At the recent North American Jewish Day School Conference, I had the privilege of co-presenting one of the sessions with Sharon Feiman-Nemser and Vivian Troen, two colleagues from the Mandel Center for Studies in Jewish Education at Brandeis University. Our session addressed new teacher induction, or the various ways that a school supports and develops its new teachers. Gann has invested significant resources over the past several years in this induction process, and one of the things I have learned is that, when done well, induction does much more than support new teachers; it actually can transform teaching and learning in the entire school. My part of the presentation focused on the role of the Head of School in the induction of new teachers and, during a case study that we presented, I was surprised and a bit disturbed by a debate that surfaced about the Head’s responsibility to new teachers.

One of the participants in the session suggested that new teachers either “have it or they don’t” and that it is really their job to seek out the help they need. This belief underlies an approach to new teacher induction that is limited to “orientation,” helping teachers adjust to a new school in cultural and technical ways. Instead, my co-presenters and I suggested that we need a completely different understanding of teachers and teaching. New teachers, like new doctors or new athletes, are just beginning to learn a complex craft. Great teaching actually demands a lifetime of learning and growth. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the school and, ultimately, the Head of School, to create the conditions under which every teacher can and is expected to grow and develop. And this, of course, is a teacher’s responsibility to his or her students, as well.

In this week’s parsha, Parshat Tetzaveh, when describing the appointment of Aaron and his sons to the priesthood and the commands to make their sacred priestly vestments, the Torah repeats three times that this consecration and these clothes are in order for Aaron and his brothers “l’kahan li,” to “act as kohanim (priests) to me (God).” (Exodus 28:1-4) Rashi and various translations interpret this verb “l’kahan” as “to serve.” But why does the Torah repeat three times in four pasukim (sentences) that this consecration of the priests is “in order for them to serve God”? Isn’t this what a kohen (a priest) does? Perhaps, the Torah is teaching us something that, sadly, the history of the Jewish Priesthood actually bore out: it is very common for leaders to lose focus on their core purpose, on the higher mission to which they are dedicated, and on the people whom they serve.

One of the most important reasons for a conference like the one we attended this week is to help leaders step away, temporarily, from the day-to-day challenges that sometimes distract or divert our attention from the higher calling of our work and to refocus us on our responsibility to serve those whom we lead and on our mission to develop and inspire the
minds, hearts, and Jewish identities of our students. It is, after all, our children who will, in turn, serve, sustain, and inspire the future of the Jewish People.