

# Keep Your Mentee Disappointed

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Submitted: October 8, 2024 – Accepted: November 20, 2024 – Published: January 22, 2025

## Abstract

Commenting on a Talmudic expression, that exhorts one to “make for thyself a Rabbi”, I suggest that the mentoring relationship involves the student making an emotional investment and constructing an (often distorted) image of their mentor as possessing superior mastery. I argue that this process cannot be understood with our model of liberal education, because being mentored as a sociologist involves learning a craft, and is akin to the ancient cultural model of apprenticeship. I conclude with some thoughts about the ethical duty of the mentor that this model entails, the most important of which is to disappoint your mentee in the right measure and at the right time.

**Keywords:** Apprenticeship; charisma; emotional investment; mentoring.

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There is a peculiar expression that appears in the Talmud twice. It can be translated literally as “make for thyself a Rabbi”.<sup>1,2</sup> I cite it when I speak to newly admitted PhD students, because I think it contains several important lessons about mentoring and being a mentee. I am not a Talmudic scholar, so please take the following hermeneutics with a grain of salt.

The first thing that strikes one with this expression is the active role of the mentee. When our newly admitted PhD students arrive to the Sociology Department at Columbia, we assign them a faculty adviser. It’s our first best guess as to who would be a good mentor for them. But we impress upon the students that perhaps the most important task of the next two years is for them to find their “true mentor”. Not everyone does. This underlines that for mentoring to work it needs to start with an investment made by the mentee in the figure of the mentor, inescapably also an emotional investment.

Yet, what truly makes this expression striking and poignant is the tension captured in three pithy words between this active role assigned to the mentee, who is advised to “make” a Rabbi for themselves, and the authority that the term “Rabbi” connotes. The word “Rabbi” derives from the Hebrew term for “Great”, “greater”, etc.<sup>3</sup> A Rabbi is one who is greater in wisdom and intellectual stature, and therefore possesses natural authority. How could a student “make” for themselves that which is greater than them?

This tension is characteristic, I think, of the ancient cultural model of apprenticeship. Apprenticeship myths begin with the novice setting out on a journey, seeking personal transformation, and ultimately finding a master (or a mistress?) from whom to learn. We, modern people, are uncomfortable with terms like “apprentice” and “master”. We tend to think of the goal of liberal education as the development of autonomy, and of autonomy as the opposite of accepting the authority of a master or a mistress. The Talmud does not see the two as opposites. Note that it does not even say that one should “choose” a Rabbi, but “make” one for oneself, as if from clay. The expression places the novice in the active, autonomous role of the maker, while it places the Rabbi, the master, in the passive role of an object being fashioned. It tells us — long before Weber — that the charisma of the master derives, at least in part, from the emotional investment made by the apprentice, the projection by means of which they fashion for themselves a model to be emulated.

All of this is germane to the sociological mentoring relationship to the extent that it is about, as Bourdieu (1992) says, “handing down a trade”, or a craft. A craft is something that is learned “on the job”, in apprenticeship, through personal example, and not in classrooms, textbooks and examinations. Examinations ask the student to absorb some body of predigested knowledge and then repeat it in the form of answers. In research, you are often in a situation when not only you do not yet know the answer, you do not even know what question to ask, or you do not know if the question you are asking is a good one. Knowing how to ask good questions is a craft. It is not learned by sitting in your chair and musing. Think about the surgeon, asking questions with a scalpel, or a molecular chef, asking questions with a blowtorch. Similarly, apprenticeship in sociological research is learning to master your tools, your scalpel and your blowtorch, your survey instrument or your embodied participation in social settings, so you can use them to ask good questions and discover unasked questions, puzzles that present themselves only when one has mastered one’s tools. This cannot be done if, like the ideal liberal

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2. Pirkei Avot 1:6. <https://www.sefaria.org/sheets/174426.1?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en> (accessed 9/17/2024).

3. <https://hebrew-academy.org.il/keyword/%D7%A8%D6%B7%D7%91/> (accessed 9/17/2024).

student, you question your master at every step. When the scalpel opens the skin for the first time, your trembling hands require that you put your faith in your mentor, that you believe in their superior mastery. Patricia Benner (1982) found that if nurse interns attempt to deal with the complexities and pressures of their work through emotional distancing and just “following the rules”, they typically fail, burnout and leave. Those who are successful and become experts are those who display a high level of emotional involvement in their work and are especially sensitive to mistakes. In order to become expert, you have to learn from mistakes, which means two things: you cannot be too afraid of mistakes so as to not make them; but you also cannot be too cavalier, too emotionally defensive, so as not to care about your errors. All of this applies, ipso facto, to the mentee’s relationship to their mentor. You may have “made” your mentor, but it is your ethical duty to care deeply about their rebuke. If you don’t feel it on your skin and in your guts, this is not a mentoring relationship.

I suppose what I am trying to say is that the mentoring relationship cannot be understood with our knee-jerk model of liberal education. It is not a relationship of equality, but of master and apprentice. It is not a Socratic dialogue, but a maelstrom of emotional energies scarcely beneath the surface. And how can it be otherwise when, in making someone their “Rabbi”, the student invests their desire — admitted only to themselves — to be “great” too? Perhaps even greater one day than their Rabbi.

And what is the ethical duty of the mentor? Let me return to the Talmud one last time. The full quote says the following: “make for thyself a rabbi, and acquire for thyself a companion, and judge all people with the scale weighted in their favor”.<sup>4</sup> The companion, the friend, is “acquired”, bought, through effort and mutual sacrifices. The Rabbi, on the other hand, is simply “made” in a unilateral gesture, but once they are made, he or she need to be listened to with deference because they are “greater”. The full quote seems to contrast the mutuality and dialogical nature of friendship, the exchange of reciprocal concessions that constructs a relationship of equality, with the sovereign exteriority of the two gestures that compose an inequality: the mentee “makes” the mentor, and the mentor acts as the “master” for the mentee, but these two actions touch one another only obliquely. This is perhaps understandable because while a friendship is meant to last, a proper mentorship relationship should work towards a satisfactory conclusion and parting. Ultimately, the mentor should disappoint their mentee in just the right measure, so they can emerge from the relationship to chart an independent path.

This disappointment can begin from the very first mentorship encounter, but it must be measured. It is almost inevitable that when the student makes their gambit to enter into a mentoring relationship, the would-be mentor will be confronted with a distorted image of themselves, an effort to “make” them into something they are not. I certainly have found myself many times in this position. If the mentor were to frustrate this effort headlong, there is a good chance that the mentoring relationship will end soon. After all, as the Talmudic injunction teaches, it is the action of the would-be apprentice that truly creates and maintains this relationship. The student holds most of the cards, but not all. Is it ethically justified, therefore, for the mentor to leave this distorted image of themselves undisturbed? I think there are times when this is the case. You might judge that the relationship is too fragile to withstand a disappointment. You might judge that the distorted image is useful for the student’s own path of development. Most importantly, the mentor is not an immovable rock. The distorted image offers you perhaps a challenge and an opportunity to grow in ways you did not anticipate. There is thus a reciprocity to the mentoring relationship, but to work properly it needs to re-

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main submerged. You can confess to it later in your recommendation letter (“I learned as much as I taught”, etc.)

But disappoint your mentee you must, at one point or another, unless you are in the business of creating replicas of yourself, which is an enterprise doomed to failure, and can only produce the grotesque. At one point or another, you do need to confront the distorted image that is projected on you. Irony and self-deprecation will serve you well at this moment, as would generosity towards other modes of doing sociology, other embodied models of the craft. But disappointment, visceral, bitter disappointment will serve you best. Commentators on the Talmud suggest that even the wisest and greatest need to “make a Rabbi” for themselves, because “one does not see in one’s own affairs, what others see [from the outside]”.<sup>5</sup> If you let your mentee see your limitations (at the right moment), if you disappoint them in the right measure, you would have served them well.

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5. [https://he.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D7%A2%D7%A9%D7%94\\_%D7%9C%D7%9A\\_%D7%A8%D7%91](https://he.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D7%A2%D7%A9%D7%94_%D7%9C%D7%9A_%D7%A8%D7%91) (accessed 9/19/2024).