9 pm.*
>
> *I was so nervous I hope I did okay [reciting HaMotzi].*
>
> *I always feel so awkward when the guard can't find my name on the list or when I have to wait so long to sign in.*

I was going to come but I did not like what was on the menu you posted.

It was so cold that night, I really wanted to come and hear her [Mayim Bialik] speak, but it was just too far for me to walk.

Oh sh**, we forgot to do candle lighting.

Shabbat, when confined to a Friday night dinner, ends up becoming an event rather than a gathering. Throughout my year of research, it emerged that any number of elements having to do with the institutional setting or the particular ritual aspects of Shabbat were dominating the experience in a way that was leaving people feeling adrift. In a room with 100-250 people, it is very difficult to bring one's full character or even create a moment of true interaction with another individual. Ideally, the meaning of Shabbat would be the thing to bring people together or provide the opportunity for a moment of connection. However, as illustrated in the comments above, most participants in the ritual meal felt alienated from the central meaning of the gathering, becoming participants in an event whose success was measured by transactional or instrumental outcomes: With regard to blessings: 'We messed up because we did not do the required item'. With regard to attendance: 'I chose not to come because I didn't like the particular conditions (too cold, not my preferred food)'. In other words, the very "Thirdness" that could bring everyone together is repelling our students.

Over the course of the year we were able to manipulate many smaller elements of the experience: improving the food, facilitating the check-in process, and changing design elements of the building to make it feel more home-like. We had some success with engaging particular micro-communities as part of the mass participation Shabbat event. A celebrity visit in the dead of winter yielded a high turnout in terms of attendance, but it did not seem to enhance relationships among students and indeed further alienated some individuals. In the immediate aftermath of the anti-Semitic attack here in Pittsburgh in October 2018, many students sought community and an experience of solidarity at Hillel, but the vast majority of students weren't able to meet their needs in a setting as large as our Shabbat dinner. Added security concerns and fear around being in a Jewish building also pushed some people away.

After a year of small changes and design, I see that only a major re-envisioning of how Shabbat dinner at our Hillel is created will fully realize its relational potential. For a Friday night ritual meal to feel authentic instead of performative, we must have a critical mass of leaders, both student and staff, who have a thick, nuanced, and most importantly shared vision of what Shabbat is and can be. In order for our Shabbat dinner to be the space and time in which to initiate or deepen relationships, those previously disorienting elements of Shabbat need to become meaningful. All of us involved, from staff to students, need additional education, including experiential education, to nurture our ability to lead Shabbat rituals in a way that gives purpose and meaning to attendance. A community with a co-created vision for Shabbat must also be nurtured; relying on the same one or two individuals each week can never meet the needs of a diverse crowd. Otherwise, Friday night dinner will remain "Friday night dinner," rather than the

"Erev Shabbat" of connection, rejuvenation, and reflection that it could be.

Hillel as an organization prides itself on peer leadership. However, on our particular campuses, and indeed with Gen Z students across the country, fewer and fewer students have the capacity to lead--either because of their own lack of Jewish knowledge or because of the decreased maturity of college age students as has been increasingly documented by researchers. Hillel staff are cast as either co-leader or behind-the-scenes coordinator. What would happen if Hillel staff saw ourselves as peer leaders, or indeed as participants ourselves, open to relational experiences and personal transformation?

We staff members must examine our own roles and experiences as contributing factors. This year, I began exploring why students were so reluctant to take leadership risks during Shabbat itself, by increasingly putting myself on the line as a role model. Rather than literally standing outside the door as an event planner, I entered our spaces as a participant ready for spiritual engagement. I faced a challenge even in the language we used to describe my presence. I am often the adult "staffing" the event, and with the safety and well-being of our students constantly on my mind, it is hard to lean into the potential of being a host or co-host for what in its essence is a family meal. It was instructive for me to notice this cognitive and emotional dissonance, and attempt to undo it, even if only for a portion of the evening. I explored ways in which I could truly become a part of the community, become a host or a friend. This shift adjusting my own expectations for my role, and my own desired outcomes for participation, on a deeply personal level. Transformational change must involve everyone in the community, students and staff alike.

Regarding student involvement, learning both practical and theoretical aspects of Shabbat, outside of the Shabbat experience itself, is crucial to a new vision. Everything that makes Shabbat special must be nurtured and enriched outside of Shabbat. As I complete this research project, my next step is that of building a cohort of student leaders who will serve as official co-creators of the Shabbat experience. I have set aside a significant part of my programmatic budget for the year to fund a Shabbat Fellows cohort who will train not only in the why and how of our rich Shabbat tradition, but also in how to be network weavers and hosts within the Shabbat experience itself. If our average attendance on a Friday night is between 100-150, I hope to have a cohort of 10-15 students (10% of attendees) who are tasked with the production and hosting of Shabbat. By cultivating a deliberate, shared set of goals and outcomes with a critical mass of diverse student leaders, we hope to shift Friday night campus Shabbat experience to being a locus of belonging and meaning. Recruiting the right people to take on this commitment has also been a challenge, as I need to express the value of both the cohort experience and Shabbat itself to a group of students who might not otherwise be interested in taking on such a demanding (but rewarding!) leadership role.

An additional challenge to this kind of change is the structure of Hillel work on campus itself. Hillel International cultivated a vision of institutional identity in the 1990s that revolved around buildings on campus that were a part of the Hillel brand. Jewish life in America is turning away

from legacy institutions, and Hillel buildings like ours that were once considered so attractive are now a liability. Students aren't excited to come to a now-dated, separate building for a communal experience. For other legacy Jewish institutions, such as synagogues, and Jewish day schools, communal Shabbat meals are rare events, perhaps once a season. Residential campus life, which includes daily communal meals in dining halls, and students' inability to finance big Shabbat dinners themselves, demand regular communal Shabbat meals at Hillel, even though that mass participation format is not the traditional mode in which Jews usually celebrate Shabbat. If we are to have these large-scale weekly dinners be compelling, attractive, or relevant, we must invest in learning and leadership training, and take massive steps to mitigate the unattractive institutional elements of gathering in the Hillel building.

It is challenging for pluralistic Jewish communities, in which constituents represent a broad range of Jewish identities, backgrounds, and needs, to create meaningful Jewish experiences in such large group settings. If pluralistic communities resort to fracturing into small groups, then we can't rejoice in being a part of something greater than ourselves or our own pocket of campus. We lose out on pluralism when we have no large Shabbat gathering in which to find a place for ourselves, but even more is lost with a large weekly gathering in which no one can find a place for ourselves. We can't assume participation if these dinners are not positive parts of students' lives. If the question is "Who wants to have dinner with 200 people and when?" and Gen Z's answer is "almost never," how can any large gathering create community? Deeply connecting with Shabbat as a concept could unite and connect students, rather than divide and alienate. We must commit budget, staff time, and vision to knowing what Shabbat is and how to activate it.

Danielle Kranjec is the Senior Jewish Educator at the Hillel Jewish University Center of Pittsburgh. Every day she works with students on campuses across the city to weave vibrant communities with deep roots in the Jewish tradition. She makes her home in Squirrel Hill with her family.

RELATIONAL ENGAGEMENT IN THE JCC MOVEMENT: A NEW LEADERSHIP PARADIGM

by Alan Scher

I was never a particularly creative educator. As Teen Program Manager at the Jewish Community Center of San Francisco (JCCSF) in 2008, my abiding memory is failure. Every idea I came up with—after school arts enrichment, a program where teens "took-over" the JCC Friday evenings, or a weekly social justice club—bombed. I heard stories about peers in the field who facilitated with ease everything from empowering retreats to memorable evenings of exciting engagement, but it wasn't until I created the JCC Fellowship in Sports Leadership (JFiSL) that I understood anything about programming.

I was hired by the JCCSF right before our hosting the 2009 JCC Maccabi Games. The institution and its leadership aspired not only to create an experience unrivaled in the history of the annual Jewish teen Olympic style event, but also that it would serve as a gateway to reinventing their JCC teen program—one of the largest in the country. I was responsible for what we called "Day 8," the future of teen programming following the Games—ideally, engaging the majority of 300+ athletes in our JCC Maccabi local delegation.

At first, I stumbled. As a teen, I had never participated in the Games and didn't even identify as an athlete. So, when thinking about the work ahead of me at the JCCSF, one might imagine I began by immersing myself with the teens and their experience as athletes. To the contrary, I remember talking to a lot of adults. It was an unfruitful beginning.

Things changed when I met Eytan. He was introduced to me by his mother, one of the adults I thought might provide a revelation, given she had a good handle on the local landscape of Jewish programming through her role at a local synagogue. Eytan and I immediately hit it off. He reminded me a lot of myself in high school: bursting with ideas and enthusiasm, as passionate about movies, films, and artistic culture as he was about playing basketball. One afternoon, we found ourselves talking until dark at a coffee shop about what we might build together at the JCCSF. One of his ideas was a coaches-in-training program that would provide an opportunity for local JCC Maccabi athletes to become assistant coaches in our youth sports program and leaders of our delegation at future Games. It could excite teens like him while satisfying a need for students to complete community service hours.

Our "Day 8" vision included Jewish education and social action. I added to Eytan's idea that it could also teach the Jewish *middot* (personal qualities) that so effectively align with popular coaching philosophies. In addition, those teen assistant coaches could learn to lead both teams of young athletes and also their peers in giving back to their community. Our brainstormed idea set the template for the next several months of my efforts, as we concretized not only the JCC Fellowship in Sports Leadership program but

several others. Along the way, I built a brain trust of many different teenagers for creation and collaboration. Three years later, we had transformed our teen program and were nationally recognized by the JCC Association as a model for JCCs around the country. Going to the users themselves to create the program was the key.

Brandeis University recently published a study on "thriving" Jewish Community Centers called "Innovating JCCs." In it, authors Amy Sales, Nicole Samuel, Rachel Minkin, and Fern Chertok outline an urgent need: "JCCs are fundamentally 20th century agencies. The world around them has changed, and there is general recognition that they, too, need to upgrade to the 21st century." "Innovating JCCs are thinking about their role not only vis-à-vis their members or the Jewish community but also in their local community more broadly. In doing so, they are opening up their space and programs to a larger and more diverse population and bringing new opportunities to their members and participants."

This call to action has inspired my work at the 14th Street Y, and I believe we have fulfilled the report's definition of innovation regarding new opportunities for membership. This year, with my colleagues in M^2's Relational Engagement Circle, I have helped to concretize a language and a rubric to shape relational efforts like mine with Eytan, to be more intentional, proactive, and successful.

In this regard, the "encounter" between Eytan and me was a worthwhile example of relational learning, or the contextualized, co-construction of meaning, guided by the intentional expression of *middot*. In other words, I as an educator created a space in which we might both present ourselves, our ideas, and our full character – and together we collaboratively explored the possibilities for our learning, as opposed to my predetermining them.

Using this framework in my role as Associate Executive Director for Program at the 14th Street Y, a JCC in New York City, I have seen powerful potential impacts on our approach to our businesses and organizational culture. I think this relational approach will undergird our innovation to meet what the Brandeis study outlines as the challenges of the 21st century JCC.

Fully exploring this new-found pedagogy, is also explained through a recent story. This time with Andrea. The 14Y's Preschool Director connected me with Andrea, a former parent associated with our Preschool who had been a champion on our Parent Association. We met one morning over coffee in our Center's lobby. She was contemplating ending her membership at 14Y, because she believed that for her family, and in particular her children aged 7 and 8, there was literally "nothing for them" any longer. The vast majority of programs no longer suited her family, and much of what she missed about involvement in the preschool—a diverse, inclusive Jewish educational experience for her interfaith family, an opportunity to celebrate Jewish holidays and other milestones in a small, close-knit community--weren't offered at 14Y for older children. She also didn't see those types of experiences available at other Jewish institutions in Downtown Manhattan, and neither did her friends. Like with Eytan, we ended up talking for some time that morning, and we began conceptualizing a project that would align her needs

with grant funding that we had recently received to incubate small group Jewish educational experiences for families.

Roughly a month later, I found myself, some of my colleagues, and fifteen other families in Andrea's living room dialoguing for over three hours about our hopes, dreams, and tremendous doubts about Jewish education. It was thrilling and terribly honest, during which 14Y staff unpacked the challenges many in the room had with Jewish education growing up and shared the difficulty of navigating a diversity of faith traditions in their own households. We began to collaboratively imagine what a Jewish experience might look like for their children, a cohort of 5, 6, and 7-year old's. We were struck by the commonality in the room: the hope to take a Jewish tradition many of us had grown up with and, wrestling with it, use it to help us raise ethical children. It was the beginning of a thought community, or a gathering of individuals committed not only to common cause, and common exploration, but connected by shared experience, values and vision. Over the course of the next six months, we began to gather regularly to celebrate Jewish holidays, have Shabbat dinner, and explore what an alternative religious school experience might look like shaped as a cohort.

Through my participation in the program and both my experience with Eytan and Andrea, I've developed a theory of why these programs were successful:

- We approached this learning possibility relationally. In other words, rather than come in with a predetermined end goal, or product, we co-created something that not only reflected our mutual hopes and aspirations, but consciously did this work through the intentional expression of our Jewish values, or middot.

- In both scenarios, I was able to fully share my character—the expression of my best authentic self.

- The encounters positioned Andrea and me, Eytan and me, the cohort at our gathering, as peers. We embraced reciprocity, listening, and looked to break down the Thirdness of traditional JCC programming: We as staff providing the programming, and customers purchasing it.

- We were unafraid to boldly express thick, authentically Jewish values. In each context, we sought to embrace our tradition, its sources and cultural influence, and engage it in a modern context.

Using this pedagogy at 14Y, we have begun to foster several thought communities over the last few months beyond just Andrea's. Whether associated with our Early Childhood programs, our youth programs, or beyond, this approach has routinely resulted in deeper connections between individuals and our institution. Each cohort, as we refer to them, have not only helped foster impactful programming for their group, but also helped to enhance our existing programming with creative feedback, and participation. For example, we've built a cohort of Israeli families in our neighborhood. They've begun celebrating Jewish holidays on our rooftop

"in Israeli style," bringing together over 100 attendees who rarely, if ever, participated in 14Y programming before. They've not only begun patronizing our early childhood programs but also taking ownership and leadership in our existing programs, such as our preschool parent association. Finally, Andrea, the influencer who helped incubate our journey so many months ago has agreed to join our Board. Instead of nothing existing anymore for her family at our institution, she is now a leader and an advocate. One might call the result creative, or even innovative. Definitively, it is two things – relational, and a success.

Alan Scher is the Associate Executive Director for Program at the 14th Street Y. Previously, he worked at other JCC's, including the YM&YWHA of Washington Heights & Inwood, the JCC of San Francisco, and JCC Chicago. He believes that the world is becoming increasingly isolated and polarized, and that JCC's, and those who work there, can change the world for the better. Hit him up next time you're in Downtown Manhattan @alanbscher, and help him practice over a cup of coffee.

RE-CALIBRATING PASTORAL INTIMACY

by Rabbi Noah Cheses

Part of my motivation for becoming a rabbi was to accompany people through their most momentous times, whether it be a time of celebration or sorrow. I believe that these moments, when shaped and guided by the beauty of Torah wisdom, are crucibles of positive Jewish identity. Ten years into my rabbinate, I am finding myself weighed down by the negative emotions and experiences that my congregants have shared with me in pastoral settings. Members of the community, for instance, often seek my spiritual counsel during times of marital discord, upon receiving a diagnosis of terminal illness or in the midst of a financial crisis. Unburdening these dark experiences can be helpful for many people but the cumulative effect upon me has been numbing at times. I feel weighed down by the shortcomings in human nature and momentarily depressed upon absorbing the pain that people share with me.

I want to stay open and fresh in my perspective on people and human nature so that I can continue to serve the Jewish people with the talents and skills that I have been blessed with. My exposure to relational learning theory through the M² relational circle provided me with the conceptual framework, the inspiration and the practical skills to be able to bring more of my character into my pastoral relationships so that they are more fulfilling than depleting.

I believe that people approach me to talk, to share and to consult for several reasons, including: 1) knowledge of Torah and Jewish law, 2) accumulated life wisdom, 3) perceived piety and closeness to G-d, and 4) free human connection. There are certainly other motivations that bring people to come into my office to check in but these are the main ones that I have surmised, based on explicit comments and implied ones. As a result of my participation in the M² cohort, I am now aware of the authority and hierarchy that exists in many of these pastoral moments.

The nature of this authority can at times, be absolute, for instance when Jewish law says something is clearly forbidden and an individual wants an allowance. In circumstances that do not allow for behavioral flexibility, I lean more on the Self-Other dynamic to try and soften the harshness of the authority and hierarchy. This means spending significant time and energy listening, trusting, creating, giving, playing, connecting, weaving, story-telling and wisdom sharing. Doing these activities together solidifies the relationship, and allows me to align the authority that I carry in my role as rabbi with the individual in front of me. If, for instance, there is a red line, a difficult "no," or the need to uphold a policy that emerges out of my knowledge of Jewish law and tradition (Thirdness) and my commitment to certain beliefs and principles (Character), then the Self-Other can make that result digestible. Even if the individual resists conforming to a given behavior, the relationship is strong enough to hold that tension.

What I bring of myself into the Self-Other, namely the kindness, empathy, listening heart and

hope are also part of my character that temper the alignment of other parts of my character with the demands of the Jewish tradition. Using these *middot* thoughtfully helps to achieve reconciliation or navigate the tension soon after any rupture occurs.

In addition to these aspects of my character, I have learned that if I expand the range of my character even further in these self-other moments, then I will be able to continue to be present for other people for longer periods of time with greater intimacy because I will not be suppressing parts of myself that take energy to suppress and that when used appropriately can be tools for connecting with people with more immediacy. Bringing some of my shadows into the relationship would mean, at times, being competitive, judgmental, skeptical, materialistic, jealous, frustrated and disappointed. Allowing these parts of my character to surface at very specific times, raises the differentiation, the capacity for me to be fully myself and fully with the other. The greater the differentiation, the greater the potential for soul to soul connection, which is what I believe to be my ultimate purpose and vocation as a human and as a servant of our creator.

An example of what this could look like includes a scenario in which a couple sits down in my office to share that they have decided to get a divorce and that they want my help securing a Jewish bill of divorce. I could emerge from behind my desk and sit closer to them to share with them that this makes me sad, frustrated and disappointed. Shifting my physical position and being more emotionally expressive and self-revelatory are relational skills that can create more direct, unmediated relationships between myself and members of the community. Moving from behind my desk to in front of my desk dissolves some of the hierarchy in the relationship and naming my emotional state during the pastoral encounter enables me to let go of some of the pain in the moment instead of holding onto it alone, while at the same time affirming some of their emotions. I believe that these sorts of experimental interventions will engender pastoral relationships that are more two-directional which is helpful for my self-preservation as a rabbi and more relatable, constructive and solid for the individual I am connecting to.

I am grateful to the burgeoning field of relational learning for equipping me with the ideas and empowering me with the skills to become better at what I am called to do.

Rabbi Noah Cheses serves as the Rabbi of the Young Israel of Sharon. He advances the values of Modern Orthodoxy, Religious Zionism and Mussar by inspiring people through powerful and relevant Torah. He loves laughing with his four kids, Adina, Natan, Orly, and Ezra. Our Approach

STAY IN THE HEAT – ON FINDING AND LEVERAGING RELATIONAL FRICTION

by Andy Kastner

I used to think of myself as a strong communicator. I was comfortable speaking to large groups and having intimate one on ones. I felt that as a student of culture, I could navigate difference with grace, cultivating diverse relationships.

Yet, over time I began to notice that I was not quite as relationally adept as I thought I was. From time to time, and truthfully, more often than felt right, I found that I would walk away from a relational encounter feeling as though I missed something. At times the encounter would result in some type of rupture or conflict. I would feel as though I should have said something in order to prevent the escalation. In other instances, I would walk away feeling as though I missed an opportunity to push a little harder, thereby creating the potential to deepen a relationship.

I began to feel as though I was missing a critical cue in a relational encounter, or worse, subconsciously (or even worse, consciously) choosing not to pay attention to the cue. Being able to catch the cue, and lean towards it as a relational lever represented a key for me to unlock a deeper mode of relational engagement.

The cue that I had to identify, as I will share below, is what I call relational friction.

A Story

A few years ago, I received an urgent call from the board chair of the non-profit where I was working at the time, requesting that we meet prior to Shabbat. He shared that the CEO had resigned while I was away, and that he would like me to step into the executive role. The organization was at a critical moment, having just completed a re-visioning process recommending a consolidation of operations with a neighboring (and significantly larger) affiliate organization. After announcing publicly the desire to merge, the larger organization responded with the sentiment that indicated that there was not alignment on this idea. This left us exposed as an organization, having expressed our intentions and vulnerability.

"Your job," the board chair asserted, "will be to keep things as stable as possible and work to broker a consolidation within the next 11 months, before the end of our fiscal year."

As the intensity of what I heard sank in, I could see that there was more to be said. Looking eye to eye, the board chair expressed, "The staff, and many board members have identified that you

are the right person to lead the organization through this next chapter."

And then the "but"…

He continued, "But I know that you have never held an executive position before and that you don't quite have the requisite experience…" he trailed off. "But, many others think you can be successful…"

This was a big "but." While the flattery of being asked to lead quickly faded, something was bubbling up within me and between myself and the board chair. I took it in, felt the discomfort, some ego wounding, and didn't know what to say. I settled for, "Thank you for this opportunity to lead. Let's circle back after the weekend to discuss further."

On my way home, I began to see the contours of that discomfort that bubbled up in me. The board chair clearly had his reservations about my ability to lead. Having just returned from the first M2 Relational Engagement seminar, I had the language of "thirdness" to help me categorize and analyze that sense of the "elephant in the room" that wasn't being named, but was making its presence known.

There were two levels of thirdness at play here that I could feel from the outset. There were 35 years that separated me from the board chair. He was a retired, successful Fortune 500 executive with deep life, professional, and board experience. I was coming to the table with more than 10 years of senior management experience and an advanced degree. Good and solid experience for sure, but still early/mid-career. I had not, prior to this moment, been in a position to lead an organization, let alone an organization during a tense period of instability. At the time, I was not yet 40, perhaps a youthful under 40. I can imagine that from the board chair's vantage point, I didn't "look" or "feel" like I could take on the role. Further, I imagined that perhaps I didn't present the stature or image of an executive.

But there was more there. He had his doubts about my ability. I would have to prove myself capable to serve with effectiveness and equanimity in order to be taken seriously as a young leader. I played back the conversation focusing back in on the "but".

"The staff, and many board members have identified that you are the right person to lead the organization through this next chapter."

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In the replay, I could hear that while I had the vote of confidence of many stakeholders, I didn't seem to have the vote from the board chair himself. I was really going to have to step up!

Peering deeper, I began to reflect on the moment of the feeling of something "bubbling up". Replaying the scene, trying to feel it in my body, I could sense the uneasiness, a surging of adrenaline, signaling to me that something significant is happening, well before I could understand what it is. I felt a warming, a little bit of heat – a cue of relational friction.

Defining Friction

In the simplest terms, friction means drag - the slight feel of stickiness, warming, or abrasion that impedes action. In a relationship, these are feelings of tension or discord. An important distinction must be made here: friction is not conflict. Rather, in the arc of a relational encounter, friction, is that first appearance of a tension or heat – a point before a conflict has fully metastasized. Friction is easily missed. When missed or not appropriately managed, it can lead to conflict.

Think of relational friction as that warming before a spark, that potential for something to more dramatically shift in a relationship. If the drag is missed, or worse, fueled, it can grow in damaging ways, potentially creating relational rupture. In those cases, we must identify the friction and work to "turn down the heat." Sometimes we can simply name it. Consider pointing out, "It appears as though we are having a moment of friction." Naming it serves as a pause in the encounter, an exhale before proceeding.

There is another side to friction, what I'll call generative friction. It can be a creative force that, if coaxed, can bring forth new insight. Between two people, creative friction can be generative, enhancing creativity or fostering a deepening of a relationship.

Think of a *chevruta*—two study partners working to decipher a complex piece of text or a design team at IDEO. Here, friction is something to lean into. The Talmud in tractate *Taanit* 7a describes the dynamic of this relationship. In trying to draw out meaning of a verse of Proverbs, the Talmud concludes, "Iron sharpens iron, so a person sharpens the countenance of their friend" (Proverbs 27:17). This verse comes to tell you that just as with these iron implements, one sharpens the other when they are rubbed against each other, so too, when Torah scholars study together, they sharpen one another in *halakha*." This type of friction, when coaxed, can bring forth a *hiddush*—a fresh insight or development in the relationship. In moments of generative friction, we do well to turn up the heat, or we miss the opportunity to leverage the range and depth of the relational encounter.

Identifying Relational Friction

Friction can be easily missed. At its heart, identifying relational friction is a practice of awareness. One must be both present in the encounter, and at the same time assessing the relationship of self-other to nimbly adjust one's behavior as needed. It is as if "being on the dance floor" and "being on the balcony" at the same time. This way, we may notice moments of friction as they occur, identify what type of friction it is, and decide how to effectively manage it.

In my own practice, I have sought to create an awareness that enables me to slow an encounter, seeing it in sequence, with perspective. I began to imagine relational encounters as a film strip, playing out frame by frame. Friction emerges as a blip, the tiniest bit of heat. As I deepened my awareness, I found the visualization of an ice skater, performing a triple Lutz, a helpful aid in developing my practice.

Allow me to explain.

When I first saw an Olympic ice skater perform a triple Lutz (the second most difficult jump), it was a blur. The skater approached from their back, gracefully released from the ice, spun, rotating through the air, before landing smoothly in reverse. The maneuver appeared so natural - from the viewer's eye, seemingly beginning with a lift off and ending in a landing. Surely, from the skater's perspective, there were moments between lift off and landing that were acutely orchestrated - the tuck of the elbow, or micro-adjustments made critical to the execution of the jump.

Since seeing my first triple Lutz on television, I have seen sequential imaging of this maneuver, enabling a viewer to take in the complexity in its totality, linked visually move by move. Viewing the triple Lutz in this way makes clear the individual motions that make up the complete maneuver. In many ways, I have experienced relational encounters in much the same way as the triple Lutz, having a distinct beginning and end, but the critical steps in between blurring with fluidity. Focusing on a relational encounter with the same frame by frame approach enables us to better identify moments of friction.

Back to the Story

A couple of weeks after beginning my new appointment, the executive committee met for the first time in a few months.

While reviewing the financial report, it emerged that our financial position was different, and weaker than many committee members recalled. The group pressed. "How did we go from strong to weak within a couple of months?" The group wondered, "Was the group misremembering the details of the last report?" "Had a mistake been made?" "What was the source of surprise in the report?"

Anxiety grew. Uncertainty around the financial report brought into question the organization's resiliency for the months ahead. As the group looked at each other, things felt a bit more desperate.

This presented me with an opportunity to create some generative friction. The following day I called the board chair to reflect on the meeting and the anxiety that was felt.

I opened, "We both agree that the financial uncertainty adds more stress to an already complex situation. We are headed a bit into the unknown. None of us, staff or board, have navigated a consolidation of this type before. I really need your partnership here, to be scrupulous, communicative, and collaborative. We need to be vigilant about our budgeting moving forward to be successful. Do I have your buy in to work together in this type of partnership?"

Catching my breath, I could feel my heart pounding as I waited for a response. I had just "managed up" to the board chair, very early in our relationship, intentionally creating friction.

In his response, I could hear an immediate shift. My courage to create some friction seemed to have enabled the board chair to begin to see me more as the type of leader that he was envisioning. More importantly, by leveraging friction as a generative tool, we were able to bring our relationship closer, increasing trust and communication.

"I'm fully with you," the board chair replied. "We're in this together. Uncharted and rough waters lie ahead. Thank you for initiating this conversation."

Conclusion

Friction is a present and potent element of relationships. When ignored it can lead to relational atrophy, conflict or missed opportunities to enhance the quality and character of a relationship. When we are attuned to friction, and engage with it as a relational tool, we unlock its potential to expanding the range and depth of a relationships.

What I have learned is that in developing a practice to identify friction, (allowing relational exchanges to be seen frame by frame as opposed to a blur), and a comfort to engage with friction, (i.e. turning down the heat or turning it up), I have become more confident in my character and a more effective communicator and relationship builder.

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Our Approach

At M² we believe that captivating experiences infused with Jewish values serve as evolving foundations for Jewish growth, and that the creation of such experiences requires intentional and knowledgeable educators.

M²: The Institute for Experiential Jewish Education is a training and research institute dedicated to advancing the field of experiential Jewish education by infusing it with rigor and purpose and by investing in the growth of its educators.

By drawing from Jewish wisdom and academic research, modeling innovative methods and practical applications, and cultivating collaborative learning experiences, M² provides educators and organizations with knowledge, tools, skills and traits to advance the theory and practice of experiential Jewish education, ultimately strengthening its reach and impact.

Utilizing world renown experiential educators and cross discipline experts from fields such as scriptwriting, psychotherapy and design, M² offers a broad range of training and consulting services in North America and Israel.

Our Name

M² is *Machshava* and *Ma'aseh* – Intention and Action – two values whose interplay is at the core of Jewish life. At M² we believe that these values are the foundations of experiential Jewish education.

M² is also *Melechet Machshevet* – Deliberate Craft – an idea that guided the building of the *Mishkan* – the Tabernacle – Judaism's greatest act and expression of experiential Jewish education.

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