

An Invitation

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

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

The personal attention of a mentor to a willing student has perpetuated Torah and Jewish identity in every age. That power of the individualized transmission makes good psychological sense: we are drawn to communities in which we feel welcomed and valued, particularly if those communities offer profundity, beauty, and goodness. This connection between mentor and protégé is the glue that binds communities, but it does far more than that. Individual connection makes theological sense, too. The Torah portion “Ḥaye Sarah” begins

with the statement that “Sarah’s lifetime—the span of Sarah’s life—came to 127 years. Sarah died in Kiryat Arba.”¹ A few verses earlier in the Torah, we are offered the seemingly unconnected information that “Milkah too had borne children to your brother Naḥor . . . (including Bethuel), Bethuel being the father of Rebecca.”² Even though Rebecca and Sarah don’t meet personally, the looming figure of Sarah remains a powerful and nurturing presence through her legacy and example. Sarah’s legacy mentors Rebecca, and the story of the two matriarchs in turn mentors us, their sons and daughters, across the ages.

Why does the Torah tell us about the birth of Rebecca (Sarah’s future daughter-in-law) prior to informing us of the death of Sarah? The sages of the Midrash explain this juxtaposition by referring to a curious line from the biblical book of Kohelet: “The sun also rises and the sun sets.”³

Rabbi Abba said, “Don’t we know that the sun rises and the sun sets? But the meaning is that prior to causing the ‘sun’ of one righteous person to set, the Holy One causes the ‘sun’ of another *tzedek* to rise. . . . Before the Holy Blessing One⁴ allowed Sarah’s sun to set, God caused that of Rebecca to rise.”⁵

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

So it is in every generation. We are Jewish today because of the loving coaches we encountered along the way: grandparents, rabbis, parents, siblings, friends, neighbors, teachers, and acquaintances. Their willingness to reach out to us, to include us in their holy-day celebrations, to walk us through the labyrinth of communal leadership, to work with us on a worthy project, or to teach us the fundamentals of Torah and its values—those efforts are the reasons

we know from the inside how wonderful it is to be a Jew. The people who made those efforts are our mentors.

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

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

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

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