

## Rabbis Need Rabbis

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For the invitation to the party following my parents gave to celebrate my rabbinical ordination in 1991, I selected a quotation from *Pirkei Avot*, Sayings of Our Sages, on the cover: *Aseh l'cha rav u'kneh l'cha chaver*, “Find yourself a rabbi and acquire yourself a friend.”<sup>i</sup>

At the time, I did not distinguish between my roles as “rabbi” and “friend.” Although I would soon be serving a congregation made up entirely of people I had never previously met, I imagined that I would make friends there in the same way I had at camp, in college, and in rabbinical school—that is, that members of the congregation would be my friends.

The meaning of “friend” in the *Pirkei Avot* passage is disputed. Most commentators understand it as merely an extension of “rabbi,” so the word “friend” is translated, “a friend to study with you,”<sup>ii</sup> even though the phrase “to study with you” cannot be found in the Hebrew. One commentator, though, suggests that a friend is unlike a rabbi, and that *Pirkei Avot* is advising us to have both a “rabbi” and a “friend,” to meet different needs. A friend, writes Maimonides, is “a confidant for their actions and for all of their affairs to be bettered...and they must make an effort to be lovingly attached to one another.”<sup>iii</sup>

I do cherish friendships in each of the congregations I have served. Still, the boundaries necessary to establish and nurture an appropriate relationship between rabbi and congregants prevent me from forming friendships with congregants that are intimate in the ways that I can relate to my poker buddies—friends from camp since the 1980s. Conversely, though I have officiated at many of those friends’ life cycle ceremonies, particularly their weddings, I cannot **really** be their rabbi. Our personal relationship comes first.

We all advise our friends from time to time, of course. Still, in my poker group, we are much more likely to turn to the veterinarian, the anesthesiologist, or the employment lawyer for professional advice than that group is to turn to me rabbinical counsel. For me to provide that would require a level of authority inappropriate for a friend in discussing their inner lives.

Moreover, even after more than thirty years in the congregational rabbinate, I have much to learn about how to comport myself as a rabbi. Lay leaders, particularly of Congregation B’nai Israel, have provided wise direction, and I trust them, in large measure because I know that their advice comes from an eagerness for me to succeed and from loving support of me as the congregation’s rabbi.

Being close personal friends, though, would entangle the friendship in what is necessarily and appropriately a professional relationship, however friendly.

As a young rabbi-in-formation, I treasured rabbinic mentors, especially three who could not have been more different from one another. From my childhood rabbi, I observed that the meticulously crafted sermon, excellent teaching, and pastoral presence complement one another. One can learn best from a rabbi who cares about you as a person. One can best be comforted by a rabbi who is drawing from the depths of our tradition. In my Hillel rabbi, I saw something I could not replicate but toward which I could aspire—a quiet, humble presence in a rabbi who worked diligently, passionately, and successfully to build inclusive Jewish life in a diverse college community. The third, the rabbi for whom I interned, taught me that loving one’s congregants is critical to being effective as their rabbi. He also instructed me, “When trapped, be gracious,” a lesson I know is right but still struggle to emulate.

My rabbinic teachers continue to shape me as a rabbi, decades later.

More recently, I have learned the most from two different but equally important groups: close friends in the rabbinate, on the one hand; and younger rabbis I have been privileged to get to know, on the other.

My close friends in the rabbinate fulfill the traditional understanding of “find yourself a rabbi and acquire yourself a friend,” for are uniquely both. They include the Chief Executive of a critical international Jewish organization, the senior rabbi of a large congregation, and a rabbi who works as a synagogue executive director. Admittedly, we do not get together to study classical Jewish text. We learn from each other in our varied rabbinic experiences and personality types. With one, I marvel at strategic vision and its implementation. Another demonstrates discernment about picking battles, which is a challenge for me. A third has modeled productive and successful reinvention of oneself as a rabbi over the course of one’s career. All three can and do tell me hard truths about myself, and I respond in kind. We are close enough that we can laugh about one another’s foibles lovingly. That is also true of my rabbinical school classmates, a group that has only become closer and more highly valued over the decades since ordination.

Tomorrow, I am to head to San Diego, for the annual convention of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, CCAR. I say “annual,” but our 2020 and 2021 conventions were casualties of the pandemic, so I have not been at a large rabbinic gathering in three years. As I age, coming to know younger colleagues has been essential to my rabbinic growth. You have met some of them, particularly women, who have visited us in person or via Zoom. This week, I hope to meet in

person some colleagues with whom I have developed meaningful relationships from a distance—for example, contributors to *The Social Justice Torah Commentary* and a younger rabbi to whom I was assigned as his official CCAR mentor, a relationship that has now outlasted the official mentorship for three additional years of monthly meeting. I have learned so much from the rabbis, all more recently ordained than me, with whom I was in a support group for solo rabbis during the pandemic—I hope that some will be in San Diego, too. Newer colleagues come with fresh ideas and knowledge. I did not emerge from rabbinical school, for example, knowing about gender transition or diverse family structures, certainly not as varied as those we are blessed to embrace in our congregation today.

Many of you can share the blessings of gathering with professional colleagues and friends. For me, the need is particularly critical: The closest Reform congregation served full time by CCAR colleagues is two and a half hours' drive away, and I have not been to Memphis during the pandemic. Several months ago, I said, “I need nothing more than to get on an airplane to be with other rabbis.”

In the Talmud, Rabbi Chanina declares, “I have learned much from my teachers, more from my colleagues, and most from my students.”<sup>iv</sup> I learn a lot from the teens and adults I am privileged to teach here at Congregation B'nai Israel. Still, that “colleagues” part is important. *Pirkei Avot* wisely suggests that we all need rabbis who are also our friends—that is, friends with whom we do not need to maintain the boundaries appropriate to rabbi and congregants. I look forward to learning much from my colleagues in the coming week—and then, to returning to my students, with more to teach.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup>*Pirkei Avot* 1:6.

<sup>ii</sup> See, for example Bartenura to *Pirkei Avot* 1:6.

<sup>iii</sup> *Ikar Tosafot Yom Tov* on *Pirkei Avot* 1:6. Translation in part Sefaria's and in part mine. *Ikar Tosafot Yom Tov* distinguishes rabbi from friend, citing Rambam's definition of “friend.”

<sup>iv</sup> B.T. *Taanit* 7a.