

Taking Jewish Education Seriously

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I read Mike long before I ever met him.

Around the time I began to sense that Jewish education might be more for me than a slightly nerdy hobby, I came across an unusual book in a secondhand bookstore. It was a hardback with a brown dustcover and everything about it—from title to back page blurb—shouted: “Academic! Serious! Contemporary!” And it was all about Jewish education. “This is the book for me!” I thought. I bought it and added it to my bedside pile.

A few weeks later I started reading it. I never made it through to the end, then or on subsequent attempts. I was no match for the book’s erudition and complexity. But what I learned from *Commandments and Concerns* (Rosenak, 1987), and later, in person, from its author, was that Jewish education is a profoundly serious business and deserves to be treated as such.

Mike was committed to taking Jewish education seriously. No idea was too abstract, no practice too concrete, no question too simple or problem too complex, for Mike to treat it with exquisite seriousness as a theorist of Jewish education. The rich metaphors he developed (such as, “language and literature,” “explicit and implicit”) gave us new lenses through which to view our theories and practices. And the breadth of his scholarship brought into our professional discourse literatures and problems, of which we would otherwise have remained blissfully ignorant.

All this is true. But, for many of us, Mike’s greatest impact as a teacher and a writer had less to do with the ideas he developed than with the values he embodied. More than an author of textbooks, Mike was what Heschel called a text person. It often occurred to me, when sitting in Mike’s classes, that people weren’t so much following his train of thought as basking in his aura. Mike didn’t just talk of commitment and openness. He exuded them.

My most enduring memory of Mike is thus neither of Mike the writer nor of Mike the teacher. It is of Mike the person. It is from a meeting of

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the Jerusalem Fellows faculty, at which one of our colleagues spoke disparagingly of the person she was tutoring. Mike remained poker faced and said nothing. He waited until it was his turn to speak and prefaced his own report with a delicate introduction, phrased entirely in the first person. He apologized in advance for the sketchy details he was about to share about a problem his own tutee was facing, and reminded the group how important it was in cases like these for the discussion to remain focused and confidential. Not a word of direct criticism nor even a raised eyebrow. Just a gentle, general plea for us all to try a little harder. We all heard Mike's implicit lesson in שמירת הלשון. And we all tried harder. Jewish education doesn't get any more serious than that.

REFERENCE

- Rosenak, M. (1987). *Commandments and concerns*. Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society.