

# Deep Calling to Deep: Religious Imagination and Rabbinic Mentoring

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This essay presents a unique approach to rabbinic mentoring that rests upon two foundational claims: First, rabbinic mentoring is crucial in a world of shifting Jewish values and models of community that are redefining the rabbinic role. In multiple and different ways, rabbis are being challenged to renew and to raise their own authentic rabbinic voices in order to lead, guide, counsel, and shape community. Ongoing rabbinic mentoring offers a framework for personal and professional growth.

The second claim is that there exists a need for rabbinic mentoring that reaches beyond opportunities that are currently available. Rabbis have access to useful coaching that helps to refine particular leadership skills, address issues of community dynamics, or make the best use of new technologies. Rabbis are also fortunate to have access to programs that foster the spiritual and intellectual growth of rabbinic cohorts of various sizes—groups that develop the valuable support and solidarity of rabbinic community as each rabbi partakes of that which is offered to all.

But, beyond skill-mentoring, and beyond the enrichment programs for rabbinic study cohorts, there is a need for mentoring that attends to the enrichment of the *individual* rabbi. Such a mentoring program involves a rabbi and a rabbinic mentor in the sustained exploration—through texts and experience—of a theme that is personally meaningful to the rabbi-mentee.

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The proposed program of individualized mentoring begins with a rabbi identifying a theme of personal interest and value—a theme that engages the imagination at the intersection of the intellect and the spirit.

A rabbi might identify a theme such as: *wrestling with God or giving, receiving, and being a blessing*. In the very act of identifying a theme, a rabbi has already begun the enriching work of recovering and discovering an ancient story to be an element in the plot and calling of a contemporary rabbinic life. When learning confirms that a rabbi both shapes and is shaped by a particular theme, that unique rabbinate can become more coherent and sustainable.

The rabbi and the rabbinic mentor have unique and also overlapping responsibilities in developing and sustaining their *chevruta* learning. The rabbi supplies the theme of learning, a theme that touches calling and stirs religious imagination. A rabbinic mentor serves as an exemplar, guide, teacher, and trusted study partner. The mentor must be able to propose associations between classical texts and a rabbi's theme.

The program for training mentors in this method is the subject of another essay. But, simply put, mentors should be able to identify their own core themes to which they meaningfully bring a well-tended love of texts, making useful associations between texts and experience. With empathy, a mentor must bring these skills to the theme of a rabbi-mentee. Together, they learn to bring Jewish religious imagination into conversation with a specifically chosen classical Jewish image of personal relevance.

"Jewish religious imagination," rises from and returns to Judaism's ancient images. The work of a rabbinic mentor is to bring a rabbi's religious imagination into conversation with texts that carry Judaism's timeless images into timely relevance for a rabbinic life.

I want to offer an image of personal relevance that has guided me in conceptualizing the role of the mentor. The image of the deep has long drawn my attention. An ancient sage confirmed my fascination by bringing his own imagination to bear on the biblical image of *the deep*. He did not—and likely could not—have explained the origin of his interest. Like me, he might have pictured his fascination rising from the very *deep* that drew him. He taught:

Scripture never specified how many deeps there are. One verse says: *There were no deeps when I [wisdom] was brought forth* (Prov.

8:24). Another verse says: *The deeps covered them* [the Egyptians pursuing Israel into the sea] (Exod. 15:5) without numbering the deeps. The sons of Korah in a psalm attributed to them could only say: *Deep calling to deep is the thunder of your falls* (Ps. 42:8). Since no one knows how many deeps exist, the last psalm to mention them says: *Sea monsters and all of the deeps sing . . .* (Ps. 148:7). *All of them will praise the name of the Lord* (Ps. 148:13). (*Midrash T'hillim* 148:5)

Imagination led this ancient teacher to personalize a biblical image even as that image gave traditional shape to his personal imagination. An exploration of the deep became his own personal quest, rewarded by Scripture itself confirming his intuition: There are countless *deeps*, he discovered; reservoirs beyond number, offering boundless praise.

Jewish religious imagination, in general, and the image of *the deep*, in particular, serve to outline some details of the rabbinic mentor's role. A rabbinic mentor must cultivate a personal and authentic connection of imagination and image in which personal experience and relevant texts are mutually illuminated.

A mentor practiced at bringing imagination into conversation with image can guide a rabbi to ask: Where does my religious imagination lead me? What particular image invites exploration? With the mentor leading the way, the study pair identifies texts that serve the questions and the quest for learning that can move a rabbi's personal strengths and imagination towards public vigor—texts that can prompt inner motivations towards outer enthusiasm, helping enthusiastic private direction to fuel community leadership.

Imagination emanates—watery and flowing—from the deep. But without particulars, it has no serviceable features or shape. Giving useful shape to the imagination is, broadly speaking, the goal of the rabbinic mentor. To that end, the image of the deep—bound up with the hidden mysteries of creation and creativity—is a valuable screen against which to project some particulars of the mentor's role.

A rabbinic mentor must honor and embrace the wide ranging characteristics of *the deep's* ancient images, its rages and its riches, its power and its potential. At the watery beginning of Genesis was *the deep*, moving and brooding in its own shadows and secrets (Gen. 1:2). The darkest intimations of its power were confirmed when, in the time of Noah, *all the fountains of the great deep burst apart, and the floodgates of the sky broke open* (Gen. 7:11).

After the flood, *the deep* remained hidden. It reappeared only at the end of Genesis when Jacob blessed his son Joseph with *blessings of heaven above, blessings of the deep that crouches below* (Gen. 49:25). *The deep* re-emerged; now as a complex, mysterious, and powerful source of both blessing and danger.

A rabbinic mentor leads the way into the promising and perilous *deep* like the ancient tribal leader Nahshon at the shore of the Red Sea. According to oft-told rabbinic legend, Nahshon waded first into *the deep that would cover the Egyptians, into the deeps that congealed in the heart of the sea* (Exod. 15:5, 8). Only when submerged to his nostrils did the water finally yield a path for Nahshon and for those who followed him.

Often, in the press of the week and the work, a rabbi remains in the shallows without venturing into deeper reflection about events, interactions, intuitive responses, or decisions. The “shallows” is the necessary rabbinic work that includes—among other things—reports and correspondence, the oversight of schedules, facilities, and committees, as well as writing deadlines. Such work is expansive, and always expanding. While such tasks are absolutely important, it is also true that diverse, high paced, deadline-driven work can be exhausting and depleting. The “ankle deep” projects rarely touch the restorative and sustaining depth of one’s rabbinic calling; namely those ideas, images, and imagination that touch the wellspring of enthusiasm.

A mentor, like Nahshon, leads the way not “out of my depth,” but into it; going deep enough so that the everyday might be displaced by the buoyancy of creative possibilities.

The Rabbinic story of Nahshon entering *the deep* before its waters would split is at odds with a simple reading of the Torah narrative in which the waters were first split to allow passage on dry ground (Exod. 14:21–2). Avoiding the pure and simple miracle, a Rabbinic storyteller imagined the plot of his own complicated life into the image of Nahshon.

Like the Sages’ Nahshon, a rabbinic mentor leads the way through problem-solving to problem-dissolving—melting and diffusing particular obstacles within a sea of deeper images and wider perspectives. A mentor leads the way towards discovering that *the deep* can support a rabbi even as it yields a path.

A rabbinic mentor is an exemplar, guide, and teacher. But it is the mentor’s role as a study partner that ensures

learning-in-conversation. The mentor follows the imagination of the learning partner. But the theme articulated by one is shaped by two; imagination calls to imagination, experience to experience.

The sound-image of *deep calling to deep* (Ps. 42:8) prompted another sage to animate the conversation of *deeps* joyfully combining resources:

Rabbi Eleazar said: When they pour the water libation [simultaneously with the wine libation] during Sukkot: One deep says to its fellow: Pour out your water! It is the sound of two companions that I hear! As it is said: Deep calling to deep is the thunder of your falls (Ps. 42:8).

Rabbinic mentoring that honors *deep calling to deep* produces a single thunderous abundance. At its best, such mentoring honors both learning partners by blurring the distinction between them. There is no teacher apart from student.

A rabbinic mentor and a rabbinic partner are, themselves, to be counted among the uncounted *deeps*, inviting one another: *Pour out your water!* Their learning becomes *the sound of two companions*. Together, the unique, deep sources of each can become the shared resources of both, thunderous and resonant.