

Roles Greater than Rules

BY RABBI DAVID WOLPE

Judaism so treasures words one might think you could get a righteous person out of a book. Yet beginning with the bible Judaism taught that laws come to life in people. Role models speak louder than rules.

Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary Solomon Schechter famously explained to the incoming student and future Chancellor Louis Finkelstein that the purpose of coming to the seminary was not to learn a fact or law; he could learn those elsewhere. The purpose was to study with great men. Speaking of his years as a student my father told me far less about what he learned than about the people with whom he learned. They were not perfect, but they were passionate, learned, marvelously eccentric and they brought the tradition to life.

To the extent that the Internet and the proliferation of long distance learning deprive us of being in the presence of charismatic, kind, scholarly people, it will be a tremendous loss. When a Hasid said that he traveled miles just to see how his master tied his shoes, he was expressing this beautiful idea. What we learn from a great teacher cannot be put into a book, because it is in a look, an inflection, a quirk of personality or a tossed off comment. The greatest human lessons are found in the power of presence.