

Inspiration. Cultivation. Reverberation.
Training Community Leaders to Change the Game
By Rabbi Sharon Brous

A few years ago I visited the Sheba Medical Center outside of Tel Aviv, which houses one of the world's leading medical simulation research centers. Medical professionals from around the world come to the center to learn from the greatest doctors, surgeons and medical ethicists how to fail. In a controlled environment, technicians and teachers create scenarios in which challenging elements intensify until new doctors inevitably slip-up. The objective: to add enough stressors that young doctors forget to bring along a back-up oxygen tank while rushing patients in distress through the hospital corridor. Or neglect to properly dislodge the IV. Why? If it happens only once in a simulation exercise and the subject flatlines, you can be certain that doctor will never again forget an oxygen tank. With careful mentorship, every mistake brings the opportunity for growth and learning.

This model has been on my mind as I contemplate what might help ensure a Jewish future that is bold, dynamic, enlivened and compelling. First, a few observations:

- *Diminishing affiliation is an unquestionable trend in the American Jewish community.* Fewer young Jews associate with or pay dues to be a part of conventional Jewish establishments. A cursory analysis of the regulars in non-Orthodox synagogue communities around the country substantiates the statistical evidence. The organized Jewish world is graying. Young people (Gen Y, Millennials) speak about feeling a deep sense of alienation and disconnect from organized religion and institutional Jewish life¹, which are perceived to be driven by an ideology and agenda half a century past their prime and an approach that, despite rhetoric of a willingness to change, is stuck in a steadfast commitment to doing things as they have always been done. (Try moving Shabbat services an hour earlier if you want to see the full capacity for outrage among the children of Israel, particularly those who sit on synagogue ritual committees.)
- Despite diminishing interest and affiliation, there has been, over the past decade, a simultaneous burst of innovation manifesting itself in creative communities, organizations and programs that reflect what many consider a renaissance in Jewish life. These initiatives are often driven by young people, and characterized by a language that not only entices but inspires and empowers them. Those same folks who bristle at the idea of conventional Jewish engagement are eagerly signing up and lining up to engage in Jewish creative, artistic, political, intellectual and even spiritual endeavors. In our experience over the past eight years in building IKAR - a community of predominantly young, unaffiliated Jews - we have found that imaginative approaches to community, ritual and learning are surprisingly effective in engaging the disengaged.

My strong sense is that the key to reaching even the most cynical and disconnected American Jews is strong, visionary leadership. It is rabbis, educators and community leaders who, while honoring the tradition, are willing to challenge or sidestep the status quo in order to make space for something new. It is a leadership driven by moral courage and a commitment to manifesting core Jewish values – including social responsibility, compassion, equality, dignity - in our communities and in our world.

We know that great leadership is hard to come by. And we know that there is a definitionally conservative impulse that permeates most Jewish institutions – so that even the most earnest young rabbis struggle to resist the tug of the status quo once they leave Seminary and enter communities of practice. That's why we only infrequently witness real shifts in the landscape of the American Jewish community. And yet there have been a few rabbinic leaders who, over the course of the past several decades, have changed the game. One whose vision and inexhaustible spirit lead him to build a world class Cultural Center that becomes a defining Jewish landmark in Los Angeles. Those who reanimate the most burdened and banal of Jewish institutions - the synagogue - making their Upper West Side sanctuary a veritable tourist site for those

looking to believe again in the relevance of prayer and spirit. One who fearlessly reshapes the course of American Orthodoxy. These are the rabbinic game changers of the last 30 years, people whose voices and vision have changed the American Jewish conversation.

How do we create an environment that fosters and encourages that kind of creativity and boldness in a new generation of leaders? Here I would call us to take a page out of the medical simulation lab book: I would argue that the best way to support bold, imaginative leadership in the Jewish community today is apprenticeship/ fellowship/ intensive mentorship. One of my colleagues, a rabbi and psychiatrist, likes to point out that the rabbinate is the only service profession in which there is not a built in safe space for mentorship, reflection and sharing of best practices.

A good deal of research has been done over the past decade looking at the transition from seminary to pulpit in Christian ministers. The prevailing theory is that even the best seminary training ought to be supplemented by focused mentorship programs that prepare freshly minted practitioners to cross the threshold and become communal leaders, in a position to touch hearts and minds and shape the future of the religious community.ⁱⁱ

This is of course the case no less so for rabbis than for ministers. During my orientation to Rabbinical School, a tired retired rabbi came to address our class: “You’re no smarter than we were,” he said. “You’re no more ambitious, and frankly no better looking than we were. We failed. What are you going to do differently?” After eleven years in a rabbinate that was shaped indelibly by a powerful mentorship experience, I am certain that **great mentorship not only paves the way for a smarter, healthier rabbinate, but is the best way to ensure the continued relevance of Judaism to a rapidly changing population that feels increasingly alienated from conventional, institutional forms of Jewish expression and communal engagement.** Formal rabbinic education is central to the growth and development of a new rabbi. But there is a limit to the ability of a Seminary to cultivate the dreams of young rabbinical students. Many rabbis note that their most important growth occurred outside the classroom in individual mentorship relationships, in which their visions for the Jewish future were supported and fueled.

Excellent mentorship of dynamic and promising young rabbis, in a space where it is safe to experiment and fail, to reflect and reimagine, to dream and to grow, is itself a game-changer in the American Jewish communal experience. And it ought to be funded, supported and studied.

As IKAR has grown, nearly every foundation executive we have spoken with has asked us about replication. “How can you bring this revitalized Jewish communal experience to scale?” “Can we franchise IKAR?” we are asked. But our sense is that while certain models become impactful through replication, **others become impactful through reverberation.** In a multi-faceted approach that works to develop paths to cultural, intellectual and spiritual engagement, the key is not to apply the formula and hit repeat, but rather to identify extraordinary young leaders, each of whom has the potential to learn deeply and contribute to a ripple effect in their own voices and with their own distinct visions.

My Rabbinic Fellowship at B’nai Jeshurun, with intensive mentoring from Rabbis Roly Matalon and Marcelo Bronstein, transformed my rabbinate. And yet when we set out to build IKAR, I was not trying to build another BJ. My interest was in taking the core values and principles I had learned from my mentors, which they had learned from theirs (Marshall Meyer) and he had learned from his (Abraham Joshua Heschel) and translating them into an idiom that would be resonant for a demographic of Jews who lived in a time and place that brought with it decidedly new challenges and opportunities. At BJ I learned the values of both sincere rootedness in the Jewish tradition and radical inclusivity. I learned the power of an intensive spiritual practice to motivate and mobilize a community to work toward social change. I learned the importance of building a culture of risk-taking and change, even when everything is working. And I

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learned the necessity of spiritual partnership at the heart of spiritual community. But I worked to manifest each of those core values in a way that spoke to both my own rabbinic vision and to a disparate population of disaffected, urban 21st century Jews. In other words, the greatest gift good mentorship gives a person is the ability to become the best version of herself. Under mentorship at BJ, I also experienced a few critical *oxygen tank* moments, which left such a profound imprint that I continue to draw upon them regularly even a decade later.

Thus the case for rabbinic fellowships: intensive, individualized apprenticeship opportunities for rabbis, complimenting their formal rabbinic training. The objective is to build *relationships* and create safe *space* within which young rabbis learn, experiment, fail, imagine and reimagine. They are mentored by exceptional teachers and go out with a commitment to using personal strengths and honed vision to take bold steps to revitalize Jewish life.

IKAR has just completed our own two year pilot Rabbinic Fellowship program, funded by the Charles H. Revson Foundation. Our first Fellow trained through this program left IKAR to found a vibrant new spiritual outreach project in Chicago designed to serve young Jewish adults, most formerly disengaged. They are already regularly attracting hundreds of young Jews to Shabbat services and other creative programs, and just had over 450 people singing and dancing their way through the High Holy Days. Our second Fellow went on to run one of the largest conversion programs in the country. He was hired to take an innovative model of adult learning that he explored as an IKAR Fellow and use it to transform the way that we welcome, educate, and engage Jews and future Jews. In just two years, we have seen how dedicated mentorship not only has a transformative effect on the young rabbis it directly touches, but that the impact reverberates throughout the communities they go on to serve.

Rabbinic mentorship is a simple but big idea. The Foundation could support it by strategically identifying a limited number of mentors and host communities – both emergent and established - that are vision-driven, that model creativity and fluidity, that are open to experimentation *and that have demonstrated an ability to engage young Jews – particularly those outside the fold*. Those mentors would be paired with a small number of exceptional rabbinical students chosen to participate in a two year post-Seminary training program that would include intensive mentorship and apprenticeship, national fellowship and hevruta.

We live in a time of deep spiritual need, when many young Jews are searching for a sense of purpose, restless with the desire for an authentic connection with one another and with some spiritual or religious framework. But the resistance, particularly among 20- and 30-somethings, to the world of institutional Judaism is something that must be addressed or we risk losing a generation of Jews to apathy and alienation. **We must take seriously the idea of training leadership to respond to this population and this dynamic with creativity, optimism and a sense of possibility. This generation offers new and different challenges, and the hour calls for new and different way of thinking about Jewish and particularly rabbinic engagement.** A National Rabbinic Fellowship would be instrumental in animating the vision at the center of the Jewish revitalization movement.

Those of us who believe that Judaism is a vital, compelling force must respond to the call of this generation by articulating a passionate, accessible, challenging and compelling Jewish life. Rabbinic Fellows are a powerful way to amplify the message to thousands and thousands of people through serious and sustained mentorship, leadership training and spiritual strengthening. Together we can inspire the next generation of young rabbis to charge into the world with holy hutzpah – working to bring the spirit of innovation and possibility to the farthest reaches of the Jewish community.

ⁱ See Professors Steven M. Cohen and Ari Kelman, as well as Anna Greenberg in *OMG!: How Generation Y is Redefining Faith in the iPod Era*.

ⁱⁱ See *Becoming a Pastor: Reflections on the Transition into Ministry*, James Wind, the Alban Institute.