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Sincerity and Authenticity in Teaching

Teaching can have a way of entangling one's very identity, tying up one's professional and personal self in convention and expectation. Teachers may work hard to create a deliberate persona in the classroom that can become hard to escape from when leaving the school building for home, for their communities, for a visit to a friend. They are always and proudly the teacher—until they want a separate identity but may have closed off many tunnels of self-expression.

Several years ago, when teaching in a few post high school programs for women, I struggled between the need to be a role model and the need to hide from the many eyes upon me—watching me in class, over the Shabbat table, in conversations with other teachers. Two strong pulls stretched me to a point of weakness. On the one hand, I believed my students to be beautiful young explorers, mapping out their own characters and religious lives, who invited me to join them on this journey of self-discovery. On the other hand, I felt the suffocation of educational *mar'it ayin*. Were my eyes closed tightly enough as I recited a blessing before them? Did I deal with a difficult student with the Ḥafez Ḥayyim's sensitivity? Did I dress in accordance with their expectations? I did not want to disappoint them, but I also wanted my own space. Role modeling became a mixed blessing. It provided a powerful incentive to stay within the parameters of my own highest ideals. But it also ate away at the freedom I needed to express my individuality. I struggled to find

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the right balance, to look beyond the superficiality of *mar'it ayin* and locate a more genuine self in the classroom. I returned to adult education because I found in that setting a greater respect for the varied shades of individuality and an ability to admit the complexity of religious life in the setting of modernity. Behind this decision lurked an important educational discussion to be had in the Orthodox community—one that we are loath to own up to: are we paying a steep human price for loving the image of a teacher more than the individual teacher? Is our strength also our weakness? Are we communicating to an educator that he or she has to be less of a person to be more of a teacher, thereby scaring away potential candidates because of the demand of having to be so much?

A “teaching identity” can be created by students who have strong needs for a teacher to reflect a certain image, but it can also be created by a teacher who cannot separate the roles of purveyor of knowledge from personal example. It is difficult to disconnect knowledge from virtue. Ideas are intangible commodities which help form and mold human character. If this is or should be true for those who study ideas, all the more so should it be true for those who teach them. When we teach history and learn lessons about tolerance, we expect that the history teacher himself be tolerant. When we study English literature with a teacher who highlights the nuances of human interaction between protagonists, we expect that she herself will be sensitive in the arena of human communication. No one asked if this expectation is fair; it is enough to say that it is present.

Aristotle supports this view in *Nicomachean Ethics*.¹ There is a difference between virtue and a job that requires a certain skill, what the philosopher calls art. A carpenter, for example, is not expected to be anything other than proficient at his task. We do not care if he is a profligate, a gossip or a deep thinker. It is enough that he can construct a chair or build a bench. We may question whether or not a particular moral lacuna befits someone who is able to construct a beautiful table—namely why the beauty of one endeavor does not translate into another—but these thoughts we keep to ourselves. However, with a person who represents knowledge, we expect that intelligence refines character and morally enriches the one who possesses it. Such wisdom bespeaks ideals and a possible vision of a better society. We expect that a teacher embody virtue and are often taken aback when an instructor of a subject can be well versed in the details of his field but his character seems untouched by his intellect.²

If this is true for teaching in general, one could argue that it is that much more true for a teacher of religion or the teacher of another subject who professes to be a religious person. In Orthodox Judaism, the teacher of religion and his or her student are both bound up in the same language of commandment and transgression, obligation and covenant.³ This provides a perspective through which the student views the teacher. The teacher sacrifices some autonomy and individuality due to the claim that both she and her student are links in the same chain of tradition. The teacher is partly responsible for this transmission, but once the student becomes a link, the two are directed on the same trajectory of observance. This trajectory explains the host of aggadot in which *talmidim* observe the behavior of their rabbis—called *shimmush*—with the hope that they, too, will be able to uphold the high standards observed by their scholarly mentors.⁴ This relationship of observation was seen as so critical to intellectual and spiritual development that students, according to the Talmud, even entered into the bathroom on occasion with their rabbis and listed what they had learned from this private encounter.⁵ The response by one rabbi to hearing of this invasion of privacy was, “How could you take such liberties with your master?” The question is heart-felt, but it is the student who gets the last word in the interchange: “It is a matter of Torah, and I was required to learn it.”

This talmudic passage is immediately followed by the stunning account of a student who lies under his teacher’s bed to understand the laws of intimacy practiced by his rabbi and the rabbi’s wife. This is a perfect example of the role model trajectory taken to its extreme. Rav, hearing a noise under his bed, shoos his student away in disgust, “Kahana, are you here? Go out, because it is rude.” Neither the student nor the teacher acknowledged the limitations of the role modeling relationship until this point. We may side with the rabbi’s need for privacy, but our sympathies ultimately lie with this novice who took his teacher seriously. He understood that Jewish law must be practiced in all of its particulars, and that the teacher represents the living law. The teacher, subsequently, must be observed in all of his quiet and private moments. We stand for a teacher when he walks into the room just as we stand for a Torah scroll that is out of the ark because the teacher personifies the book. R. Kahana, too, gets the last word in our aggada as he replies to Rav, “It is a matter of Torah, and I am required to learn it.”

This personification of law and ethics is understandable. We feel the teacher’s discomfort but also the student’s eagerness to learn. The inclu-

sion of these passages for public study signals the Talmud's own sense of their importance. We are asked not to blush so much that we fail to learn the lesson contained in these interactions. For the teacher, this lack of inhibition can create an unrealistic and squelching diminution of self. The teacher does not always feel free to be other than what his students expect him to be, not in the bathroom nor in the bedroom. We might recall early impressions of this predicament. Young children who see a teacher in a restaurant or grocery store are often overwhelmed by the fact that a teacher of theirs actually eats or purchases food. The teacher seems immortal to their young innocent minds; teachers seem to live in the school yards and need no human nourishment. They are not people with backyards and backaches; they are demi-gods with authority and wisdom. We then arrive at an age when bad teachers can become the victims of ridicule and the all too human failures of bad breath or an inability to discipline. Bad teachers become all too human, but good teachers do not. They still retain their Mount Olympus status; the better of their students imagines growing up and becoming the same kind of sixth grade teacher that they are. As students get older, bad teachers continue to suffer from critical judgment but good teachers often become anchors for the turbulence of adolescence. In these instances, students can eat up the identity of the good teacher. They want to see wedding albums and how the teacher plays ball and what he or she eats for lunch. Far from denying the teacher's human needs, they want to see them all. No teacher wants to disappoint his hopeful students, so he or she may grant limited access in between classes or after school.

Sometimes teachers do not want to separate between these distinct spheres. They feel that role modeling is at the core of teaching and is just as, if not more, important than content. They feel comfortable enough with themselves to invite students into their home lives; the dinner table is more important than the chalk board for the life lessons they are teaching.⁶ As mentioned earlier, post-high school education, in particular, can benefit or suffer from this blurring of personal and professional lives. It is common within Orthodox settings to send students to Israel for a year or more to experience text study in a more intense environment than is generally offered in a Jewish day school. The intensity of textual rigor with Israel as its background is heightened by the fact that the teacher/student relationship can change dramatically. Students appreciating independence from parents and their home communities explore the newness of this independence with their new rabbis or teachers. Teachers, often acting *in loco parentis*, do invite students

to their homes. They are expected to move from text to life with their pupils and serve as personal examples. But many a teacher in such an institution has shared the complaint of being stifled by the very job they have chosen. Teachers do not want to find their students under the proverbial bed, but they do not always know how to set limitations on a relationship they initially welcomed.

There is another risk in the role-modeling gambit that can be best expressed in a question: is the teacher/role-model genuinely interested in the character development of the student⁷ or is he or she more concerned with being a charismatic figure, living up to an image where the teacher and not the student is central?⁸ Is the role modeling genuinely for the student or is it about the ego of the teacher? Teachers can sometimes be a little too anxious to open their lives to students. There may be something potentially arrogant in the invitation. Watch me. Pray like me. Learn like me. Be like me. Instead we need to tell our students that they need to pray with *their* own intensity, learn as best *they* can and find *their* own formula for religious growth. Teachers who fail to do this and encourage an almost voyeuristic approach to *kiruv*, may need to let go of an inflated self-image in order to really see the student who stands before them. This ego-centered view of teaching can sadly lead the teacher to become judge and critic. Teachers can be guilty of prying too much when it comes to the personal lives of their students. More than we fear the student under the bed should we fear the teacher under the student's bed.

The need to protect the teacher's authenticity, individuality and privacy and ensure that the student's development rather than the teacher's ego is central, brings us back to finding and setting limitations. In my own search for these limitations, I discovered an important text by Martin Buber, "The Education of Character." Buber begins by sharing a concern that education is reflective of more than the acquisition of knowledge. A teacher must always be concerned with "the person as a whole, both in the actuality in which he lives before you now and in his possibilities, what he can become."⁹ As in traditional Jewish education, the education of character is part and parcel of the endeavor.¹⁰ With this, however, Buber warns that a teacher must be aware of "the fundamental limits to conscious influence."¹¹ He contends that pupils who sense that a teacher is consciously trying to meld their characters will react by showing signs of their own independence. The pupil will detect the "hidden motive" or agenda behind a teacher's attempt to influence to the detriment of trust. Instead, the teacher must present himself to his students honestly and directly:

Only in his whole being, in all of his spontaneity, can the educator truly affect the whole being of his pupil. For educating characters you do not need a moral genius, but you do need a man who is wholly alive and able to communicate himself directly to his fellow beings. His aliveness streams out to them and affects them most strongly and purely when he has no thought of affecting them.¹²

Buber uses the ambiguous language of aliveness and wholeness to communicate authenticity. In other words, the teacher should not be concerned with affect. The more he or she is conscious of affect, the less effective genuine character education and role modeling will be.¹³ The more an educator shows the stamp of his own unique humanity, the more the student will be able to look for that uniqueness in his own character. Buber inspires the teacher concerned with character education to begin the exploration not with his student but with himself.

One has to begin by pointing to that sphere where man himself, in the hours of utter solitude, occasionally becomes aware of the disease through sudden pain: by pointing to the relation of the individual to his own self. In order to enter into a personal relation with the absolute, it is first necessary to be a person again, to rescue one's real personal self from the fiery jaws of collectivism which devours all selfhood. The desire to do this is latent in the pain the individual suffers through his distorted relation to his own self. Again and again he dulls the pain with a subtle poison and thus suppresses the desire as well. To keep the pain awake, to waken the desire—that is the first task of everyone who regrets the obscuring of eternity. It is also the first task of the genuine educator in our time.¹⁴

Character education of the student begins with an acceptance of the uniqueness of the teacher. The teacher must be at home with the existential joy and pain of his individuality, not hide from it. Although it is impossible to communicate utter solitude to another, it is not impossible to articulate that a teacher can be both traditional and autonomous. Nor is it difficult to convey that a teacher is not a completed, perfect being but is still himself part of a learning community. Role models who are not afraid to show their own struggles are no less role models; they may, in fact, show the student a good deal more about personal growth.

It is easier to hide from individuality when the teacher and student both live by the same code of law and ethics. But what will ultimately make an impression upon the student is the individual recipe that the teacher created for his or her Judaism, the unique personal interpretation that the teacher struggled to arrive at in his hours of "utter solitude."¹⁵ As more and more educational institutions in the Orthodox

community strive to create codes of dress, speech and behavior that are easily mimicked, the teacher's task becomes more daunting. Where the language of convention flattens, dulls and provides a slip-in identity for students and teachers alike, the teacher must resist and instead show his students what they will learn with time if they do not learn it in a classroom—humanity compels complexity. The teacher can offer up this complexity in the searching portrait he offers of himself or he can resort to clichés and social norms, all the while denying intellectual and spiritual ferment. Instead of a self-confident sense of arrival, the teacher can present character education as a process or journey which she herself is still engaged in and to which she invites the student to join. The invitation to be part of this process can cut the form of an enriching diagonal line upon which both student and teacher find themselves, rather than the vertical ascension of the student to the height of the teacher.

Today educators often get pushed into image-making, shaping themselves according to their student's needs or convention's demands. The self-conscious creation of an external professional persona is based on the *mar'it ayin* approach mentioned previously. In this occupational hazard, educators can lose more than personal identity; they may be vanquishing the kind of excitement and ability to influence that first brought them to the classroom. The idea of *shimmush* challenges superficial image-making because it is the student who must meet the teacher where the teacher is. *Shimmush* demands the observation of many teachers and scholars, exposing students to a variety of approaches and lifestyles. In this model, students do not get stuck in one picture of Jewish life because they open themselves up to multiple portrayals of individuality. Educational *mar'it ayin* should give way to traditional notions of *shimmush* where the teacher is allowed to live in his or her complexity while interacting with students. Keeping up impressions can be very tiring. The luster of teaching can wear off from the exhaustion of role modeling. Before it does, the educator must re-energize his eros with education by inviting a dialogue with his authentic self.¹⁶

Notes

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1. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* II, 4.
2. Kimberly Patton has argued that this is also true of academics who are teachers of religion. Students do not assume objectivity or neutrality of professors in the academic study of religion: “The effective teacher is part parent, part priest, part psychopomp. There is no way around this mandate; ignore it, as we have at the university level...and confusion and betrayal are the results.” See Patton, “‘Stumbling Along between the Immensities’: Reflections on Teaching in the Study of Religion,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 65, 4 (1997): 835-6.
3. This discussion raises, among other things, the issue of student motivation. Students are often motivated by needs to conform to the conventions set by teacher, tradition or community. Mordechai Nissan distinguishes between first-order and second-order motivation as it applies to education. First-order motivation applies to the needs of the individual whereas second-order motivation involves an individual’s cognition of desirable behavior to satisfy the needs of others. Students on the same religious trajectory as teachers are often motivated by the desire to please the teacher rather than to please themselves. This can involve complications in the religious development of the student in the teacher’s absence. See Nissan, “Beyond Intrinsic Motivation: Cultivating a ‘Sense of the Desirable’” in *Effective and Responsible Teaching: The New Synthesis*, ed. Fritz K. Oser, Andreas Dick, Jean-Luc Patry (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1992), 126-138. The first and second order distinction is original to Harry G. Frankfurt, “Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person,” *Journal of Philosophy*, 63 (1971): 5-20.
4. The idea of “*shimmush*” in the *Sifrei* (357:7) is based on Moses’ service to the children of Israel for forty years. This number forty becomes the paradigmatic number for effective observation; in the same midrash Hillel does *shimmush* for forty years as does R. Yoḥanan ben Zakkai and R. Akiva. In *Avot* (6:5), one of the forty-eight ways of acquiring the Torah is through “*shimmush ḥakhamim*,” and one of the reasons that Israel suffers from so much argument was the failure of Hillel and Shammai’s students to do sufficient “*shimmush*” (*Tosefta Hagiga* 2:9). *Avot de-Rabbi Natan* makes the bold suggestion that someone who does not serve and observe scholars loses his portion in the world to come (end of chapter 36). Jonathan Cohen uses yet another rabbinic example to examine the teacher/student relationship. See his “On the Moral Significance of Teaching: An Examination of an Aggadic Story” [Heb.], in *Studies in Jewish Education*, vol.1, ed. Barry Chazan (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1983), pp.40-50.
5. *Berakhot* 62a. Both Rabbi Akiva and Ben Azzai are later told off for their brazenness.
6. The popular bestseller, *Tuesdays with Morrie* by Mitch Albom (New York: Doubleday, 1997) is predicated on exactly this idea—that learning is about a relationship to the teacher more than it is about the subject studied together.
7. Cate Siejk in “Learning to Love the Questions: Religious Education in an Age of Unbelief” (*Religious Education* 94, 2 [1999]:155-171) discusses the possi-

bility (within a Christian context) that postmodern views of knowledge may help religious educators understand “education as a community process instead of as a product.” Then, the author argues, “Genuine conversation, inquiry and dialogue—the dialectical process—are intrinsic to such a pedagogy” (p.170), and may move the teacher away from the dangers of role-modeling and towards a richer conversation with students.

8. It is important for teachers of religion to be aware of the fine distinction between education and indoctrination. Orthodox instructors may not want to admit that there is indoctrination—only religion. For more on this sticky issue, see I. A. Snook, *Indoctrination and Education* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972) and Michael Rosenak, “Jewish Religious Education and Indoctrination” in *Studies in Jewish Education*, vol.1, pp.117-38. Rosenak distinguishes the *method criterion* of indoctrination—use of threats, suppression of evidence or charisma—from the *content criterion*—use of an accepted set of dogma to promote a world-view. Orthodox educators may feel more comfortable with the latter while not fully acknowledging the danger of the former.
9. Martin Buber, “The Education of Character,” *Between Man and Man*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (New York: Macmillan, 1965), p.104.
10. Another instructive example of Buber’s conceptualization of relationships as they impact on education can be found in Oded Schremer, “I-Thou/I-It Dichotomy in the Context of Education,” *Studies in Jewish Education*, vol.2, ed. Michael Rosenak (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1984), 212-30, esp. 227-28.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*, p.105.
13. Lionel Trilling quotes Andre Gide, “One cannot both be sincere and seem so.” See Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (London: Harvard University Press, 1972), 70.
14. *Ibid.*, pp.110-11.
15. Yehuda Gellman in “Teshuvah and Authenticity” makes a similar claim about the process of repentance (*Tradition*, 20, 3 [1982], pp.249-253). The more he is surrounded by *teshuvah*—twenty principles, six steps, eight levels, etc. the less the dance of *teshuvah* feels authentic to him. For more on personal authenticity from a philosophical angle, see Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991) particularly “The Sources of Authenticity,” pp. 25-29, and “The Need for Recognition,” pp. 43-53.
16. See Joseph Schwab, “Eros and Education: A Discussion of One Aspect of Discussion,” in *Science, Curriculum and Liberal Education*, ed. Ian Westbury and Neil J. Wilkof, (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1978), pp.105-132. Schwab sees this eros—“this energy of wanting” as the root of intellectual energy and the key to effective teaching. He also calls it “a regard for self, a desire for selfhood” (p.111).