Jewish Professional as Colleague

Larry Moses

"Two are better than one in that they have a greater reward for their work. For should they fall, one can raise the other; but woe to the one who is alone and falls with no one to raise him up."

(Ecclesiastes 4:9-10)

It pleases me to share reflections on the theme "Jewish professional as colleague," drawing from the special qualities embodied by John Ruskay. Wishing to be fully transparent, I informed the guest editors of this issue that I would write such a piece only if it could be more personal than scholarly in tone. Be forewarned.

John Ruskay and I are colleagues. I find these six words to be affirming, even ennobling. We share a friendship, a history, and a set of professional commitments that are interwoven and difficult to parcel out. Like others of our generation who entered professional careers in Jewish communal life, we embraced Jewish activism as products of the sixties—a tumultuous decade filled with angst, idealism, rebellion, and the winds of change.

In this now long-ago moment of American social history, a moment that cast many of our contemporaries into Jewish careers, seeds were planted within us that would ultimately blossom into lives of responsibility and commitment. As we entered young adulthood we were nurtured by the civil rights movement, the idealism of the Kennedy presidency, a mind-bending revolution in popular music, the emergence of Black and ethnic pride into mainstream culture, Woodstock, the tragedy of Vietnam and the antiwar movement it stimulated, student unrest everywhere, and the development of feminism and women's rights into a wholly new phase. These were the forces of American life that shaped us and in varying ways laid a foundation for the Jewish professionals we would become.

But there was more. During that same decade, young Jews on college campuses throughout America also experienced, albeit from afar, the 1967 Six-Day War. In an era of antiwar protests, many of which were led by us, the Six-Day War stood separate and loomed large as a new platform for Jewish identity and pride. In the aftermath of the Holocaust, Israel's victory—a seeming triumph of a modern-day David in the face of overwhelming Goliaths—gave Jewish students not only a renewed sense of purpose but also measures of redemption and empowerment.

These were some of the factors that influenced John, me, and many other young Jewish activists when it came time to decide what to do with our lives. Filled with idealism and new visions about the future of America, on the one hand, and feeling deep pride and growing commitment as Jews on the other, many of us decided against careers in law and medicine (much to our parents' dismay) and rather chose to channel our activism toward the challenges of the Jewish community and the Jewish people.

Larry Moses is president of The Wexner Foundation.

I begin my reflections in this manner because, for those of us who have now worked professionally in Jewish life for a string of decades, our sense of what it means to be a "colleague" derives in important ways from the camaraderie we experienced as activists so many years back. Coming from the era of the sixties, we viewed each other as comrades in arms; indeed, the word "comrade" might have been a more apt description of who we were and are to each other than "colleague"—a rather neutral, "professional" term. Many of us remain friends, allies, confidants—brothers and sisters. In a sense, we are part of a movement too complicated to define, but too important to ignore.

This deeper sense of being a colleague springs not only from the activist associations we shared in a day gone by but also from a deep understanding of our mission that might best be illustrated by the Hebrew word *avodah*. *Avodah* literally means work, but it originally referred to sacrifices offered in the Temple of Jerusalem—or more broadly put, to "divine service." It is this sense of "*avodah shebalev*"—service of the heart—that strikes deeply into the collegial framework that defines Jewish professionalism at its best. It is about individuals who are bonded with others through a mutual embrace of values, ideals, idealism, and an enduring sense that the Jewish people has a unique message, meaning, and destiny.

Jewish professional colleagues of my generation are thus bonded by a history, a set of abiding values and dreams, and a sense that working alongside each other has meaning both on the deeply personal level and also on the stage of world history.

There is a methodology of study in our tradition commonly referred to as "hevruta learning." It embodies the idea that learning in solitude is inferior to learning with a partner or partners, and it is fueled by passion for the task and concern, even love, for those with whom one learns. Only when we engage each other do we come closer to understanding the larger truth at work. Hevruta learning requires trust, honesty, and a capacity to listen. Jewish professional colleagues, at their best, learn from each other in this spirit.

And John Ruskay is a Jewish professional colleague "at our best." Occupying one of the most empowered positions in the Jewish world, he has remained uniquely and thoroughly himself—a combination of power and humility, seriousness and humor, eloquence and listening, teacher and learner, and, above all, one who loves life. Time and again I have heard from colleagues of all ages, stages, and roles how an encounter with John—from fleeting to more sustained—remained with them, lifted them, shaped them.

It is not an overstatement to say that John's fingerprints are everywhere in Jewish life. Let me use The Wexner Foundation as an example. More than 20 years ago John served on the original Advisory Group that worked closely with Leslie Wexner in designing the work of the foundation. Afterward, when I served as director of The Wexner Graduate Fellowship Program, he was a valued member of our selection committee. Still later, when our foundation gathered a small group of advisors to review our work and recommend changes, John was among the very first Leslie and Abigail Wexner tapped to sit by our side.

One might conclude from this, "OK, so John had a particularly close relationship with The Wexner Foundation." But the truth is that John has had a particularly close relationship with many foundations, organizations, philanthropists,

It is not an overstatement to say that John's fingerprints are everywhere in Jewish life. and causes over equally long periods of time. In this pattern of life that defies time and space, John has become a colleague and confidant to more leaders than one can imagine. He has embraced the collegial role as a priority. It has not been a weighty effort on his part. It is who he is.

One of John's most important qualities is his capacity to balance being a spouse, parent, friend, and whole person with what would otherwise seem to be impossible work demands. John models for his colleagues a celebration of work and at the same time an ability to put it into perspective when honoring other precious commitments.

Jewish professionals, be they at the highest levels of responsibility or on other rungs of the organizational ladder, often feel isolated, underappreciated, and spiritually depleted. They need loving colleagues to serve as mentors and friends, as allies and confidants, as comrades in arms. We all need to have our idealism replenished, the safety valve of laughter, a sense of being cared for, a renewal of the values and ideals that brought us in from the outset.

John Ruskay, as a colleague, leads this charge. He finds the time when it doesn't exist to care for those near and far who need not only the intellectual spark and the strategic insight but also the human touch, that mischievous smile, the hug that speaks better than words.

Long ago John and I, and so many others alongside us, were the brash young rebels outside the walls of the Jewish community, powerless but for the idealism and commitment that emboldened us. Today we sit within and atop the very institutions that seemed so distant and unapproachable earlier in our lives. And as we now lead these institutions we continually remind ourselves, and each other, how blessed we feel for the opportunity to contribute at this level, and how important it is to take seriously the winds of change, now borne by new generations outside the walls who need to be brought in.

In the Mishnah Avot we read the dictum, "Get yourself a companion." It strikes me as a comment upon the importance of fellow travelers as we journey along our way. Deep down, we know that much of what we have built will eventually be reworked, redefined, and replaced by better and more effective structures and programs. May it be so. But this is not true of our colleagues. They are irreplaceable. They are our energy when we are weary, our cheerleaders when we feel demoralized, our partners when we feel isolated. This is the deep secret of longevity in Jewish professional work. Among many other achievements, this too will be John Ruskay's special legacy.

 $\ensuremath{\textit{John Ruskay}}$ and $\ensuremath{\textit{I}}$ are colleagues. I find these six words to be affirming, even ennobling.

John Ruskay is a Jewish professional colleague "at our best."