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FROM THE EDITOR

The Role of the Rabbi

There was once a time when Jewish civilization produced various layers of leadership that, we are sometimes surprised to learn, did not include rabbis. The biblical period, lasting over one thousand years, yielded patriarchs, priests, prophets, judges, kings, and scribes, but no rabbis. Rabbis emerge during the period that derives its name from their collective appellation—i.e., the "rabbinic period." We associate "rabbis" with the period beginning in the second century B.C.E., although we would be hard-pressed to find the title in usage that early. The "proto-rabbis" of that era were the nascent leaders who were beginning to shape a Judaism whose core was sacred text rather than sacrifice at the Temple altar.

When the second Temple was destroyed during the rebellion against Rome in 70 C.E., and the priestly system of sacrifice ceased, what would emerge as the rabbinic system of communal organization and leadership was already fairly well along in its development. By the second century C.E. "the rabbis" had consolidated their power and control over the official system of Judaism.

From that time forward, in varying degrees and with varying levels of cooperation and competition, rabbis claimed the religious leadership of the Jewish people. They often also claimed the role of, and/or functioned as, the "civil" leaders of various communities. So long as Judaism was seen as a revealed religion whose sacred law was entrusted to those whose expertise in that law was sanctioned; so long as Jews lived in self-contained communities in which religious law and practice was subject to communal coercion; and so long as the idea of "democracy" and "the consent of the governed" were far in the future, rabbis held power, authority, and a central role.

With the advent of modernity, especially in North America, and the correlative collapse of "the community" into "the congregation," rabbis found their areas of expertise as well as administration circumscribed. Rather than being a leader of the entire community, rabbis rapidly emerged as employees of specific congregations. Those congregations, being voluntarily constructed and supported by their members, quickly created a system of management in which boards of laypeople held ultimate authority over their congregations—and, as employers, over their rabbis.

The residual aura of authority and the perception of the rabbi as a "clergyman" preserved, to a degree, both status and stability for the role of the rabbi. But in the past generation, things have changed significantly. The role of the rabbi has been changing. Some report this as an erosion in the role of the rabbi. Others see it as a transformation.

The Reconstructionist movement defines its establishment as a full fourth stream in American Judaism from the establishment of its seminary, the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College (RRC), in 1968. The founders of the RRC understood that, absent an indigenous training center for rabbis educated from a Reconstructionist viewpoint, the movement could not emerge, and Reconstructionism would likely have ended up as an influential footnote in 20th century American Judaism.

It is, therefore, striking as well as curious that the role of the rabbi in Reconstructionism has often been the source of so much controversy and confusion. Some associate this with the Reconstructionist emphasis on "democracy," and suggest that congregants (incorrectly?) understand this to mean that the rabbi is just one vote among many others, and that the rabbi has a "vote but not a veto." Others suggest that it is not the authority of the rabbi but the role/s of the rabbi that are central to the controversy: is the rabbi the spiritual leader of a religious community or the employee of a non-profit organization?

In 1998, the Reconstructionist movement convened a commission on "The Role of the Rabbi" (see the article in this issue) to help frame the conversation that rabbis and congregations need to have to create and sustain a healthy and productive relationship. Those of us who have worked on that commission believe that new paradigms, new language, new frames of reference, and new models for understanding the shared task of leadership within congregations can truly make a difference. The degree to which our individual rabbis and congregations devote attention to the work of the commission, and open themselves to honest effort at reconceiving their relationship, will, we hope, be rewarded by better, less stressful, and more collaborative relationships.

In this issue we collect a variety of viewpoints on the role of the rabbi in different settings. We trust that each perspective will provide important insights that can be heard by both rabbis and laity.

Comings and Goings

Rabbi Judith Gary Brown has served as managing editor of *The Reconstructionist* since 1996. In that time she has not only managed the production of each issue, but has been a diligent editor for content as well as for copy, and a thoughtful contributor to the editorial process that shapes this journal. She is a true partner whose good eye is matched by her good humor.

With this issue, Rabbi Brown concludes her service as managing editor. On behalf of our readers, our editorial board, and especially me (she would not let me get away with the dodge of "myself"!), I want to thank her for the many contributions she has made. We know the Jewish community will continue to benefit from the editing and other literary projects in which Rabbi Brown will be engaged in the future.

We also want to take this opportunity to thank Dr. Deborah Dash Moore

for serving on our editorial board for the past five years. She has brought her academic eye as well as her personal Jewish commitments to our discussions, and this journal has been enriched by her perspectives. We will miss her in our future deliberations but look forward to her continued contributions by way of articles and reviews.

Coming Next

Our Spring 2000 issue will focus on "Parenting and Partnering" with a series of articles exploring the challenges, innovations, and opportunities connected to these central relationships.

We hope the articles in this issue provide ample opportunity for your own thinking, and remind you that we welcome letters in reply to further the conversation.

— Richard Hirsh

Letters

Healing Prayer Services

To the Editor:

I looked over several styles of *siddurim* and I found about ten places where healing is mentioned and prayed for in daily services. My question is: Why do we need a separate and special communal petitional "Healing Prayer Service?" Are we spiritually so desperate, so inadequate, that we need a customized service led by an intercessor to exorcise our illnesses?

Aren't we retreating culturally, ethically, and theologically by accepting this kind of ritual? Don't we make ourselves vulnerable to exploitation by "Gurus," "Holy *Rebbes*," "Healers," and "Snake Oil Salesmen?"

We know that the Torah describes our Jewish God, the one to whom prayers are directed, as gracious, slow to anger, kind, compassionate, forgiving of sins, a moral God on whom you can count when in need. God is also described as a healer and even as a preventer of illnesses, a good God that gives things. For countless generations we had been programmed to think that by pleading hard and long enough, and with ample sincerity, the gates to heaven will be opened.

Now we find ourselves in "Petitional Healing Prayer Services" in synagogues of every ilk, orchestrated by specialists, by scholars, I am sure. To which God are our people addressing their prayers—to the omnipotent, benevolent God of the Torah, who hopefully will kiss our sore and make it better, or to the blind, dumb, deaf, and enraged God of the Shoah?

As a young man, I used to think that resorting to false hope or petitional prayers was a transgression against personal honesty and dignity. I also used to think that being sick and dying was not the worst that can happen to a person, that living a lie is. Now that I have reached maturity and look at my tatooed number on the wrinkled skin of my arm, I am not so firm in the opinions I held in my youth. I can even concede that these services might help some people cope with desperate situations and that the community will feel better for reaching out to our people in need. But couldn't we call it a "Communal *Bikur Ḥolim*"? At least it sounds better.

Menachem (Mickey) Warshawski
Queens Village, NY

The Secular As Sacred

To the Editor:

One of the most misunderstood words currently in use is "secular." For most people this connotes antireligion. Yet in modern times secular faiths, like fascism, communism, and even democracy have developed. Some are malignant, others are be-

nign; but they all share the characteristics of religions—systems of salvation, with their values, sacred writings, places, holidays, heroes—generally known as "sancta," which symbolize the common values.

Fortunately, democracy, especially American democracy, developed into a secular faith of great worth and promise, although, to this day, few recognize democracy as a form of secular faith. When one scrutinizes the Declaration of Independence, one can discerning the words "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness," a deistic euphemism for the word "salvation." The Founding Fathers were apparently careful to avoid religious terminology. But surely they had in mind a secular faith.

Many years ago, the Reconstructionist Press published *The Faith of America*, a "prayerbook" for the civic celebration of American holidays. It was based upon the conviction that the writings of the Founding Fathers, the "sancta" of American places and holidays and heroes constituted, in effect, a secular faith. The book offered "religious" services for the major American holidays—Fourth of July, Thanksgiving Day, etc.

Unfortunately the idea did not catch on—and today we are left with the popular misconception of secularism and anti-religion. In Israel this same misconception prevails—the so-called *ḥilonim* are represented as opposing religion.

Perhaps the time has come when we Reconstructionists should boldly declare that we are "secularists" in the sense that we reject supernaturalism but recognize that a system of "salvation" is indispensable to the full life of the human being. We may be misunderstood, but that would not be the first time we would be facing such a problem.

Rabbi Ira Eisenstein
Silver Spring, MD

To Awaken and To Comfort: Rabbi As Spiritual Guide

BY SHEILA PELTZ WEINBERG

In 1976 I attended my first Reconstructionist Rabbinical College (RRC) graduation. The only thing that I can recall is the main speaker, Rabbi Harold Schulweis. I remember listening and becoming more and more excited. I had never heard anyone talk like this man talked. I had never heard anyone speak so clearly and so radically about the possibility of transforming Judaism, about connecting Jewish ritual and teaching with the deepest needs of the human heart and soul. I was more than awakened. I was electrified. I was lurching halfway out of my seat. I was bobbing my head in earnest approval of what he said.

After the graduates' recessional, sometime during the reception I joined the folks crowding around Rabbi Schulweis. I couldn't help it. I told Rabbi Schulweis that I was enthralled by what he had said and that I was going to become a rabbi. He gave me a curious smile. I went home and started typing a ten-page paper which I sent to Rabbi Eisenstein. It began with these words: "I will try to explain to you—and myself—the somewhat awesome desire of a thirty-year-old woman, wife, and mother of two, to become a rabbi."

The Rabbinic Enterprise

So began my participation in the rabbinic enterprise—the reconstruction of Jewish life. I recollect experiencing a literal burst of energy, a charge of hope and possibility, a bolt of new understanding. I learned later that Mordecai Kaplan spoke a great deal about "energy" in referring to the group or the nation or to God. As Kaplan wrote in his journal: "We must break completely with the habit of identifying the whole of the Jewish

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religion with merely certain beliefs and duties, while ignoring completely the living energy which has operated to produce them. They are only the static residue of something that is essentially dynamic."[1]

Each RRC graduation launches a new class of spiritual leaders, rabbis, and teachers. They are becoming rabbis because in some way they were touched by the sparks of energy emanating from creation and from Sinai—sparks transmitted in the white fire and in the black fire, igniting you through a teacher, a story, a moment of illumination in sound or stillness, in community or solitude, in prayer or study or action. The spark sometimes seems invisible. The energy certainly flags at times, smolders and flares at other times. Rabbis have soared and they have crawled. It will continue to be so.

There are three parcels of thoughts and questions to pack into our rabbinic suitcases as we take the steps along our journeys as rabbis.

To Comfort and To Awaken

The first parcel is called "to comfort and to awaken." One of our tasks as rabbis is to comfort people. The repetition of rituals, stories, and festivals forms a pattern of stability and return. We provide a place of meeting, belonging, and acceptance. We are present during trauma and grief. We show up in the funeral parlor and at the ICU and listen to confessions of loss and pain and confusion. We cry with people. We sit with people who are dying.

Not long ago I got a call from Maureen to please visit her mother-in-law Bessie Solomon, who was dying at the local nursing home, and in a terribly agitated state kept calling, "Rabbi, Rabbi." When I arrived and told her I was the rabbi, she said "Rabbi, what do you have to tell me?" This is a great question for us. What is the source of comfort? From what do we derive comfort? Where do we draw the light, the energy, the spirit to face the suffering that we will see and next to which we will be called to stand?

On Friday night we are singing "*Lekha Dodi*" and someone is sitting in the back of our *shul*. Her face is really dark and her eyes are red. Only we know that she buried her father that morning and she hasn't been in a synagogue in twenty years. We pause and acknowledge her and ask everyone to say, "*Hamakom yinakhem etkhem betokh sha'ar avley tziyon veyirushalayim*—May the Place offer you comfort among all who mourn in Zion and Jerusalem." *Hamakom*—the Place (a name for God). This place, The Place, finding your place, resuming your place, finding a new place, knowing the comfort in every place for *Hamakom* fills all places and all times.

Comforting and Awakening

"*Lekha Dodi*" holds an interesting relationship to comfort. "*Lekha Dodi*" is a mystical hymn about awakening. It is a pastiche of verses from the *Tanakh* (Hebrew Bible), especially Isaiah, containing many words aimed at awakening the beloved, the queen, the bride, Jerusalem, the people Israel. We need to wake up from the routine

of the work week. The Sabbath can only be enjoyed if we are present, connected to our souls. Redeemed from the valley of suffering. Comforted. Blown clean and clear of the dust of the week, the *afar*, the grime of sleep, distraction, delusion, absentmindedness, discontent.

Being awake is linked in this song to joy. To be awake is to realize in the words of Rav Kook that "everything sings, celebrates, serves, develops, evolves, uplifts, aspires to be arranged in oneness." To be awake is to grasp a light beam that shines through this finite body toward an infinite creation. To be awake is to yearn for the awakening of all beings and to grieve for the suffering born of our failure to see how deeply connected we are to one another. Our task as human beings, as teachers, as rabbis is to wake up and, through our patience and example, to help awaken others.

Some might say that the task of comforting contradicts the process of awakening. To be awake is to be in pain, and to be comforted is to be asleep, in a state of ignorance and bliss. Some might say that most people come to religion to be put to sleep, to be lulled by the liturgy and soothed by the familiarity—to enter a cocoon that insulates against the unexpected and the uncontrollable. Some say that only a few really want to wake up. Perhaps this is true. Still, I do not think comfort is about being comfortable. I would suggest that to be truly comforted, is to be truly awakened.

Shabbat is an example. It is a time of rest and peace. The stillness, the luxury of sweet bread and wine and good food, candles and song and friendship—all of this is a matrix of comfort and delight. Yet, on Shabbat we wake up to the soul's song and seek freedom from accumulated habits and routines. We contemplate creation, we create a space for the possibility of unity. The Safed Kabbalists walked into the fields to greet the Sabbath. They understood that Nature is a source of comfort and awakening. In Nature we can't help but feel part of the grandeur of creation. We become aware that we are strands in the miraculous web of existence. This knowledge awakens us from the isolation that breeds despair and calls us to act as guardians of the Earth. Torah can also be a source of comfort and awakening. The humanity of our ancestors, their merit, and their struggles are sources of comfort. And we are awakened by the invitation to enter into the dialogue. Torah forces us to wrestle with God. Sometimes we wish we had simpler stories, less ambivalent characters, more harmonious families, happier plots. But Torah is a passionate encounter with our humanity—perennially pulsing to the rhythm of the unity of creation, liberation, and hope.

A story: A young father in our synagogue came to see me. For several months he and his wife had been overwhelmed by dealing with their seven-year-old son and only child, who had been diagnosed with a serious illness. The father and mother are both very sensitive, poets, intelligent and reflective individuals. Their stability was sorely shaken by their terror

at the prospects for their beloved child. I listened as the father spoke. I took in his fear and anger. Then I took a big risk. This man was a serious student of Bible. He had done a *devar Torah* not too long ago about the *Akedah* (Binding of Isaac). I leapt into the void. "You know," I said, "sometimes I think the point of the *Akedah* is this: God has us all. We are all living at the edge of our parents' knife. We are all dancing at the edge of the abyss at every moment. In your life it is simply so obvious and apparent—as it was when God spoke to Abraham. Mostly we don't realize how risky life is—how much we can lose every time we love someone or something. Then it can all change. We can lose everything in a flash. So what is Abraham's greatness? He doesn't go mad. He sees it. He knows it and he continues to live in the life he has been given. He walks up the mountain. He offers himself to this life, completely and without reserve—no matter what. Will this drive you mad, or will it bring you closer to Abraham?" Of course, there are a thousand other interpretations of the *Akedah.* But on that day, in my office, this piece of Torah helped one man feel less abandoned and more full of faith.

Boundaries and Power

The second parcel is about "boundaries and power." Rachel Adler writes about this in her new book, *Engendering Judaism*:

> In the beginning, we are told, there was tohu va-vohu, a formless void. Creation both fills the void and gives it shape. Shaping is accomplished by means of boundaries . . . . Without a boundary there can be no "I" and no "other" . . . . But while boundary and categorizing are acts of relation, they are also acts of power . . . . Both boundary making and the exercise of power are basic human activities. They have no intrinsic moral valence. Boundaries are not intrinsically divisive any more than power is intrinsically oppressive . . . . But acts of distinction and acts of power are morally charged. They carry implications of how members of categories are to behave and how others are to behave towards them. Hence, acts of definition are vulnerable to abuse . . . . Physically, emotionally, ethically, we are best served by boundaries that acknowledge the integrity of both self and other yet are flexible enough to allow for creativity and communion.[2]

Rabbis frequently become "other" in the Jewish community. This is strange news. It is because of our passionate devotion to the Jewish people and tradition that we made the choice to become rabbis and now we find that we are becoming something other than a regular Jew. A leader is an "other." A leader must be concerned with boundaries and power. Because we live in an era where no one has any time and there aren't many rules and

there are accelerating amounts of information, this is even more challenging. What are some implications?

Preserving Identity

I try never to say "my congregation," "my board," "my president," "my educator," "my treasurer," etc. I need to preserve an identity as a woman and a Jew that is not identical with the Jewish institution that I serve, and I need to acknowledge that I do not own any of these institutions. This is really important for my spirit. In addition, I am not responsible for all the praise or the blame that I receive. Rabbis are symbols. We have chosen to be symbols. Hence we represent something to many people that has nothing to do with us, and everything to do with how people view their Judaism, authority figures, God, or experience a particular moment in their lives. We gain power from this and admiration and attention. We can use this power for valuable ends, to help move Jews in the direction of *tzedek veshalom*, peace and justice. We should not, however bask too long in this glow or mistake it for ourselves. It often comes with equally unmerited blame for our failure to meet expectations and to fill needs, ideals, and dreams. Our words and actions sometimes have greater weight to others than we imagine. Our simple kindnesses may be received in extravagant ways; our censure and judgment may add salt to ancient wounds and sting beyond imagination.

The career of rabbi offers an excellent opportunity for a sustained meditation on boundaries and power. We are often very giving, caring, and idealistic—we enjoy, more than anything else, helping other people. We want to be loved, to be appreciated. We are also very sensitive to criticism. Rabbis love to say "Yes" and hate to say "No." We have active intellects and deeply appreciate knowledge. We want to transform our ancient tradition and deeply believe that it is possible. Let's face it. We want to save the Jews! We want to save the world! Yet, many of us feel inadequate in relation to the sources of Judaism. Most of us share the fear that we don't know enough, are not pious enough, are not genuine enough, spiritual enough, politically courageous enough, generous enough—What is enough? When is enough? How do we make and live with wise choices?

Making Choices

I remember a day when I was working at Temple University Hillel in the 70s, when a group of students were baking *hamantashen* (Purim pastries) in the kitchen and needed help, and another group of students was planning a program on the Holocaust. I was torn between *hamantashen* and the Holocaust—a typical experience. A few months back I was called by a political organizer to speak on a Wednesday night in Boston at a rally protesting the prospective American bombing of Iraq. That same night I was scheduled to teach a course on Abraham Joshua Heschel's views on moral responsibility and religion. I thought Heschel would go to the rally. What was I to do? There are always choices. Which groups to teach

and counsel—the beginners or the advanced? The disaffected or the committed? The spiritual seekers or the politically active? There will never be enough time to manifest all of the possibilities born of our desire and imagination.

The first synagogue meeting I attended in Amherst when I arrived in town was about the steeple—a loud and angry meeting filled with very opinionated people. It had been discovered that the tilting steeple on the 150-year-old church that was now the *shul* was a potential danger if and when we had high winds and storm. Half the people wanted to take it down because they hated the idea that a synagogue looked like a church and had a steeple. The other half were adamant about fixing it up so that it would remain a New England historic building—and the Jews should not offend our Christian neighbors. Having attended so many meetings over the years, I observed colliding opinions based on taste, preference, history and hundreds of known and unknown factors. The steeple was not my issue. As rabbis, we need to be available beyond and through many of the issues that rile and agitate various factions and interests in the community. My personal commitment however, is to try and speak for the ones without a voice—for the hidden and the invisible at the margins of the community.

Reflecting on boundaries and power leads me to distinguish between attachment and connection. We need to examine this often. As a spiritual leader I am committed to principles, values and practices. I am an *ed*, a witness. I witness to order, meaning, justice, courage, love, hope, mystery, unity, the infinite divine light in every human being, the full worth of human life, the possibility of freedom. I try to be attentive to the truth of the moment, when I am with people and when I am by myself. I try to touch the range of experiences that are presented to me. I try not to expect that things will work out as I plan or prefer. I try not to rely on a particular outcome for any particular process. I don't get invested or attached to whether the steeple stays or goes.

We are called to create a new form of flexible leadership that acknowledges the integrity of both self and other and allows for creativity and communion. We need to know ourselves deeply, to plumb the depths of our own fears and weaknesses as we accept and appreciate our strengths and talents. We need to seek and accept help and support, nurturing and care from sources inside and outside our rabbinic jobs—from other rabbis and other clergy, from retreats, from healers and visionaries, from literature and learning, from music and nature, from therapists, and from the earth, from all the things that feed your soul. And remember: Eat well and get enough rest!

Love the Jews

The last parcel is simple, but not easy. It is called: "love the Jews." This is a great spiritual practice. It is hard because we are the Jews. The hardest part of *ve'ahavta lere'akha kamokha*

(love your neighbor as yourself) is "*kamokha*" ("as yourself"). This is true because we see the similarities. We see the traumas and the ambivalence and the yearning. We know the need to belong and the fear that it will never happen. It is said that synagogues are like families in that we come to them bearing our highest expectations and our very best intentions but we also bring our worst behaviors. It's the same principle that makes the mothers of our friends always seem to be such lovely women. It might be easier to feel love for any other people but of course that is the point. One of our most powerful and important teachings is that the route to true universalism is through the particular. Here are a few pointers on this compelling practice of *ahavat Yisra'el* (love of Israel).

Moses Cordovero writes in *Tomer Devorah*:

> First, respect all creatures, recognizing in them the sublime nature of their Creator, who fashions human beings in wisdom and whose wisdom inheres in each created thing. Second, train yourself to bring the love of your fellow human beings into your heart, even the wicked, as if they were your brothers and sisters. . . . "

We need to *practice* directing loving kindness toward not only all of our fellow human beings, but toward ourselves, those who are close to us and finally to those who are most difficult for us to love.

Leonard Fein tells a story about good leadership. It was August 7, 1945 and he was eleven years old at Camp Tavor. The director of the camp called all the children together at the flagpole and said: "I want you to know that a terrible thing happened yesterday that will change history and all our lives. The United States dropped the first atomic bomb ever on Hiroshima, Japan." Many years later Fein remembers this story because, at eleven years old, he was treated with respect and total seriousness. This is good advice for leaders. Treat people with respect, especially children and those we may tend to dismiss or disregard for various reasons. Often the major act of respect is simply to listen. Most people just want someone to listen to them. If we listen deeply and speak with respect we save ourselves a lot of work. When we don't listen we lose time and trust which cannot be retrieved.

Another strategy for cultivating *ahavat Yisra'el* is developing perspective. Jews are a small minority. The religious and ethnic picture in this country and the world is fascinating and complex. The largest Buddhist temple in the world is in Los Angeles. Chicago has seventy Islamic mosques. Boston and Cambridge together have more than 250 churches where worship services are conducted in languages other than English. It is important to remember that God is not relying on us alone.

Keeping Perspective

Perspective, perspective, perspective. That is a great aid in this field. We had a community meeting re-

cently at our synagogue in Amherst. There had been numerous mailings about the agenda, which was about initiating a capital campaign to expand the building. Ninety people showed up on the night of Mother's Day. We had a quorum. Everyone was psyched to hear the final proposal and vote. Then one of the veteran members raised his hand and made a motion that we adjourn the meeting because there had been an infraction of a subtle, unseen, unknown, and unheard obscure part of the bylaws. The ninety people persisted to debate for forty-five minutes whether or not they should go home and reschedule another meeting.

I suddenly realized that I was in Chelm. I understood why Chelm is so important—even more important than a comic fool or clown figure. In our folklore it is the entire community that represents the fool—the individuals are all intelligent and well meaning—but when they gather, sometimes it is Chelm. Once you understand that you are in Chelm—the unavoidable maneuvers, posturing, heartfelt efforts at compromise, caring and sweet foibles of human beings wishing with all their insecurities to build something lasting and beautiful, to really heal the world and themselves—all of that is easier to take.

When we can laugh at ourselves and the antics of our community, we feel a deep love for our humanity, a perspective about redemption, a sense of comfort, an awakening to the reality of our limitations and the magnificence of our possibilities. We can smile at ourselves and at each other. We can lead by holding our principles with our laughter, by opening our hearts wider and wider to create more space for *Hamakom*, for the contradictions and the imperfections, the love and the struggle, the potential and the gratitude for what is before us.

May, we always remember that wherever we are it is not too far from Jerusalem and not too far from Chelm.

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1. Mel Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century: A Biography of Mordecai M. Kaplan* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994), 148.

2. Rachel Adler, *Engendering Judaism: An Inclusive Theology and Ethics* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1998), 115.

The Rabbinic Role in Organizational Decision Making

BY DAVID A. TEUTSCH

The legitimation of decision making in an organization rests on an agreement about who ought to have authority and what constitutes proper process. But how any group perceives legitimation will be deeply affected by how its leaders are perceived as carrying out their roles. Rabbis often have complex roles and multiple sources of authority, and these need to be examined to understand the legitimation of their roles in organizational decision making. My ideological preference is for combining open discussion and democratic processes with serious Jewish learning, values exploration, and study of current information from the social and natural sciences. But I will set that aside here in order to examine the rabbinic role as a context for decision making.

In thinking about the rabbis of old, most Jews in my experience rely on two images. The first is of the scholar sitting dressed in dark clothes and debating points of law in the yeshivah with large, dusty, incomprehensible tomes spread open on the table before him (always him!). The other is the wise adjudicator making pronouncements, for example, on the kashrut of a chicken and settling fights between quarreling neighbors. These images conjure up an automatic power, authority, and claim to authenticity that most modern Jews find alternately comforting and alienating. It provides much of the multivalent emotional backdrop but not the contemporary context within which most contemporary rabbis function. In practice contemporary rabbis have evolved far past this picture of their roles even though they still frequently struggle with its emotional consequences, which often color issues surrounding decision making processes.

Without dwelling on the evolution of the rabbinate—a subject that has a

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growing literature of its own—I would like to propose a five-part typology of the contemporary rabbinic role. Within each part are options that are more traditional or less so, and more authoritarian or less so. Most rabbinic positions have varying amounts of all five elements, which are listed here in no particular order:

Pastor-Priest

From the magically transforming power of ritual actor to the healing and calming presence of the pastor at a sickbed or counselor in times of trouble, rabbis have profound, personal relationships tying them to individuals whose lives they touch. In this role the rabbi often consults with the individuals but usually retains full control, and always retains veto power over decisions about what the rabbi will say or do. The rabbi's power comes from his/her tie to key experiences in the lives of others, from control over transformative rituals, and from the intimate knowledge of their lives. This power, often experienced as parental, not only provides a critical source of role legitimation. It is often a two-edged sword that can make the rabbi an admired or resented symbol of authority depending, upon the psyche of the beholder.

This is particularly the case for those rabbis who maximize the more dramatic, awe-inspiring aspect of their role as priest rather than the more consultative, personal aspect of their role as pastor. When rabbis internalize the priestly role, they sometimes understand themselves as *kley kodesh*, holy vessels. This not only legitimates their uniqueness and power in the community; it implies they are always above reproach. That claim creates resentments around the issues of power and blame as well as a belief that rabbis do not understand what "real life" is about because they do not participate in it.

Administrator-Facilitator

The title of the position and the job description will vary depending upon the congregation or organization, but usually the rabbi is an important professional with responsibilities for overseeing and coordinating with other staff, planning and executing programs, serving as a liaison with various committees, and performing a broad variety of other organizational functions. In many of these functions the rabbi may also be a key facilitator, communicator, and/or strategic planner. In matters involving policy or innovation, the balance among unilateral action, advice and consent, and group decision making varies widely, but there is always a balance, and there are always group disagreements and gray areas regarding where that balance is. When the rabbi is an effective administrator and communicator, the rabbi's presence can pervade every organizational activity and decision even when the rabbi is not physically present. This often enriches and improves leaders' perspectives and helps to break down the rabbi-for-ritual and board-for-money model in which the rabbi (and hence Judaism) is seen as irrelevant for anything practical. But

it also can bring out in some laypeople the sense that they are not being trusted and given the freedom necessary to do their jobs.

Scholar-Adjudicator

In most settings the rabbi is a major source of Jewish knowledge and teaching. This root of rabbinic power and function may be expressed in ways that are more authoritarian (e.g. halakhic decisor) or more supportive of individual choice ("Let's look at sources that show how and why traditional practice does it and then look at some contemporary alternatives so that you can decide what you want to do"), more aimed at empowering through transferring skills and motivation or at retaining traditional roles by handing down pronouncements. All rabbis necessarily do some of each in the course of their function as repositories of Jewish learning, but once again the balance shifts from rabbi to rabbi and organization to organization. If the rabbi retains the sole right to be the repository of tradition, this may well result in a reluctance to share power in areas perceived as historically lay-controlled.

Magid-Teacher-Prophet

Providing inspiration and motivation, giving *divrey Torah*, teaching in the classroom, and leading informal learning sessions are part of most rabbinic positions, either regularly or occasionally. Depending upon the rabbi's position, message, charisma, and personal relationships with students, teaching may be a powerful, centrally important, and even commanding aspect of the rabbinic role, or it can be one of only minor significance. Through teaching, the rabbi can expound tradition, champion innovation, or stress social action. This can be done through prophetic (and hence authoritarian) demand, through exhortation to discussion and action, or through providing emotional support, interesting material, and challenging questions.

With the *magid*-teacher-prophet too, the balance among these elements will reflect rabbi and organization as well as the relationship between them. When the rabbi tends to the more authoritarian as teacher and preacher, this will often increase resistance to the spread of the rabbi's influence in venues that are not traditionally those of the rabbi.

One aspect of the role is teaching by example. It is inevitably the case that the rabbi is a role model. I remember my astonishment as a young rabbi when I found a congregant staring into my home pantry. Responding to my confusion, she said without embarrassment that this was her chance to see what foods were okay to buy for her newly kosher kitchen. Functioning as a role model gives the rabbi the claustrophobic feeling of always being on duty. Should rabbis aspire to serving as role models of extraordinary holiness and commitment or of blending Jewish commitment with lives that otherwise are not so different from those of the people around

them? How will this affect rabbinic authority and power?

Beneficiary-Supervisee

The rabbi generally depends upon the organization for a livelihood. Rabbinic compensation is a large budget item, reflecting the central importance of a high level of rabbinic function to the success of the organization. Controversies abound over how to supervise rabbis and evaluate their performance, and how to determine appropriate compensation. While there are legitimate reasons that rabbis want to avoid using the term, from this vantage point they are employees. Whether tough and demanding or flexible and soft-spoken in matters involving supervision and compensation, the rabbi inevitably struggles over this aspect of leadership, which is an inevitable result of serving as a professional communal leader.

Role Dissonance

A painful dissonance can exist for the rabbi as a result of the power that flows from the first four rabbinic roles and the relative powerlessness often experienced as a result of the fifth role. When resentments have built up over the extent of the rabbi's exercise of power and authority in some of the first four rabbinic roles, those resentments are often acted out in connection with the fifth. Sometimes this is appropriate, but often it revolves around lay leaders who have not worked out their own problems with authority or with the Jewish tradition. It is most difficult to handle when the appropriate and inappropriate elements are mixed together, as they all too often are. In my experience the only way to avoid this is to maintain an ongoing dialogue regarding the way that power and authority can best be exercised in the organization. Often this is a conversation that the rabbi and organization do not foster with the result that it takes place in stressful and destructive ways.

A rabbi with whom I talked recently could not understand why congregants so often seemed angry with him just as he began his new contract. After all, he told me, they had just given him the full increase that he had demanded if he was to continue with the congregation. I asked what the budget consequences were, and he noted membership dues increases, expanded fundraising, and a serious deficit. I pointed out that the way he had obtained his increased compensation had been experienced by at least some of his congregants as blackmail, and I asked whether that might explain the new feelings he had encountered. This is an uncommon situation. More often, when the negotiation turns sharply adversarial, it is the rabbis who capitulate and must then deal with their feelings of frustration, anger, and impotence. These feelings have powerful implications for the distribution of power and authority in the congregation. They will often show up later in situations unconnected to the original conflict. A rabbi I saw at a *shiva* minyan several months ago put it bitterly, "I am their paid Jew."

The interaction among the various

aspects of rabbinic leadership has a profound impact on the nature of the rabbinic role in organizational decision making. The division of authority in the many areas of rabbinic and organizational life, the relative powers of rabbi and organization, the complex of feelings and attitudes between them, and the degree of self-consciousness that exists about the relationship all deeply influence the nature and smoothness of the decision-making process.

Lay-Rabbinic Leadership

Rabbis who are highly present and powerful in all of the aspects of leadership may dwarf the other professionals and lay leaders with whom they work. This domination may result in weak leaders being attracted to the organizational hierarchy. It may also result in unstated anger and frustration gradually building up toward the rabbi. Sometimes rabbis persuade and build consensus, thereby creating a cooperative commitment to change. Other times rabbis force change or block it through a coercive exercise of personal will. Bending a resistant organization to a rabbi's will is like bending back a tree branch further and further. If it doesn't crack, it will unleash a dangerous amount of uncontrolled energy the moment the rabbi's grip loosens.

Rabbis who are particularly strong in one or more areas and less so in others sometimes effectively compensate by inviting volunteers or other professionals to fill the gaps. This diffusion of power and responsibility often results in an increased sense of partnership and mutual worth. On the other hand, when the rabbi resists acknowledging areas of weakness and avoids getting help from others, this can result in conflict, negative evaluations regarding the rabbi's performance, and sometimes (particularly when traditional attitudes toward the rabbi are present) an institutionally dangerous version of the-emperor-has-no-clothes or elephant-on-the-table. When the weaknesses are acknowledged but not compensated for, the result can be institutional weakness.

Agreements about power and authority are essential to any successful decision-making process because cooperation is needed to implement decisions. Sharing power requires that the rabbi not exceed the amount of authority that the organization is willing to accept. In the roles of priest, counselor, prophet, administrator, adjudicator, scholar, and teacher, the rabbi can exercise an enormous amount of both power and authority outside the narrow confines of the official decision-making process. Unless the rabbi and organization are willing to allow the rabbi to become the dominant center of the organization with the rest of its members pushed into entirely subordinate roles, the rabbi cannot exercise sole authority in all these areas. Most rabbis, by virtue of their own predilections, will choose to specialize in one area or a few.

Some rabbis will avoid being authoritarian even in their areas of greatest involvement and specialization, but that takes enormous strength of character. The effect of people look-

ing up to the rabbi—putting the rabbi on a pedestal or treating the rabbi as a parent-figure or as someone special—is that the rabbi develops the expectation that the rabbi should always be treated as an authority figure. Given that many go into the rabbinate partly because they find the public role attractive, there is a particularly strong tendency for rabbis to delight in being at the center of attention and authority. (What person doesn't?) This can create a complicated dynamic in which discussing decision-making processes becomes unexpectedly tense and even explosive.

Issues of Decision Making

Those who are unhappy with the overall division of power and authority between rabbi and other organization members or who are unhappy with the division regarding any one of the five basic rabbinic roles will fight for a revision or, feeling unable to do that, act out their resistance in other ways, such as undermining the rabbi elsewhere or pulling back from the organization. This provides a pressing reason for becoming self-conscious about the division of power and authority, placing questions about decision-making processes in that context, and taking care in designing the decision-making process to develop a consensus around power issues and methods of decision making. I have observed that in the life of most groups, agreement about the method of decision making is more important to achieving a positive outcome than what the method is.

Decision-making methods also necessarily differ depending upon the size and nature of the organization. A *ḥavurah* can operate with the entire group participating in making all decisions of any consequence. Small congregations necessarily require some representative decision making. Large congregations need highly differentiated committee structures and delegate many more operational decisions to paid professionals.

Congregations can be ideologically committed to: (1) centralized authority, as illustrated in the Reform *Temple Management Manual*; (2) a broader democracy, as in the Reconstructionist model; (3) the concept of rabbi as *mara de'atra* (local authority) on the Conservative model, in which often the rabbi has relatively little involvement in synagogue management affairs; or (4) the concept of rabbi as ultimate authority in all matters, as in the Orthodox world.

Different kinds of organizations also have different modes of decision making. The Jewish Reconstructionist Federation, for example, is deeply committed to a democratic system in which all significant decisions are made by lay leaders. The Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, following the methods laid out by its accrediting agency for colleges and universities, takes only broad questions of policy and finance to its board, relegating other decisions to complex staff-driven procedures involving administrators, faculty, and in some cases students. Hillel directors have the responsibilities exercised by executive directors in small to mid-sized not-for-profit agencies. Chaplains often form

an independent administrative unit that is only lightly supervised by the hospital, nursing home, prison, or other facility.

What can be deduced from this diverse list of models? That decision-making processes should be designed in light of many variables. The most central of these variables include:

- the nature, purpose, and structure of the organization;
- institutional history and ideology;
- the skills, style, personality, and preferences of the rabbi;
- the history and status of the relationship between the rabbi and the organization;
- the personalities and histories of leaders and opinion makers within the organization.

These variables, rather than preset universal blueprints of processes and divisions of power, ought to shape decision-making structures. Having clarity about what the rabbi is good at and interested in is of particular importance. Since rabbis occasionally change jobs and many other organizational changes occur from time to time, frequent review of decision-making processes is highly important. This is one of the important functions of synagogue bylaws committees.

Broader Issues

Some universal comments about decision-making are needed to fulfill the purpose of this essay. These will of necessity reflect my Reconstructionist views. My first assumption is that individuals ought to be as free as possible to follow the dictates of their own consciences regarding what they themselves will or will not do. Second, the community has the right to determine its own direction. It can delegate decision making to the rabbi, but it is the community as a whole that has the right to determine its own good. Third, maximizing input is most likely to result in the best decision, but less significant decisions should be made in the smallest appropriate group after the shortest appropriate discussion in order to avoid squandering the time and energy of the group. Boards should expect committees to formulate full proposals and present reasons for and against them.

Rabbis tend to focus most on issues of ritual and individual status, areas primarily of concern in their priest/pastor function. While these are the areas most directly affecting their own activities, they are not the only critical places in need of substantial input regarding Jewish precedents and values. For example, the most powerful assertion of the congregation's priorities and values is evidenced in its budget and program, yet most rabbis spend little time exploring how the budget can be shaped to reflect most fully the organization's values and priorities. Decisions regarding health insurance for secretaries and the elaborateness of interior decoration also embody powerful moral choices.

Participating in planning processes and providing Jewish input to the broadest possible series of decisions provides the rabbi with critical opportunities to educate organizational stakeholders and shape the overall organizational direction. For some con-

gregational rabbis this suggests too great an involvement in the administrator role, but I would suggest that this function can as easily be understood under the rubrics of scholar and teacher since it shapes the organization through Jewish education. This mode of intervention will not be resented if it is undertaken in a manner that is not coercive or authoritarian and if resentments about rabbinic power or adversarial style have not built up already in ways that I've described earlier in this essay. I would argue that the rabbi should have substantial input in every matter that is in any sense Jewish. I know few rabbis who have superb opinions about which heating company should get the contract, but I hope that they develop Jewishly informed opinions about issues like the environmental impact of synagogue consumption or the interaction between the nature of architecture and the character of Jewish prayer.

Where Decisions Get Made

The rabbi will have the greatest influence in decision-making processes in the least grating way if the rabbi builds consensus by using opportunities for one-on-one discussion and for teaching rather than relying on strong assertions during large meetings. While taking strong stands during decision-making meetings may occasionally be necessary, it strains relations and uses a great deal of political capital so that doing so should be understood as a tactic of last resort. The demystification of the rabbinic role results in a greater reliance on persuasion and facilitation. Especially in congregations and clusters of *ḥavurot*, the rabbi more than any other single person has the opportunity to talk with people and feel the pulse of the organization. This provides the opportunity to shape views in a way that builds consensus and trust. If the rabbi can convince the leadership that major decisions should be accompanied by relevant Jewish study, that will not only improve the organization's direction. It will also serve as a decision-making model for organization members in their own lives.

The model in which one side wins an argument and the other side loses is destructive to everyone. We need to remind all of the organization's members, including the rabbi, that we are struggling to make decisions *leshem shamayim* (for the sake of heaven). Keeping score is bad for everyone because it encourages decision makers to give ego needs precedence over thoughtful listening and compromise. In my experience, the roots of lay-rabbinic conflicts about decision making lie in the basic roles of the rabbi. Conflicts and tensions result from the way that power and authority balance. If there is a breakdown of listening skills, or if the professionals do not put enough time and energy into facilitating dialogue in advance of decision-making meetings these conflicts and tensions then become amplified. By virtue of their presence, knowledge, and role, rabbis are usually the most influential people in their organizations. They need to learn to use that influence. If they don't, before blaming anyone else regarding poor

decisions or hostility toward the rabbi, they should consider their own responsibility. It is true that occasionally an emotionally disturbed, vindictive, or obtuse organization member will upset the decision-making process. In my experience, however, it is much more difficult to do that when the professionals are doing their homework.

Change Takes Time

I don't believe that a rabbi who fully develops and vigorously uses the interrelated skills needed to function as Jewish resource, teacher, and facilitator will suffer from an inability to move the organization on issues of importance. The organization will be powerfully influenced by where the rabbi stands. Furthermore, when the rabbi is fulfilling well the tasks needed by the organization but not demanding the right to make decisions, it is my experience that often the right to make a sensible mix of decisions is naturally and gracefully given. This, however, may take years. Most organizational theorists agree that it takes five years to make successful changes in areas of an organization that are deeply embedded. It takes another five years for those changes to become fully institutionalized. Rabbis, like other organizational leaders, need to learn patience!

Rabbis are in the business of teaching Torah. Often we are most effective teaching one Jew at a time. Teaching does not mean that our students will arrive precisely at our conclusions. But if we trust them, we know that as at Yavneh, in the formative years of rabbinic Judaism, once we are done teaching and discussing, it is up to them to cast their votes with the most learned voting last.

The ideological statements in this essay are for the most part not different from those propounded by some of our colleagues as long as twenty years ago. What has changed in the interim is our awareness of the impediments to their implementation, some of which I have discussed here. As our awareness of the difficulties in carrying out our vision of the rabbinic role has increased, so has our understanding of the skills, insights, and motivations needed to surmount those difficulties. The reshaping of seminary curricula should increasingly reflect these considerations. Even when the curricula are optimal, however, substantial experience is needed to fully comprehend their implications. Thus these concerns should be revisited frequently through continued professional training for rabbis in the field. Congregational decision making will continue to be a place where fruitful discussion, traditional sources, professional expertise, and committed lay energy coalesce.

The Rabbi As Spiritual Leader

BY SIDNEY SCHWARZ

Ever since the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College started to graduate rabbis in the mid-1970s, the Reconstructionist movement has been struggling to understand the implications of its philosophy as it pertains to the role of the rabbi in congregational life. I have been an active participant in that ongoing discussion. In particular I have been an advocate of rabbis implementing congregational processes in which laypeople play an active role in shaping the principles, religious policies and standards which subsequently guide and govern congregational life.*

These are among the areas that I explored in my recently completed study of American synagogues entitled, *Finding a Spiritual Home: How a New Generation of American Jews Can Transform the American Synagogue* (Jossey Bass, 2000). The book looks at what makes certain synagogues "work" and what separates them from others that don't. My criteria for the paradigm that I call the "synagogue-community" were certain characteristics pertaining to communal culture, articulation of mission, serious Judaism, and spiritual leadership. The synagogues from each of the four denominations that I profiled distinguished themselves by their ability to attract a significant number of marginal and unaffiliated Jews. The book concludes with an analysis of what it would take to transform the rest of American synagogues to the synagogue-community paradigm which has a unique ability to attract the next generation of American Jews.

Shaping Communal Cultures

Of significant note was the fact that the most successful synagogues that I found were places in which the rabbis played some central role in

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either the founding of the congregation or in being its first full-time rabbi. As such, the rabbi was essential in shaping the communal culture that came to define the community. By communal culture I mean an attitude of mind and spirit that permeates a community and comes to animate all areas of institutional functioning.

Every institution has a communal culture uniquely its own. Such cultures evolve over time, almost imperceptibly. Once in place however, an institutional culture is extremely hard to change. Even the most effective and politically savvy rabbi will find it hard, if not impossible, to change an existing communal culture in a short period of time, although some change can be effected over a five-to-ten-year term. If there is not a match between a rabbi's personal style and the communal culture in which they are retained as the rabbi, s/he needs to engage in strategic planning, preferably with key lay leaders, around the way the culture might be changed. Failure to anticipte this "culture gap" will invariably undermine the effectiveness of even the most talented rabbi in that community.

Thus a congregation that functions as a small, informal *ḥavurah* for ten years in members' homes will have significant difficulties adjusting to their first paid rabbi. If that rabbi was inclined towards a more formal style and was to conduct his/her first High Holyday services in the new congregation with little to no lay involvement, there would be an early and serious clash of styles. The unwritten rules of the communal culture would be violated. If the rabbi continued in the same vein, the seeds of a rocky, and most likely short, tenure would be sown. Conversely, if a rabbi came to a congregation that was used to a formal service and immediately launched into *ḥavurah*-style services, with the rabbi him/herself dressed down and "winging" parts of the service that were always well prepared ahead of time, an equally problematic relationship would ensue.

Communal cultures touch many other areas of congregational life as well. They include things like the linkage between wealth and leadership; the relationship to the organized Jewish community and the federation world; the expectations of the rabbinic family; the attendance patterns at services, classes and congregational programs; the extent of commitment to social justice issues; the attitude to experimentation in services; the musical style; the role of the board and committees; the relationship to the national movement and to neighboring synagogues; the attitude to classically marginal populations (e.g. gay and lesbian Jews, intermarried Jews, singles, the disabled, the elderly); the attention to youth. The list could go on.

The point is that no healthy rabbi-congregational relationship can be created without significant symmetry between the communal culture of a congregation and the approach and style of the rabbi. The fact that rabbi-board relationships are so often troubled has to do with the failure of both parties to identify and articulate what the cultural norms are in the re-

spective congregation. A new rabbi who is politically active may be able to move the congregation in that direction but if there is no tradition of such activism in that community, a good deal of preparatory work will be necessary to introduce activism without it backfiring in the face of the rabbi. A congregation whose last rabbi was a consumate pastor, diligent about visits to any member who fell sick and conscientious about weekly follow-up phone calls, will be unforgiving to that rabbi's successor if s/he is not inclined to do the same.

Rabbi-Congregation Culture Clashes

Let none of this be construed as suggesting that rabbis always have to accommodate to the cultural styles of the congregations that employ them. Indeed, I am convinced that congregations are hungry for rabbis to assert themselves as the spiritual leaders of the community. In other words, congregations desire rabbis who, by force of character and commitment can shape the communal culture of the congregation. But to emerge as a spiritual leader, rabbis must avoid being overly passive or overly strong-willed. A rabbi whose only goal is to keep the board happy, and who will do anything and everything to please, will quickly find that the demands made on them will be impossible to meet.

Instead of commanding respect, every constituency in the congregation will want a piece of the rabbi. Without a well-designed process in which the board and the rabbi can state mutual expectations resulting in some agreed upon set of short- and long-term objectives, the rabbi will feel like he/she has been put on a beach and are expected to remove all of the sand with a teaspoon. Frustration, disappointment, and burn-out is inevitable. Rabbis in this situation will sacrifice their own health and well-being, and that of their families, and will still find it impossible to please their constituency. If the congregation doesn't precipitate the end of the rabbi's tenure, the rabbi will either move on to a new congregation that they hope will be better or find another career.

An overly strong-willed rabbi will not fare much better. To come into a congregation with an agenda that bears no relationship to the existing communal culture or to the expressed needs of members will invariably earn the rabbi a reputation as arrogant, aloof, and unresponsive to the congregation. The rabbi might be a brilliant teacher, who in his/her first year offers an exciting array of high-level adult-education courses. But if, given the age and life cycle of the community, the most important need is the development of a youth program and the rabbi gives that need no attention, failure is inevitable.

Of the two models outlined above, it seems to me that the Reconstructionist movement has erred on the side of training rabbis and congregations to think that rabbis are no more than teacher/facilitators. In a desire to close the unhealthy gap between rabbis and laity that is so characteristic of the other movements in American

Jewish life, we have suggested that rabbis are, at best, first among equals. This is not enough.

I recall being part of a committee at the congregation that I helped to found, Adat Shalom, that was charged with selecting a student rabbi to work with me. Most of the candidates were upper-year students at the RRC. One member of the committee, a past president of the congregation, asked the same question to each of the candidates: "What is your vision for American Jewish life that you would like to be the legacy of your rabbinate and how will you use the congregation to advance that vision?" Now this may have been an overly ambitious question for students who were not yet finished with their schooling, and the jaw-dropping reaction of most of the students to the question supports that observation. But it is a great question. Our rabbinical schools should prepare students to answer such a question, and congregations should be trained to expect no less from their rabbis.

"Eating Up" Our Leaders

This brings me back to the model of the rabbi as spiritual leader. In the book of Numbers(13:32) the land of Israel is called "*eretz okhelet yoshvehah,*" a land that consumes its inhabitants. To paraphrase that verse, America is a country that consumes its leaders. Baby-boomers who grew up on the war in Vietnam and Watergate have an acquired distrust of any individual in leadership. The probing eye of the media, which now reveals to us every sexual and ethical indiscretion of public persons, contributes to the pervading cynicism of our society about leadership. Yet I also believe deeply in the aphorism, "Where there is no vision, the people perish." People are desperate for true spiritual leadership; rabbis can and should provide it.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the most successful, creative, and innovative congregations that I found in America were those in which a rabbi played a central role in founding the congregation or in creating it from its nascent stages. These were situations in which rabbis had a clear vision for the kind of community they wanted to create. People coming to the congregation had no question about who the leader was.

Now it is true that few rabbis have the opportunity to start their own synagogues, though it is most certainly a fantasy that tempts almost every rabbi at some point during his/her career. Nor do too many rabbis have the opportunity to serve as a new congregation's first full-time rabbi. Yet the dynamic that exists in those unique situations reveal important insights into the kind of rabbinic-lay relationship that can lead to much more exciting and vibrant synagogues.

When a rabbi is permitted to emerge as the spiritual leader of a community, there is an opportunity for a vision to be put forth that motivates and inspires. The people who join such congregations will be drawn to the community because the vision will animate the communal culture which, in turn, is felt in every facet of congregational life. People drawn to such a community become not only loyal followers of the rabbi and his/her

vision for the synagogue but, within a short time, became advocates and missionaries for that vision as well. In this kind of environment, officers, board members, and committee chairs see themselves less as lay supervisors of the rabbi and more as members of a community being nurtured and led by a spiritual leader with whom they are in a sacred partnership.

The Art of Empowerment

For a rabbi to take on the role of spiritual leader of the community involves undertaking far more than the traditional roles of rabbi as religious functionary. It has as much to do with guiding how the congregation sets its priorities, what kinds of programs become featured, and how the message and mission is articulated and given shape. This requires both board and rabbi to be clear on the distinction between having rabbinic functions performed and having a spiritual leader for a congregation. It is relatively easy for any community of Jews to find someone to lead a service, teach a course, or work with children in formal and informal educational settings. These are services that can be "sub-contracted" to individuals as long as they understand the general approach and needs of the community. For a community to have a rabbi functioning as a spiritual leader implies that it wants its religious, educational, social action, life cycle and organizational life guided, in part, by a person who can both shape and reflect the community's ideals and aspirations.

This is the rabbinic work of building and nurturing community and it takes place "off the *bimah*." It involves attendance at meetings, work with committees, and time spent working with members who assume a variety of responsibilities for the synagogue. If Reconstructionist congregations mean more by the term "participatory congregation" than an occasional English reading done by a layperson at services, then rabbis must invest time in helping Jews learn how to create synagogue-communities. This involves getting congregants to take maximal responsibility for all the tasks that, in many congregations, are ceded to the rabbi: teaching synagogue skills; reaching out to new and marginal members; leading services; creating a study group or teaching a course; providing for pastoral needs of members; spearheading social action projects, etc. It is the art of empowerment—taking power that would normally be invested in a given office and sharing it with others in the system in a supportive way.

I used to say that this agenda amounted to a rabbi putting himself/herself out of a job. I was wrong; this is the job. I now understand better how central this empowerment strategy is to establishing a healthy communal culture in a congregation and it can only be done by the rabbi. It is about the rabbi moving beyond the role of exclusive religious functionary in the congregation and assuming responsibility for the health of the entire communal system. It is the way that a rabbi can emerge as a true spiritual leader.

One of the most vital roles that can

be played by rabbis seeking to offer leadership to their communities is the way that they recruit lay leadership and the way that they invite various members to share their particular gifts with the community. Rabbis are seen as the guardians of the Jewish tradition; they are in a unique position to empower their congregants to become active shapers of that tradition instead of passive recipients of it.

As such rabbis should play a central role in deciding who should be invited to come on the board, and thus be drawn into the leadership cadre of the congregation. They should reach out to congregants to offer a *devar Torah* or to lead some musical piece during a service. Rabbis should think strategically about a talented member who might chair a new congregational initiative. It is in this way that the rabbi also elicits from congregants their spiritual stories. Each and every Jew has a powerful and poignant journey in their soul. A rabbi who can help Jews get in touch with those stories and find ways for those stories to be shared in a congregational context will be fulfilling one of the most critical functions of a spiritual leader. It will set a tone for the entire community.

The Power of the Rabbi

Over the years I became keenly aware of the power of my office to do some of these things. Where my president would struggle to find volunteers for one project or another within a congregation of highly successful and overly busy adults, it was a rare occasion that any member that I would call to take some leadership position would decline. The same was true about soliciting people to give talks in various congregational settings. Indeed, congregants are flattered when their rabbi notices them and singles them out for some leadership role.

I was acutely conscious of reaching out to relatively new members on the periphery of the congregation and bringing them into positions of leadership. In most synagogues, leadership is notoriously inbred. Despite the stated desire of lay leaders to find "new blood," most laypeople are not very skilled at engaging others in the congregational enterprise. Those who often rise to positions of congregational leadership are usually outstanding "doers" and only mediocre "delegators." Left to their own devices, leadership will rotate among a relatively small coterie of people, not because of any desire to exclude others but because most people don't want to appear to be imposing on others.

There is no bigger challenge to a growing congregation than having a constant influx of new members entering into leadership and decision-making positions. It insures ongoing input of new ideas and it prevents the old-guard leadership from becoming too smug and self-congratulatory.

The rabbinic role that I am outlining here is no bed of roses. A rabbi functioning as a spiritual leader will need to have the courage and the fortitude to withstand pointed attacks on their leadership. There is no true leadership that is not tested. The two most difficult professional challenges of my life both involved situations in which people in significant lay leadership po-

sitions sought to re-define my rabbinic role in ways that were much more conventional than I am setting forth here. These were individuals who would flatter me in public over how well I led services and taught courses and then work behind the scenes to deny me the prerogatives that I believed were critical to being the spiritual leader of the community. In both situations I was too trusting and therefore too slow to pick up on what was happening. Only the eventual "outing" of the behaviors and a re-articulation of guiding principles of the community enabled me to continue to function in the way that I thought was most healthy for the community.

Challenging the Corporate Styles of American Synagogues

Unfortunately, the corporate organizational structure of most synagogues is inhospitable, if not antagonistic, to the kind of singular rabbinic leadership that I am outlining here. Boards hire rabbis and give them a job description which is usually limited to the conventional areas of clerical function. The rabbi may have some success in changing the tone of religious services and they will have relative freedom to speak and teach as they wish, but changing the communal culture is next to impossible. One rabbi I interviewed for my study is one of the most successful and highly regarded Reform rabbis in the country. He noted that if he were to go to an established Reform congregation, he would need a good five to seven years to establish himself in the same leadership niche that he enjoys in his current congregation, where he has played a central role in building the community. Most rabbis go to congregations with a lot less skill and experience than this rabbi. To say that they face a formidable challenge to change the way a congregation understands itself and functions is a vast understatement. Most consider themselves lucky to get a good evaluation and have their contracts renewed.

Obviously, it is impossible to raze all the synagogues in America and recreate them from the ground up although there is evidence that it is much easier to build a synagogue community which desires and is hospitable to a rabbi as spiritual leader than it is to re-engineer an existing synagogue into one. It is possible however, to begin a conversation in the American Jewish community that recasts the roles and responsibilities of rabbi and board in American synagogues, moving away from existing corporate structures and closer towards spiritualized models of religious fellowship led by rabbis.

This speaks to the need to raise the issue of spiritual leadership at a level beyond the congregation although, eventually, the congregation must to transform itself as well. Most rabbis are not hired to be spiritual leaders, even though that is often the nomenclature that attaches itself to the rabbinic office. They are hired instead to be religious functionaries, orchestrating religious services, performing life-

cycle rituals and teaching the tradition. But a generation that is starving for spiritual direction will not be drawn to religious functionaries. And while many younger rabbis are inclined themselves to move in the direction of becoming spiritual mentors to Jews searching for meaning, there is a serious question whether the congregations that hire them understand and support such a change in the way a rabbi might interact with his or her community. On a more promising note, the seminaries that train rabbis are now starting to better understand the need to cultivate these skills in the next generation of rabbis.

Challenging the Rabbinic Mind-Set

Moving towards a spiritual leadership model does not only call for a change in the way synagogue boards function. It requires a different mindset on the part of the rabbi as well. One of the ways that rabbinical schools and asssociations have responded to the corporate structure of American synagogues is to give more attention to training rabbis how to function in such an environment. It has had the effect of "professionalizing" the rabbinate to an unhealthy extent. Rabbis are now instructed how to set limits on the time they are available to congregants. Days off are sacrosanct. Rabbis hire lawyers to negotiate their contracts with the other lawyers on the board. Congregants get the sense that the rabbi spends more time thinking about the perks of the office than about their "calling." Rabbis may, as a result, be a tad wealthier than the generation of rabbis that preceded them, but they are not happier. I know of rabbis who spent five to six years in rabbinical school who were never once pushed to think about their rabbinate as a vocation. It is a disaster.

Can synagogues burn out their rabbis? Sure. Can congregants be insensitive to a rabbi's need for time alone or time with their families? Sure. But a true spiritual leader never runs an hourly clock on the time spent helping an individual with a problem, leading a crusade for social justice, or teaching Torah. Rabbis who understand what it means to be a true leader of communities and of people are also prepared to shoulder the responsibilities that come with that role. They will, in turn, be rewarded with congregants who are devotees and not employers. I believe that there are communities hungry for spiritual leaders and rabbis who would give anything to serve in such a capacity. The tragedy is that the institutional design of most synagogues does not allow such a relationship to emerge.

It would be easy to dismiss the model that I am promoting here by saying that it is only the rare rabbi, possessing extraordinary qualities of character, charisma, and vision, who can fulfill the role of spiritual leader for a community of Jews. I would not argue that the above mentioned personal qualities are unimportant. But spiritual leadership is only partly about the leader. It is as much about the context. I have seen people of

modest ability invested with trust, love, and loyalty in a certain organizational situation and I have seen their leadership ability blossom. I have also seen rabbis succeed in emerging as spiritual leaders of communities even though they have had far fewer personal qualities of leadership than certain other colleagues. The difference is the context of communal culture in which the respective rabbis work.

Sacred Partnership

There is an exercise done by organizational development consultants in which a room full of people is divided up into small working groups of five to seven participants. All groups are given the exact same task. Half of the groups are told who among them will serve as the leader of the group. The other half are left to their own devices. Despite the fact that the groups are divided randomly and the designated "leaders" of half the groups are not chosen based on any personal qualities of leadership, the "led" groups invariably accomplish their tasks more quickly and with higher quality.

What has happened is that the group has ceded certain prerogatives to the leader which would otherwise have bogged the group down in unproductive ways. Most congregations evidence the dysfunction of the leaderless group. The elected lay leadership feels responsible for a wide array of decisions that have ramifications for the way that the community functions, many of which significantly impact on the communal culture. While the rabbi may have some input into some of these areas, it is mostly in the realm of sacerdotal functions that the rabbi has primary influence. Who is the leader in this organizational setting?

A subset of the board takes the responsibility to hire and then supervise the rabbi. And while there are certainly issues of fiduciary responsibility that must be executed by board members, the irony is that it is the very lay leaders who take on the responsibility to "supervise" the rabbi that are, themselves, robbed of the kind of spiritual leadership that may benefit them. The rabbi, in turn, often feels humilitated and undermined by this kind of corporate accountability, finding it hard to minister with a full heart to the very people with whom s/he might be in contention.

Consider an alternative model. A community finds a rabbi that it believes is a match for that particular congregation. The mandate given to the rabbi sounds something like this: "We have called you to this pulpit to teach and interpret Judaism for us, to engage us in the process of wrestling with an ancient tradition that has much wisdom but that also needs substantial reconstruction, and finally, to give us the tools to create a loving and compassionate community that will help us deal with each other and with the rest of the world in a way that is consistent with the noblest vision of our heritage. Help us create, together, a 'faith community' a 'spiritual fellowship.' "

Imagine what that rabbi might be able to accomplish with such a mandate for leadership! Is failure possible?

Of course. But I think that American Jews are hungry for their rabbis to be true spiritual leaders. But it will only happen when rabbis and the communities that they seek to lead enter into a sacred partnership that allows for such a model to emerge.

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* Sidney Schwarz, "Reconstructionism as Process," *Reconstructionist*, October 1980; "The Rabbinic Role in Reconstructionist Congregations," *Raayonot*, Spring 1991; "Reconstructionist Halacha," *Reconstructionist*, Spring 1993; "Democracy and Lay-Rabbinic Relations: A Symposium," *Reconstructionist*, September 1985.

The Rabbi in the Congregation: Counselor, Mediator, Advocate, Leader

BY JOY LEVITT

Two stories

Every night it was the same thing. Around 11 PM, I would get into the car and drive to Glen Cove Hospital, a trip that took about fifteen minutes. I would walk through the quiet halls, nodding to various support staff whose names I did not know but who were the angels of the night, caring for terminally ill cancer patients, many of whom were all alone. I would walk into Barbara's room, take my place near her bed, hold her hand, and for twenty minutes or so, I would sing *nigunim* (wordless melodies). I don't think she had any idea that I was there. She was in end-stage cancer, days away from death. Although lately I have spent some time trying to understand why I did this, at the time I wasn't thinking at all. It was as if I was programmed to do this. I told no one, not her family or friends. I think it was all I could think of to do in the face of this tragedy that would take the life of a forty-two-year-old woman with two children and a husband and hundreds of friends, parents, and a sister. It was, I believe, a fairly selfish act on my part. I felt better afterwards.

* * *

There was no way Neil was going to learn his *haftarah*. First of all, he was tone deaf. Secondly, his Hebrew reading skills were poor. To top it off, his mother had died several years before and his father was struggling mightily to raise two children and maintain his dental practice. There wasn't a lot of energy for a bar mitzvah. But there was also no way I was going

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to let this kid sink. There had been too many failures in his life. He was losing at school and I couldn't let him lose here. So I worked out a deal with Neil: Each day he would learn one line. Then he would page me and I would call him back from wherever I was and listen to him. It was unbelievably inconvenient. He called at all times of the day and night. He paged me at the movies, during services, during dinner. Sometimes I couldn't listen right away, but I always called him back and made another time to hear his work. There's only a modest end to this story. He got through his bar mitzvah. It wasn't outstanding, but he felt okay about it. A year later, his family quit the *shul.*

Reaching and Teaching

Do these two stories describe the role of a congregational rabbi? No congregational board would dream of asking its rabbi to do these things. No training I received ever prepared me to do these things. And I didn't go to rabbinical school in order to do these things. But I would argue that these acts, and countless others like them, form a kind of core vision of the role of the rabbi, at least as it might be understood as we close out this century.

What we do as rabbis is ultimately only significant if it is local, touching one person at a time. No matter what the congregation may have written in its job description when looking for a rabbi, what I actually did as a congregational rabbi was live in the lives of my congregants. And when I did it thoroughly and completely, I was both enormously successful and personally depleted. I would, for example, leave Barbara's hospital bedside feeling that I had done this very important thing, but it was not without a personal price that was quite difficult if not impossible to sustain.

It is one thing to say that a primary role of the congregational rabbi is that of teacher, but there is teaching and there is teaching. While I certainly did my share of teaching in classrooms, in the end it was in my role as personal spiritual trainer that I felt I had the most impact. It was when I gave my pager number to Neil, or listened to someone practice reading Hebrew over the phone, or met someone for coffee, even to talk about Martin Buber—especially to talk about Martin Buber—that I felt I was making the most difference. That having been said, the amount of time, energy, and commitment that such a role requires may be impractical or impossible for most rabbis (and many congregations). But if I am correct, there are few meaningful alternatives. As we conclude this most challenging century, we are left with a Jewish community whose Jewish roots are tenuous at best, having been poorly watered and seriously jeopardized by toxic historical events. Only through a careful and highly individualized practice of educational, emotional, and spiritual nurture can we hope to go forward with optimism and growth.

Communal and Individual Needs

I decided to go to rabbinical school in 1974. I had spent much of my col-

lege years on the Upper West Side of Manhattan protesting the war in Vietnam and the involvement of my university in maintaining the racist government in South Africa. Because the rabbi of my parent's synagogue had been a prominent civil rights activist, I thought this was actually what rabbis did, and it seemed a little more interesting than law school. Issues of faith, observance, or, for that matter, the individual lives and losses of the people who I would ultimately serve were not even on my radar screen. I was going to integrate neighborhoods and fight the good fight, hopefully with a congregation of willing followers behind me who would somehow understand that their cause was deeply Jewish and deeply correct.

Was this the role of the rabbi? I certainly thought so, right up until the moment I actually took a congregation. There I found out that, not only were we not living in the sixties, but that people had enormous issues with their Jewish identities and knowledge. Furthermore, they had hugely complex lives, filled with moments of despair and loss as well as happiness and contentment. For these people, Judaism represented a potential context for understanding themselves and their complicated lives.

Without abandoning my commitments toward working for a better world, I was going to have to radically rethink what I was doing there. Was I going to live by my ideals or was I going to serve the articulated needs of my congregants? It was clear to me that I was going to have to somehow balance my somewhat abstract desire to work for global peace with my congregants' more tangible desire for me to be really present at a bar mitzvah lesson. It was clear to me that without accomplishing the latter, I could not hope to even bring the former to the agenda of the congregation. It also became clear that Judaism was an intriguing, often problematic but also potentially important concern in the lives of many members of the synagogue, but it couldn't be taken for granted. It had to be marketed every day, in all its fullness. People had to be literally "sold" on going to services, taking a class, or considering a particular ritual practice.

Twenty years later, as I look back on my work in the congregational rabbinate, it is easier to describe what actually happened than to evaluate whether the model I shaped was either good for those whom I served or for myself. In addition to the role of personal spiritual counselor, I played several other roles in the congregation, though three stand out as most significant-that of mindful mediator, passionate advocate, and leader of the congregation. Because I think I was a well-regarded pulpit rabbi who loved what I did, the model is worth looking at. But I am increasingly aware of its pitfalls and limitations both for the congregation and for the rabbi.

The Uniqueness of the Rabbi

Broadly, rabbis serve as the professional within the synagogue ecosystem whose primary focus is the health and well-being of the congregation. There are often Jewish professionals within the congregation who may

have known more Talmud than the rabbi. There are social workers that are more skilled at group work, and psychologists who are better trained in counseling. Ultimately, however, only the rabbi is responsible for bringing together the concerns, fears, joys, and passions of the individual members of the congregation. For me, part of this role included a need to translate the concerns of various sub-groups in the community to other sub-groups and to the lay leadership in order to keep a diverse community with potentially competing needs functioning as a whole. This I would call the role of mindful mediator.

Although I tended to resist the role of "model observant Jew" (and wonder now whether I was right to do so), I did function as Judaism's passionate advocate. I was unabashedly modeling the life of an engaged Jew in the modern world, as though to say, "Look, a person who thinks like you do, and raises children just like you, and shops where you shop also looks to Jewish tradition to provide a context for life's challenges." As I look back on it, I wonder whether I was too identified with my congregants and not enough with the tradition I sought to advance. One of the great challenges of the contemporary rabbinate is finding that balance between the needs of those whom you serve and your own needs as a professional (and, I might add, as a Jew). I think, looking back on it, that I almost never considered my own Jewish needs, which was perhaps my most serious mistake. I also suspect my professional "needs" (read "ego") may have occasionally replaced the tradition within the context of my work.

There were roles I avoided over the course of the twenty years I served congregations. I never demanded to be regarded as the religious authority. I can't remember a single time when I said that something had to be done a certain way because "I was the rabbi and I said so." That is not to say that there weren't times when I wished I had done so. There was one particular ritual committee meeting early in my career when democratic process came close to bringing about a tragic result, and I have spent many a sleepless night, even years later, replaying that meeting in my mind and handling it quite differently. By overemphasizing democratic process, Reconstructionist congregations have sometimes failed to appreciate the value of rabbinic leadership in helping to speak on behalf of those without a voice or a way in. Sometimes the silent voice is the disconnected individual or family and sometimes the silent voice is the tradition. In any event, the rabbi is the single person charged with the responsibility to listen carefully for those voices and to represent them in a powerful and authoritative way.

Rabbi As Leader

By and large, however, a rabbi's authority must be, paradoxically, both earned and assumed; when it has to be demanded, it is already of little use. But assumed it must be. There is simply nothing gained from denying a rabbi the ability to serve as the leader of the congregation. Unless there is

deep respect for the knowledge, responsibility, and perspective that the rabbi brings to the congregation, the congregation will be bereft of what it really needs, and the rabbi will feel frustrated and useless. Ultimately, we will begin producing weak leaders. They may be good administrators or competent pastors or skilled teachers, all of which are important roles within synagogues. But I think congregations need something more than these skills from their rabbi. They need vision. They need courage. They need leadership. They need links to the past and the future that they can trust. They need passion and commitment articulated in small and large ways each day. They need one more thing, which I think I never really understood until recently: they need a deep, abiding sense of *ḥesed*, inadquately translated as kindness, from their rabbi.

To the extent that I was able to be both passionate advocate and leader within my congregation, it was due in large part to singing *nigunim* to a dying woman and to giving out my pager to a disconnected bar mitzvah student. Because I loved these people—and I did—and because I tried really hard to understand them, I had their trust, at least for the most part. Because I love the tradition and tried really hard to convey both that love and the richness that the tradition could bring to their lives, congregants were often, though not always, willing to give me the benefit of the doubt. I would never have been satisfied with a role only as personal spiritual counselor or even of mindful mediator. But both those roles were necessary prerequisites to the roles of passionate advocate and leader of the congregation. And though moving seamlessly between these roles is both personally and professionally challenging and requires a whole new way of thinking about synagogue structure and staffing, in the final analysis all of these roles are essential both for the health of the congregation and the rabbi.

The Rabbi As Master

BY DANIEL GOLDMAN CEDARBAUM

Set up for yourself a master,
And acquire for yourself a non-rabbinic partner,
And give every person the benefit of the doubt.

M. *Avot* 1:6

Perhaps all the rest is commentary. And so I will venture a few comments. My approach to understanding the role of the rabbi is a literal one. The English word "rabbi" is derived, through the Greek and the Latin, from the Hebrew word "*rabi*," meaning "my master." The multiple meanings of the word "master" are, I believe, both a key to some of the problems that we struggle with in attempting to define the appropriate role of the rabbi in contemporary non-Orthodox congregations and a key to a possible solution to those problems.

Particularly for modern American Jews, because of American English usage and the legacy of African slavery, the term "master" is vexing. For many of us, it connotes, at best, an autocratic ruler and, at worst, the head of a plantation built on human bondage. This sense of "master" is more or less consistent with the perception of the traditional rabbi as an authoritarian decisor of *halakhic* questions.

But "master" can in fact be understood in a far different sense, as reflected in the (more commonly British) use of the word to mean teacher. Used in this way, "master" often refers not to an ordinary teacher, but to a teacher with exceptional expertise and skill. Moreover, this conception of rabbi as master teacher, even from a traditionalist perspective, does not imply a hierarchical teacher-student relationship in which the teacher is the active conveyor of knowledge and the student is the largely passive receiver of knowledge, nor is it limited to technical matters of Jewish law and practice. These two "non-traditional" aspects of the rabbi-student (or rabbi-congregant) relationship can be found in two famous traditional texts, one rabbinic and one biblical.

Talmudic Masters

When we are introduced to one of the most famous teacher-student pairs

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in rabbinic Judaism, Rabbi Yoḥanan and Resh Lakish (Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish), Rabbi Yoḥanan is the leader of a prominent rabbinic academy in third century C.E. Palestine and Resh Lakish, who is destined to become one of the greatest Torah scholars of his generation, is the leader of a group of gladiators who work in Roman circuses. (B. *Bava Metzia* 84a) After telling us simply that, "[Rabbi Yoḥanan] taught [Resh Lakish] Bible and Mishnah, and made him into a great man," the Talmud moves immediately to the tragic ending of their relationship, apparently many years later.

A dispute arises in the study hall as to when, for purposes of determining susceptibility to ritual impurity, the manufacture of knives and similar weapons is complete. Rabbi Yoḥanan and Resh Lakish have a heated argument over the subject, which concludes with Rabbi Yoḥanan saying to Resh Lakish, "A robber understands about robbery," a taunting reference to Resh Lakish's knowledge of weapons garnered from his previous career. In response, Resh Lakish cries out, "And what good have you done me? There they called me '[*rabi*] My Master,' [and] here they call me '[*rabi*] My Master.' " (B. *Bava Metzia* 84a, Steinsaltz translation.)

"What is the difference," Resh Lakish asks, "between being a master of gladiators and being a master of Torah scholars?" I believe that an important answer is suggested in the next part of the story.

Resh Lakish falls ill and dies, and Rabbi Yoḥanan is devastated by the loss of his best student. The Rabbis decide to send a brilliant young scholar to see Rabbi Yoḥanan, with the hope that Rabbi Yoḥanan's engaging in Torah study with the student will help Rabbi Yoḥanan forget the loss of Resh Lakish. The Talmud then recounts the following conclusion to the story:

> [After]everything that Rabbi Yoḥanan said, [the student] said to him: "There is a *Baraita* that supports you." [Rabbi Yoḥanan] said: "Are you like the son of Lakish? When I would say something, the son of Lakish would raise twenty-four objections against me, and I would give him twenty-four answers, and the statement would thereby be clarified. And you say: 'There is a *Baraita* that supports you.' Do I not know that what I have said is right?" He went on rending his clothes and weeping, and said: "Where are you, son of Lakish? Where are you, son of Lakish?" (Ibid.)

Here we have, I believe, an answer to Resh Lakish's plaintive question about the difference between a rabbi and a gang leader. We are taught that the teacher-student (rabbi-congregant) relationship is, at its best, a partnership, with the teacher perhaps taking the lead, but with each party, in a give-and-take fashion, making important contributions to the ultimate elucidation of the matter in question.

Each teaches the other; each learns from the other; and the knowledge of both is thereby increased.

The Rabbi As *Tam*

In *parashat Toledot*, we are introduced to the patriarch Jacob, whom commentators later took to be the biblical prototype of the rabbi: "But Jacob was a man who was *tam*, dwelling in tents" (Gen. 25:27.). The tents are interpreted to be rabbinic academies, but what are we to make of the description of the Torah master as "*tam*"? That the use of the term has significance is reinforced by the fact that Jacob is the only person in the Bible to whom the description "*tam*" is applied. Although the term "*tamim*" is used in reference to Noah (Gen. 6:9) and to Abraham (Gen. 17:1), this variant of the word, unlike "*tam*," is generally understood to mean "flawless" or "blameless."

The word "*tam*" is probably best known from the *Haggadah*, where it identifies the third of the four questioning children of the *seder* liturgy. "*Tam*" is often translated in *Haggadot* as "simple," or even as "simple-minded," and this at first glance seems appropriate for the child who asks the apparently simple question, "*Mah zot*? What is this?" When "*tam*" is instead translated as "innocent," we tend to regard that term as connoting ignorance.

But both the meaning of "*tam*" and the child's question are deceptively simple (no pun intended). Alternative translations of "*tam*" include "unspoiled," "naive," "wholesome," and "unsophisticated." In his commentary on the quoted verse about Jacob, Rashi explains that "*tam*" describes a person who is not expert in non-essential matters, who speaks according to what is in his or her heart and who is "not sharp-minded in deceiving." Rashi's view supports an understanding of "*tam*" as "naive," "wholesome," or "unsophisticated," in the original and literal senses of those terms, meaning one who, though he or she may in fact be highly educated, remains open to new ideas and experiences and who is not blinded to what is truly important by technical intellectual details.

No less an authority than the Vilna Gaon (Rabbi Eliyahu ben Shlomo Zalman, 1720-1798), in his commentary on the *Haggadah*, views the *tam* child in this manner, seeing that child as the most admirable of the four instead of the conventional favorite, *ḥakham* (usually translated as the "wise" child but probably better translated as the "smart" or "learned" child). The *ḥakham* child knows, or wants to know, all of the arcane rules governing the *seder*. Unlike the tam child, the *ḥakham* child faces the problem of having his or her broader vision obscured by an obsessive concern with legal technicalities, of not being able to see the forest of Torah for the trees of *halakhic* details. For the Vilna Gaon, the "this" in the tam child's question "*Mah <u>zot</u>*" ("What is this?") in fact refers to the entire Torah, as in the verse "*Ve<u>zot</u> hatorah asher sam Mosheh* . . . " ("And this is the Torah

that Moses placed before the children of Israel" [Deut. 4:44]).

Rabbi As Partner in Learning

Seen in this light, the *tam* child's question, far from being simple-minded, is in fact fundamental and profound. The "unsophisticated" child wants to explore the essence of Torah, whereas the "smart" child—who asks, "What are the statutes, the laws and the ordinances that God has commanded us?"—is only skimming the surface. For the Vilna Gaon, "*tam*" describes the true Torah master, and therefore the model rabbi, the person who is not distracted by the intricacies of legal analysis from the essential task of understanding and teaching the meaning of Torah in its most fundamental sense.

My rabbi has taught (quoting his teacher), "Congregants don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." This aphorism reflects an important truth, and I believe that the type of rabbi it contemplates can aptly be described as *tam*. Not jaded or cynical, this rabbi wants to be a partner with his or her congregants in learning ways to cope with the pain of life's most difficult times, in learning ways to deepen the celebration of life's most joyous times, in learning ways to bring sparks of holiness to life's otherwise mundane moments and, most importantly, in learning how to treat one another with respect and with love. In short, this rabbi is a master role model of the actions and words that will make Godliness manifest in our lives. And all the rest is indeed commentary.

The Role of the Rabbi: A Preliminary Perspective

BY RICHARD HIRSH

In January of 1998, the Reconstructionist movement convened the "Role of the Rabbi" Commission (RORC), comprised of equal representation from the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association (RRA), the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation (JRF), and the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College (RRC). This Commission has been meeting regularly since, and if planned timetables are accurate forecasts, should be presenting its report to the three arms of the Reconstructionist movement in the spring of 2000.

What follows is a preliminary perspective on the process and issues that have comprised the work of the Commission, identifying the key areas under discussion as well as the general outline of where the Commission has been reaching consensus. The full report, of course, will be the definitive document; the summary contained in this article represents only the reflections of the Chair of the Commission.

Mandate and Mission

The genesis of this Commission was the recognition by movement leadership that with the growth of Reconstructionism, especially the swift increase in the number of affiliated JRF congregations and *ḥavurot*, paralleled by the rapid expansion of the RRA, the guidelines for the rabbi-congregation relationship were in need of review.

As increasing numbers of JRF affiliates grew to the size where hiring a rabbi was both feasible and desirable, managing the changes inherent in that transition was a challenge facing more of our communities. As the number of rabbis increased, the need to develop clearer consensus and perspective on the respective as well as collaborative roles of rabbi and congregation became imperative. The Reconstructionist emphasis on "democratic decision making" provided both opportunity and obstacle to rabbis and

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congregations, as issues of authority, parameters, and participation proved difficult.

Largely through the initiative of the JRF and its former executive director, Rabbi Mordecai Liebling, the RORC was convened to address these and related issues. Under the direction of the chair and with the consent of the Commission, the earliest discussions identified these specific issues as being located within the larger context of issues which shape the rabbi-congregational relationship.

Identifying the Agenda

Consequently, the Commission agreed to divide its work into three broad areas: (1) the rabbi/synagogue relationship, including issues of authority and democracy; (2) the rabbi as person, focusing on issues of quality of life, emotional and physical health, and the balance of personal roles (rabbi as child, sibling, partner, parent) with professional roles; (3) the *tachlis* issues of the rabbi-congregational relationship, including application and interviewing, negotiations and contracts, integrating the new rabbi into the community, job descriptions, evaluation and review.

At the first meeting, therefore, the Commission agreed to the following:

> The mission of the Role of the Rabbi Commission is to articulate a Reconstructionist vision of the role of the rabbi; to offer guidance as well as guidelines with regard to rabbi-congregation relations; to address the concerns of the rabbi as person as well as professional; and to suggest models, policies, and procedures which can further the vision we endorse.

The Role of Learning

From its first meeting, the Commission devoted part of every session to a period of study. By collaborating as learners, the members of the Commission found a common task and opportunity which helped to develop and sustain the sense of trust and mutuality.

The initial learning, presented by Dr. Jacob Staub of RRC, focused on the historical development of the role and meaning of the rabbi throughout the evolving Jewish tradition. This overview, which enabled the Commission members better to understand the confusion of roles that accrues to the contemporary rabbi, created the foundation for further discussion.

A second teaching was offered by Dr. Adina Newberg, also of RRC, based on her research into the dynamics of congregational life. The confusion in self-perception on the part of congregations—are they "organizations" or "families"?—produces a coordinate confusion in assessing the place of the rabbi—"employee" or "member of the family" or "father/mother" of the family?

Subsequent learning focused on key value categories: the mitzvah of "the loving rebuke" (see Leviticus 19:17) was studied in an attempt to discern what Jewish tradition teaches about the way in which people hold each other accountable while simulta-

neously respecting each other even in disagreement. The category of *kavod* (honor, dignity, respect) was studied in order to identify sources and insights that could comprise a set of shared assumptions between rabbis and congregations.

The inclusion of learning in the work of the Commission, rather than being either pro-forma or an afterthought, became integral to the conversations and informed and influenced those conversations in important ways. In this way the Commission modeled the type of substantive rather than perfunctory learning that Reconstructionist communities could embody in their board and committee processes.

Finding a Perspective

In the earliest discussions of the Commission, the importance of identifying a perspective from which to address issues was recognized. Consulting with the contemporary literature in the fields of organizational theory and function as well as with the fields of family therapy and leadership training, the Commission chose as its frame of reference a systems approach. Put simply, this approach views the rabbi-congregation relationship as one dimension of the larger congregational system in which is it is embedded.

The assumption is similar to that developed in family therapy theory: rather than "treating" the individual family member whose has a behavior/issue which is often isolated as "the problem," family therapy theory focuses on the dynamic family system, in which all members play a part. The behavior attributed to an individual is seen instead as a manifestation of a problem which resides in the system. To "treat" the problem, one must understand the system and help it shift in ways that allow for the desired/necessary change to emerge.

So, for example, in a period of congregational malaise, it is not uncommon for lay leadership to focus on the "performance" of the rabbi. This individualistic perspective was increasingly seen to be a source of additional problems rather than an address for their resolution. Instead, the Commission sought to examine the functioning of the entire congregational system, suggesting in the case of the above-referenced example that alleviating congregational malaise could (from a systems perspective) be a shared task of the rabbi, the lay leadership, the membership at large, the committee chairs, etc.—i.e., all the stakeholders/members of the congregational community.

The consensus around using a systems approach opened up new and exciting alternatives to many of the unproductive and increasingly outdated usual approaches to rabbi-congregation issues.

The Roles of the Rabbi

Rabbis fill a number of roles in a congregational setting. They are pastors as well as teachers; administrators as well as officiants; storytellers, family educators, counselors. The Commission identified a number of roles and discussed each thoroughly.

Yet over and against all of these

roles was the role of rabbi as employee. It was in this role that the Commission identified a number of problems and began to formulate alternative propositions as well as perspectives. The dual nature of congregations was seen as the coordinate conundrum: they are on the one hand spiritual communities created to transmit, celebrate, and learn Jewish tradition, and on the other hand they are non-profit organizations which must deal with budget and finance, personnel supervision, and organizational and legal management.

This "business" end of the rabbi-congregational relationship was identified as a locus for controversy, confusion, and even chaos. The voluntary nature of congregational lay leadership almost dictates that with few exceptions the management skills necessary for the professional direction of a non-profit organization will be missing in the constellation of board members that at any given moment is authorized to act on behalf of the congregation.

Since the rabbi as employee is subject to the authority of the congregation as embodied in its elected officers, the difficulties of translating well-intentioned but often ineffective and/or inefficient supervision and accountability of the rabbi into appropriate and helpful alternative models was a major topic of concern. The final Commission report will reflect a number of specific suggestions for improving this area of operation, among them being the imperative that JRF affiliates consult regularly with JRF professional staff when dealing with the rabbi under the rubric of employee.

This would ideally begin before the congregation embarks on, for example, a rabbinic search process. It would also help shape a negotiation-contracting process, or an evaluation process, and, it is hoped, alleviate and/or avoid the sorts of conflicts that often arise in these sensitive moments in the rabbi-congregation relationship.

Rabbi As Person

During the two years that the Commission has been meeting, there has been a flurry of articles in the Jewish press about the difficulties synagogues have been having in securing rabbis. This appears to be especially true at the ends of the congregational size system: the largest congregations in the Reform and Conservative movements, for example, have recently reported difficulty in obtaining qualified applicants. Similarly, small congregations in somewhat isolated areas report difficulty in attracting rabbis.

Although the evidence is largely anecdotal, there is enough current conversation among rabbis to suggest that the real or perceived imbalance between rabbi as person and rabbi as professional is contributing to this issue. Rabbis who seek not only quality time but quantity time—for themselves, for their families, for their other interests—increasingly view the congregational rabbinate as a setting in which boundaries are potentially non-existent, and in which the multiple demands of members creates an unworkable expectation.

The Commission, in addressing the rabbi as person, sought to analyze the factors that contribute to this problem. Interestingly, in this discussion the topic of overwork and the problems of being overextended were (to an extent) detached from the role of the rabbi and identified as being a common problem of lay leaders and of rabbis. By extension, the Commission observed, the sense of overwork and burnout which increasingly surfaces in congregational systems (noting again the importance of seeing these issues systemically) seems endemic to contemporary American life.

What emerged from this shared concern was a sense that in reshaping rabbinic roles, identifying and respecting boundaries, and trying to set responsible but reasonable limits for rabbis, congregations could model an alternative and better-balanced work ethic for all their members.

Tachlis Concerns

Notwithstanding the multiple roles rabbis fill, much of what creates and sustains a good and healthy rabbi-congregation relationship resides in the ways that the day-to-day practical issues of that relationship are managed. There are better and worse ways to create a rabbinic search process, as there are better and worse ways to craft negotiations with a rabbi over compensation. As employees and as professionals, rabbis will need to expect to be subject to evaluation, but there are appropriate and constructive as well as inappropriate and destructive ways in which to carry out such a process.

The Commission noted, for example, that while congregations often over-invest in the rabbinic search process, they under-invest in the year-long process of integrating a rabbi into a new setting once she/he has been hired and has moved into the community. Using the systems perspective, the Commission noted that the disequilibrium that is introduced into a congregational system during a rabbinic transition requires a sustained and conscious effort in service of stabilization. The new rabbi cannot accomplish this on her/his own; it must be seen as a shared task of the congregational system.

Similarly, evaluations which restrict themselves to the rabbi, rather than examining how well the congregation as a whole is fulfilling its mission and accomplishing its goals, inevitably generate frustration and often create disruption.

Task and Role

One of the helpful insights generated by the Commission was that the specific tasks in a congregational system do not need to be defined as functions of specific roles, but instead could be assigned by consensus to those who are in the best position to carry them out.

Similarly, tasks which the congregation takes on—for example, "being a more welcoming community"—involve deployment across the congregational system: what is the role of the membership committee? The board? The rabbi? The education director? By seeing such tasks as shared responsibility rather than assigning them to a

role (such as to "the rabbi") congregations create the very "empowerment and democracy" that Reconstructionist communities strive to achieve.

This insight also highlights the fact that, given the variables in terms of congregations and rabbis, what might be the "role" of the rabbi in one setting could be assigned to a congregational committee or a different staff person in another setting.

What remains central is that the rabbi and congregational leadership be responsible for identifying priorities, goals, and resources so that what a congregation sets out to accomplish in a given year is coordinate with its reality, its needs, its circumstances, and its resources.

Looking to the Future

When the RORC completes its work, it will forward its report to the RRA, JRF, and RRC boards, as well as to the Reconstructionist Placement Commission. There will be recommendations as well as suggestions as to which arm/s of the movement, independently as well as together, should consider undertaking the recommendations.

What is clear is that as the 21st century begins, the North American synagogue is in transition; the Jewish community is in transition; and, it will come as no surprise, the role of the rabbi is also in transition. The RORC, in assessing where we have been, where we are, and where we may want and need to go, has sought to craft perspectives, tools, and resources that can help congregations and rabbis rethink the nature of their shared enterprise. As a governing principle, the Commission will be proposing that at every stage of the rabbi-congregation relationship, consideration be given to what steps can strengthen that relationship—and conversely, what steps will impede growth, respect, and mutuality.

If our congregational communities can direct their time and energy primarily to their spiritual mission (while monitoring and managing their non-profit organization) as their rabbis primarily can fulfill their roles as teachers, pastors, celebrants, and guides (while attending to their responsibilities as employees), the Commission will have succeeded in helping redefine the vocabulary, rubrics, and frames of reference for the evolving nature of the rabbi-congregation relationship.

Biblical Wisdom for the Contemporary Rabbi

BY MICHAEL M. REMSON

One day two prostitutes came and presented themselves before King Solomon. One of them said, "Your majesty, this woman and I live in the same house, and I gave birth to a baby boy at home while she was there. Two days after my child was born she gave birth to a baby boy. Only the two of us were in the house—no one else was present. Then one night she accidentally rolled over on her baby and smothered it. She got up during the night, took my son from my side while I was asleep, and carried him to her bed; then she put the dead child in my bed. The next morning, when I woke up and was going to nurse my baby, I saw that it was dead. I looked at it more closely and saw that it was not my child."

Then the other woman said, "No! The living child is mine, and the dead one is yours!"

Then King Solomon said, "Each of you claims the living child is yours and that the dead child belongs to the other one." He sent for a sword and when it was brought he said, "Cut the living child in two and give each woman half of it."

The real mother, her heart full of love for her son, said to the king, "Please, your majesty, don't kill the child! Give it to her!"

Then Solomon said, "Don't kill the child, give it to the first woman for she is its real mother."

(I Kings 3:16-27)

Solomon's Wisdom

Throughout Jewish tradition this narrative has been offered as evidence of the wisdom of Solomon. Solomon used a ruse to determine the true birth mother, and the rabbis whose opinions are recorded in the Talmud and Midrash shared this understanding.

Nevertheless, there may be another way to understand what has happened. If his goal was to determine the birth mother, Solomon might have asked for witnesses or looked to see which woman the child resembled.

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Solomon seemed to have something else in mind; and if this is so, there may be a different understanding of Solomon's wisdom.

The two women in the story were involved in a highly emotional dispute. When a disagreement ceases to be based on rational thought one or both parties may try to bring in a third person and give that person ownership of the problem. As Peter Steinke explains, "When two people or parties are anxious and they cannot resolve their anxiousness between themselves, one of them will bring a third party into the relationship. [This is] a naturally occurring phenomenon."[1] People hope that the third party will help resolve the dispute in their favor. That is what happened here. The two women could not solve their problem and tried to bring Solomon into the middle of it, each hoping that he would take her side.

According to the explanation given at the end of the narrative Solomon eventually took ownership of the dispute and settled it, but that was not his first response. His initial act was to call for a sword and have the child cut in half. This response was clearly untenable, and therein was its brilliance. It freed Solomon from ownership of the dispute. He offered a silly suggestion, hoping that the women would shake their heads and solve their own problem.

Unfortunately, only one of the women reacted in a mature, moral, and rational way. She refused to let the child be killed and offered it to the other woman. He could not allow the child to go to a woman who was willing to have it killed. As a last resort he stepped in and decided the case.

Congregations As Emotional Systems

During the last two decades creative thinkers such as Edwin Friedman, Peter Steinke, and Ronald Richardson[2] have taught us to understand that congregations are emotional systems. They are made up of individuals and factions, each with their own goals and needs. They all come with their own emotional baggage, based on the experiences of their lifetimes.

When there are disagreements among the members of a congregation, people will behave emotionally as well as rationally. Anxiety may rise, and then the disputing sides (like the women in the story) will try to involve others. The rabbi and the lay leaders will be asked, directly or indirectly, to take sides.

This is not pathological; it is normal, and in a similar fashion, every congregation will behave this way. What will vary among congregations is the way the leaders respond. Indeed, the well-being of a congregation can depend upon how these disputes are handled, as the case below will illustrate.

A Congregational Example

Jerry Golden is a respected past president of Temple Beth El. Last year as an "elder statesman" Jerry was asked to chair the Rabbinical Selection Committee and he was very pleased to bring in Bill Silverman as

the community's new rabbi. In the process, Bill and Jerry became friends.

When Jerry's older children were in religious school, he monitored their work and they were excellent students. His youngest child, Sarah, is now in sixth grade, and since she was born Jerry has been more lenient with her. She is an outstanding athlete, and in order to participate in school athletic events she has been absent from Hebrew School more than 50% of the time. Her teacher, following school policy, assigned work to be made up but Sarah never had the time to do it.

Throughout the year the principal of the religious school, Anne Bergman, called Jerry to tell him what was happening, and Jerry repeatedly promised to get on Sarah's case. Nevertheless, the work was never made up.

At the end of the year Anne called Jerry to tell him that according to school regulations (which have been in place since before Jerry's term as president, and which have been published each year in the school's "Parents' Manual") she has no choice but to hold Sarah back. Jerry was furious. He went to a meeting of the Education Committee and then to a meeting of the Board. He reminded them of all that he had done for the congregation and threatened to resign if Anne did not promote his daughter.

Three Possible Scenarios

Scenario No. 1: When Bill Silverman, the rabbi, heard about the dispute he called Jerry and tried to calm him down. Jerry would accept nothing less than a promotion for his daughter to the seventh-grade class, and he insisted that he was going to bring this before the board.

At the next board meeting Jerry came in with his voice loud and his face red. After he made his case, Bill pointed out that Sarah had been given homework assignments which she did not do, that Jerry had been called several times by Anne, and that Jerry had known about the policies. Jerry responded by talking about all that he had done for the congregation, and then made some negative comments about Anne. A number of people, including Bill, came to Anne's defense, and soon the room was filled with loud voices, everyone talking at once.

Two things happened after Jerry responded to Bill. First, the focus was shifted away from Sarah's performance. Instead, people were talking about Jerry's contributions to the congregation and Anne's abilities as principal.

In addition to this, Jerry's anxiety spread to almost every person in the room. When the president gaveled the room to silence, someone moved that Sarah be promoted with her class. The motion was defeated, but everyone walked out feeling upset and anxious.

Scenario No. 2: Bill Silverman knew, of course, that the dispute was coming to the board. He also knew that Jerry was popular and that people might line up on his side. Furthermore, he had only been in town for a few months, and he was very nervous about losing a friend and significant member. Jerry might not only leave the congregation; he might urge his friends to help start a new one.

As soon as he heard about the problem Bill called Sam Ruben, the president of the congregation. They decided that a few homework assignments were not worth losing a member, particularly one as valued as Jerry. They decided to meet with Anne to see if some compromise could be worked out. Perhaps Sarah could write an essay over the summer.

Anne said that there was a great deal of work to be done. Even if Sarah were willing to work over the summer, it would not be fair to ask the teacher to come back in the fall with a stack of her overdue papers to read. Anne also pointed out that the school has a policy, and that Jerry knew about the policy and that policies are meaningless if they are not enforced.

Sam told her that the Temple Beth El is about people and not about rules, and that he wanted Sarah to be in the seventh grade class in September. Anne asked if this was final, she was told that it was, and she submitted her resignation.

Scenario No. 3: When Bill realized that the issue was going to come before the board, he prepared himself emotionally so that he could remain calm. After Jerry presented his case, board members began to take sides and Bill asked to speak. He waited until the room was quiet and then he reframed the question.

Bill expressed appreciation for all that Jerry had done, and he expressed admiration for Sarah as a person and as an athlete. He made it quite clear, however, that this was not about Sarah Golden nor was it about what Jerry had done for the congregation. Neither was this about whether Anne was doing a good job running the Religious School. He urged the board to disregard personalities and to think about the kind of congregation they want. They want a congregation that considers the wishes of its members, but they also want one that takes education seriously. Those two goals now seem to be in conflict, but one thing is clear: if the rules are not enforced now they will never be enforceable.

Seeing that the rabbi and the president were calm, most of the other board members calmed down. The president kept the subsequent discussion focused on the congregation and its goals. After a short debate the board voted 12 to 5 to enforce the rules of the religious school. When Jerry stormed out in anger, most board members were sad, but not anxious.

Comparing the Scenarios

Conflict is a normal part of every congregation. As we have seen, when there is an emotional dispute anxiety can rise. The anxious parties can try to bring others into the conflict and the anxiety can spread. By remaining calm and by focusing on their vision, the leaders of a congregation can manage conflict with a minimum of disruption.

In the first scenario, Jerry's anxiety was allowed to spread through the board until the meeting was out of control. It is likely that this anxiety would permeate other meetings, and that the alliances that were created and the factions that formed would

continue to do battle over other issues.

In the second scenario the anxiety was less visible, but it was still a controlling factor. Bill's desire to prevent any kind of disagreement caused him to lose the services of a fine education director. Peacemaking lay leaders often sacrifice rabbis, educators, and other staff, rather than confront a congregant with the need to compromise. A congregation that cannot deal with conflict is destined to follow the will of the loudest and least mature members.

In the third scenario the rabbi and president remained calm and kept their anxiety under control. Their calm demeanor spread and a decision was made rationally. They understood that everyone in the congregation will not be happy all of the time. They were willing to accept conflict as a reality of life in a healthy congregation. Edwin Friedman taught that remaining a non-anxious presence is one of the most important things a rabbi can do. By remaining calm the rabbi teaches others that there is no reason to be anxious. In this way the rabbi can help the congregation remain focused on its vision.

This is not a panacea. Even with wise, calm, and focused leadership some people will be angry, and some good rabbis will still get fired. Still, with calm leadership congregations will ultimately be much healthier. Conflict will be managed better, decisions will be more rational, and the congregations can progress toward their goals.

The story of King Solomon and the two prostitutes is preceded by Solomon's prayer for wisdom (1 Kings 3:9) and is followed by a description of Solomon's accomplishments. Solomon was, indeed, granted wisdom. It was that wisdom that allowed him to get past small disputes and to focus on the things he wished to do during his reign. No one can always follow this example. Almost everyone will lose emotional control from time to time. Anxiety is part of human existence.

Nor can we always be focused on the goals of a congregation. We are all subject to distraction. Someone will always be trying to involve us in emotional disputes.

Still, as Solomon and our modern teachers tell us, among the goals of the rabbi—in addition to being a teacher, an advisor, a comforter, and more—is to remain a non-anxious presence. The rabbi who can accept conflict as normal, and remain calm in its face, will be better able to help a congregation focus on its goals and progress toward its vision.

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1. Peter L. Steinke, *Healthy Congregations: A Systems Approach* (Bethesda: The Alban Institute, 1996).

2. Edwin H. Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1985), Steinke, *Healthy Congregations . . .* ; and Ronald W. Richardson, *Creating a Healthier Church: Family Systems Theory, Leadership and Congregational Life*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996).

On Being a Rabbi at the Margins

BY REBECCA T. ALPERT

Most rabbis are known by some defining characteristic. For some, it's as simple as geography, as in the Lubavitcher Rebbe. Others come to be known by some dimension of their personality, not unlike the seven dwarfs—the grumpy rabbi, etc. For some, it's a physical characteristic—the large rabbi, the short rabbi. Still for others, it's an identity they have—women rabbis, lesbian rabbis, black rabbis come under this rubric. For many, their defining characteristic is their passion for something—the dancing rabbi, the meditation rabbi, the social justice rabbi. At this time in my life, my rabbinate is characterized not so much by who or what I am, but by where I am: I see myself, and I think others see me as well, as a rabbi at the margins. What I want to suggest in this article is that the margin is a fine place from which to be a part of, as well as apart from, the Jewish people.

Looking at the World from Different Perspectives

I have been aware for a long time of the significance of perspective. When I was in high school, reading the works of Martin Buber completely changed my life. Buber's psychological recasting of Ḥasidic tales is crucial to my understanding of how important perspective is, and of how each of us sees the world from a different one. Buber tells the story of the Ḥasid who searches around the world for buried treasure, only to discover it in his own home. The story can be mined for many lessons, but Buber calls it "The Place Where One Stands." This was my first realization of how an individual's perspective determines her or his worldview. Things look different depending on where you are.

This insight came to me in a more complex way in my adulthood through the teachings of feminism. Feminists focus on the politics of per-

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spective. Where you stand determines both how you see things and how you are seen by others. Women, the feminists suggest, have a particular "standpoint." Kept outside the circles of patriarchal power, women have a different view of the world, a view from the margins. This view gives them a particular way of seeing reality, but the reality they see is often ignored. Women of color, lesbians, Jewish and Muslim women, women with disabilities, and working class women nuanced the argument suggesting that there were multiple ways in which people stood at the margins, and therefore multiple vantage points from which to view the world, and multiple ways in which their insights were not taken seriously by those at the center. One of the goals of the feminist and other liberation movements of the seventies and eighties was to shift the balance so that marginal perspectives would at least receive public attention, and more significantly, the center itself would change and incorporate their vision as well.

In many ways, those liberation movements succeeded. Women's viewpoints are now taken seriously, and women's voices have been included at the centers of power. This has certainly proven true in the Jewish community. Although the situation is far from perfect (women really don't hold significant positions of power in Jewish circles, issues like domestic violence and reproductive freedom are not at the top of the Jewish agenda), it certainly can no longer be said that women hold the same marginal place in Jewish life that they did two decades ago when I entered the rabbinate. Why, then, do I find myself at the margins today?

The World from the Center

In truth, I did not always see myself as a rabbi on the margins. My perspective was that of Buber's Ḥasid after his return from the journey: I stood at the center of my world. Raised in Brooklyn, N.Y. I grew up with the view that Jews were everywhere. I never imagined that we comprised under three percent of the population of the United States—Jewish institutions, people, and products were wherever I looked. Public schools closed on Sukkot and Simḥat Torah. Local politicians were Jews, and so was Sandy Koufax of my beloved Brooklyn Dodgers. It was not until I went to college that I discovered people who had never met a Jew or who harbored any sort of anti-Semitic feelings. I came from a perspective where Jewish life was clearly at the center. So it made sense to me that, when I decided to enter the rabbinate, my perspective would be that of the center.

Of course, there was much evidence to the contrary in my life. I went to graduate school at the same time as I was attending rabbinical school, and noticed for the first time how rarely Jewish topics came up in the course of secular study. I was among the first six women in Jewish history to attend rabbinical school, and certainly noticed that I was not in the majority in any of my classes, which after having attended a woman's college was a bit of a shock. And

I chose to attend the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College (RRC), which was small and new and was considered marginal by the majority of the Jewish community. Yet I never defined myself as marginal in those days. If anything, I viewed those in the Jewish community who opposed the Reconstructionist movement or women rabbis as peripheral to the future of the Jewish people as I understood it. I was convinced that Jewish feminists would succeed in making women's issues and perspectives part of the center of Jewish life. And I was sure that Jewish history would also become less marginal to the broader educational framework in American schools.

After I graduated from rabbinical school and completed my doctorate, I became the Dean of Students and taught at RRC. During those years, I also functioned as a spokesperson to new congregations, wrote articles, and co-authored a book about Reconstructionism. I saw myself as central to this movement that nourished me. I lived at the center of a self-contained universe, feeling very much part of an important enterprise in Jewish life. That was the place where I stood.

Moving Towards the Margins

What changed all that was coming to terms with the fact that I had been living with a lie. As I saw it, my status at the center of Reconstructionist Jewish life was predicated on my being married to a man. It is certainly the case that had I announced in my 1971 application to rabbinical school that I was more attracted sexually to women than to men, I would not have been accepted. In fact, I was the one dissenting voice in the faculty decision not to admit an openly gay man to rabbinical school in 1979. And in 1984, I was also a part of the courageous decision by the rabbinical school faculty to begin admitting openly gay students. At that point, my world began to unravel. I saw others identifying as gay and lesbian Jews, forming what were then secret organizations, finding ways to be public. And I knew I was one of them. Leaving my marriage and beginning the process of coming out, of identifying as a lesbian, were crucial to my sense of self and my well being. But this process changed my perception of where I stood in the Jewish world, and even in the world of Reconstructionism.

Because I was in such a visible and important role, the College's leadership at the time was concerned that my coming out could have made the movement vulnerable to attack. There was already an openly gay faculty member. RRC was the only place openly gay and lesbian students could apply at that time. (Although HUC, the Reform rabbinical school, had many closeted gay and lesbian students and would change their policy within a few years.) While today being gay or lesbian would be considered unremarkable either as a student, staff, or faculty member at RRC, in the early years of the open admissions policy the implications for inclusivity had not been fully worked out. The senior leadership at that time at RRC made it clear that I could not come out publicly either in writing or to the

Reconstructionist community. It became increasingly obvious that I could no longer serve effectively as the Dean of Students. It was time for me to move from the center and to reinvent myself as a rabbi on the margins.

It is reasonable to wonder why if being a Jew, a woman, and a Reconstructionist did not deter me from seeing my rabbinic role as central, why being a lesbian was different. Some of it was in my upbringing as a liberal Jew in Brooklyn in the fifties and sixties, and the feminist revolution in the seventies that made being a Reconstructionist rabbi a valued role for a woman. Related to that was my own homophobia—being openly gay might be courageous, it might be important for me psychologically and morally, but it would diminish my ability to serve. I did not want my defining characteristic to be "lesbian," which at the time was inevitable. I worked too hard as a feminist, a Reconstructionist, and as a progressive committed to social justice to be perceived in that way. But on the more positive side, I discovered that the view from the margins suited me fine. I found a place from which to say things I never could have said as a spokesperson for the center. And I had a chance to work with people who wanted to connect to being Jewish, but who also saw themselves as marginal to the Jewish community.

Working As a Rabbi on the Margins

After I left my position at RRC, I chose not to look for work in the Jewish community. In the mid eighties there was no place as welcoming as the Reconstructionist movement. I would have been typecast there, but elsewhere it could only have been worse. But I welcomed the opportunity to try out a new perspective. I redefined my rabbinate as moving from center to margin and not working professionally in the Jewish community. In this move, I experienced a strong sense of freedom from the constraints of working in the Jewish world. But I never saw myself as an outsider, only as someone who had changed her perspective.

Let me explain the difference. I would compare Jewish life to a page of Talmud. In the center, we find the text of *mishnah* and *gemara.* But in the margins we find the commentary of later thinkers and scholars. The commentary explains the text, and in the process gives new perspective to the meaning. It stands apart from the text, but it is a part of what is going on there, contributing to the overall meaning. That is how I see my role as a marginal rabbi. I am no longer in the center, but I am still on the page, and can provide a valuable perspective from which to view what is going on.

Over the next years I defined my new role. I helped to found a congregation that, although comprised of mostly heterosexuals, was truly welcoming to gay men and lesbians. I began to write about Jewish lesbian issues: dealing with difficult biblical texts, creating ceremonies for coming out, thinking through gay marriage and inventing gay awareness week. My freedom as a lesbian also made me

free in other ways. I felt more courage to criticize Israeli policies and to work for peace with the Palestinians. I began to get involved in causes that were not of great concern to the Jewish community, but in which it mattered to other religious leaders to have a Jewish presence. I worked with interfaith groups supporting an end to the conflicts in Central America and democracy in Haiti; I spoke out publicly against the death penalty, and in favor of abortion rights. I did all of this as a rabbi. There is no doubt in my mind that I was invited to speak at rallies, visit elected officials, and publish articles as much because of my status as a rabbi as on my personal abilities.

Working with the "Unaffiliated"

I also began to serve a population that the organized Jewish community likes to call "the unaffiliated." These are people who may identify strongly as Jews, contribute to Jewish causes, observe at least some Jewish holidays, but do not belong officially to the Jewish community by virtue of synagogue membership. This group accounts for about half of the Jews in the United States today.

While their needs for a rabbi are sporadic, like other Jews they want a rabbi to participate in their life-cycle events: weddings, commitment ceremonies, baby namings, funerals, and occasional beney mitzvah ceremonies, conversions, and divorces. I never advertised my services to this population—there are unscrupulous rabbis who make nice livings doing that sort of thing—but they find me nonetheless. I hear from them through friends, through work, through networks of gay and lesbian Jews. They come to me because they are not religious or spiritual, or they are not interested in communal involvement and don't want to join synagogues or *ḥavurot*. They come because they are gay, or one of them is not Jewish, or they have disabilities or, for whatever reason, they think that they will not be welcome in the organized Jewish community. They are comfortable with me because I stand on the margins, as they do themselves. It is a perspective to which they can relate. In this my identity as a lesbian rabbi has been extraordinarily helpful.

Working with this population has been deeply rewarding for me. I have had the great rabbinic privilege of seeing some of them through multiple events and across generations. Sometimes they go on to greater contact in the Jewish community, sometimes they do not. I do make them aware that at least, in a Reconstructionist setting, they may find a community that welcomes them. But my goal has not been to convert them; I don't do outreach. If I worked for the Jewish community I would experience pressure to bring them in. I want the people I work with to be able to choose how much contact they want to have with Judaism beyond their connection to me. I understand and respect their perspective on the margins, their lack of interest in belonging to a group as an expression of being

Jewish. Synagogue life is not for everyone. This freedom is another advantage of my position.

Although coming out as a lesbian was the point of departure for my new rabbinic role, I have both incorporated my lesbian identity into my rabbinate, and have also gone beyond it to a new location as a rabbi on the margins. Many lesbians have had the opportunity in recent years to choose a different path, to become central to the larger Jewish enterprise. Their lesbianism for them is much like what my Reconstructionist and feminist identities have been for me. So it is not the lesbian identity itself, but the perspective it brought to me that made the difference in bringing me to where I stand today.

The Farming of Souls: Rethinking Rabbinic Activism

BY DAVID E. SULOMM STEIN

After completing a civil rights march, the late Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel is said to have remarked, "It felt as if my feet were praying." Originally, my vision for my own rabbinate included all kinds of vigorous, high-profile involvement in civic life. I would promote social justice and ecological balance as a Jewish leader. But when I tried to follow in Rabbi Heschel's footsteps, only sometimes did my feet sing praises or connect with God. I found that my attempts to change the world did not necessarily accord with the spiritual growth of those involved. In recent years, as I have explored what being a rabbi means, I have radically revised my activism.

Spokesperson for Judaism

As a rabbi, I am generally expected to take a stand on the issues of the day, transposing Jewish lore to suit the more upbeat idiom of American society. So I have sought to derive definitive Jewish answers for current public policy questions. That's usually been impossible. Yes, I do hear Judaism relating certain ethical lessons to me: actions often have intergenerational consequences; accountability is better than blame or denial; reconciliation is better than alienation. Such guidance is stimulating—yet hardly clear-cut as to the best resource allocation, administrative regulation, or legislation details for our imperfect world.

Why aren't Judaism's answers more specific? Because classical Jewish literature isn't a unison song; rather, its "music" is scored for multiple voices that intertwine. Not only that, but like a Bach concerto, whole sections of musical notes are missing—apparently for the musicians to improvise.[1] Reconstructionist listeners then create new overtones by combin-

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ing the classical track with other Jewish voices (such as women's perspectives). And we run the mix through various filters and enhancements (such as historical analysis). Two people, each sitting at the controls of the Jewish recording studio, may get different—and equally authentic—results.

If Judaism were a person, she would be a gracious, engaging crone with a twinkle in her eye; and if asked for advice, she would have the habit of mumbling.[2] When I speak "for Judaism" in public proclamation after combing sacred texts for quotes that support my position (as is common practice)—am I really her mouthpiece? No, I am her ventriloquist, throwing my own voice while her mouth moves.

Invitations abound for me to speak on behalf of Judaism. To some people, if my answer agrees with theirs, it's a relief: God is on their side and Judaism is relevant after all. To others, the crises that enervate them are vast and urgent; what matters is that my ventriloquism advances their cause. So most people don't mind the pretense. But I do.

A Light unto the Nations

Our society is adrift on a sea of anxieties, bobbing near the shoals of inane distractions; and sinister winds do occasionally whip across the deck. Perhaps it's up to the rabbis (and other clergy) to be the moral compass, the ethical lighthouse, and the ecological foghorn. Who else will do it—the exploiters themselves? The suffering victims? The couch potatoes and pleasure addicts? No, it's our religious leaders to whom society looks to distinguish right from wrong, afflict the comfortable, denounce injustice, and arouse the masses. And I, too, used to think that as a rabbi I should "wear the mantle of the biblical prophets."

I wonder what I should learn from the prophets about promoting social justice. Those fervent guerrilla poets were often more attached to being right than to being effective. Usually they spoke at their audiences rather than *with* them. They tended to be rude, uncivil, and even violent. Arguably their self-righteous, polarizing denunciations raised the societal baseline of anxiety, so that all Israelites became more reactive and less spiritually minded.

But like it or not, I function as a prophet—without even trying. I discovered to my surprise, when I served as a JRF congregational rabbi, that my title acted as a selective megaphone. Any tone of judgmentalness in my voice (even on the level of personal preference) was amplified several decibels in the minds of all who listened. Even in the "nonhierarchical," Reconstructionist milieu, I was heard as an Authority Figure.

Due to the rabbinic megaphone, people pay special attention when I take prophetic public stands. And that troubles me. Moralizing rhetoric reinforces the societal fraud that my words should carry more weight because I am a rabbi. It's a set-up.

Furthermore, my telling other people what's right undercuts the responsibility of the real decision makers (officials and voters) to do

their own thinking. Ironically, as I accept responsibility for solving society's problems, it lets everyone else—exploiters, victims, apathetic masses—off the hook. For a bargain price (having to put up with my harangues, petitions, and demonstrations), I relieve them of their inner motivation for lasting change. My attempts to "make them care" push some of them to care less, while pushing others to care more—but about the wrong thing, reacting to me rather than engaging with my message.

Yes, if I make a big enough fuss, I might get my way—and "win one for truth and justice." Meanwhile, that victory would engender passivity in some people and backlash in others. One step forward, two steps back.

Toward Sustainable Yields

So I work for justice with subtlety. I strive now for the organic farming of souls—sustainable "psychiculture," as it were. That is, my role as rabbi is to work and to watch over the ground in which souls can grow into responsive and responsible people. Happily, the actual miracle of growth happens mostly on its own. If I prepare and nurture the soil well, the plants can handle most challenges that come their way; with creativity and resilience, they will redress imbalances. Therefore I prefer not to apply the synthetic fertilizer of political crusades or the insecticide of judgmental rhetoric. (True, it may increase short-term yields, but it also causes runoff pollution, weakens the plants, and contaminates the fruit.) And I believe that by my *tzimtzum* (self-restraint)—in my learning to let go and trust the process—I am growing too.

How does this work in practice? Let me now examine seven aspects of a praxis that I hope is consistent with the organic farming of souls. (I discuss my own actions because I prefer to scrutinize my own deeds rather than those of others.)

Areas of Expression

1. Communication with elected officials. If I write issue-oriented letters or testify before legislators, I now speak as a rabbi only when it's relevant to the personal experiences I am describing. Otherwise I am a "mere" citizen-constituent. I explain where I stand with regard to the matter at hand. (I expect my concerns to be given consideration, while allowing that the decisions themselves are not mine to make.) I no longer say, "I urge you to . . . "

2. Letters to the editor. Surprisingly, a 1998 editorial in the *Forward* discussed rabbinic officiation at gay marriages without mentioning our movement's position. So without rancor or recourse to authority, I sought to note the RRA and JRF view. My letter began, "You wrote, 'not even we would suggest there is religious sanction available for these kinds of relations.' Well, I would. Let me describe how Judaism can, with integrity and respect for tradition, favor the sanctification of same-sex unions."

3. Public statements. Last summer, the Jewish Peace Lobby asked me to endorse a "Rabbinic Call for a Shared Jerusalem." I explained that I no longer think it's the domain of a rabbi

to be telling other people what they should do. Yet I did not think it right to be altogether silent. So I faxed the sponsors a statement of my own:

> I am a religious American Jew who has lived in Jerusalem and who loves to visit the city. Some Israelis believe that their country's interests would be well served by sharing sovereignty over Jerusalem with other entities. If Israel's representatives were to negotiate such a settlement, I believe that I personally would have no trouble living with that arrangement.

4. **Reproof.** At RRC I was taught: During your pastoral work (e.g, counseling), ask questions. The best questions stimulate people to define their own goals and values (as distinct from the expectations of others), and to affirm responsibility for their own destiny.[3] Likewise, when someone has behaved unethically or irresponsibly (in my humble opinion) so as to impact my own well-being, I have privately written to ask for clarification, with genuine curiosity: "I am interested in your perspective as to what happened . . . I am wondering whether this is in accord with the way that you 'do business' and wish to be known."[4]

5. **Sermons.** How can I as a pulpit rabbi take a stand and inspire others without being preachy—that is, without urging people to change their ways? *(a) Telling a story. (b) Speaking personally.* For example, on Yom Kippur I gave a sermon on gratitude. During preparation, I tried to scour out any stain of implication that my listeners "should be more grateful." I took up the challenge of my own chronic tendency to feel miserable. I thus addressed a widely shared problem, using Jewish idioms, yet spoke only for myself, focusing on my own responsibility. The thesis was a statement of fact: "Counting our blessings is a Jewishly authentic approach to life that some people have found fulfilling, and it may make sense for me too." What people might choose to do with that fact was left up to them. *(c) Sharing my vision.* The conclusion of that Yom Kippur sermon included a personal wish: "I pray that this year, we somehow open ourselves up to the continual shower of God's blessing, so that we can blossom and thrive in its nourishment." I stated my goal without confronting others with a need to sign on.[5]

6. **Revaluation.** While I don't claim to know "what Judaism says" about an issue of present concern, I do state what a given aspect of Judaism says to me. Even better, I like to suggest that we consider the questions that Jews asked in similar situations in the past. (Jewish continuity may arise more from our pondering the same questions than preserving the same answers.) And I try to make explicit my biases, assumptions, and methods.

7. **Playful intervention.** In societal "struggles" where positions have become entrenched, or when either worry or denial has flooded the field, I see room for active intervention in the form of playfulness. It can loosen up people's reactivity. In early 1999, a

colleague was worried about how best to make his congregants aware of the "Y2K" problem as a communal issue of *gemilut ḥesed* (thoughtful kindness). I suggested a modest step: In explicit preparation for Shabbat, January 1, 2000, his synagogue should simply sponsor a contest to determine "the best songs to sing together when we are all sitting in the dark with no heat."

Is It Truly Sustainable?

For me, one reward from organic soul-farming (as opposed to crusading) is that it's more fun. When I don't judge or try to change others, I seem to have more vigor and playful energy. Perhaps that's because I'm not feeling the weight of the world's problems on my shoulders. Indeed, three of the biggest threats to my vision of "sustainable psychiculture" are my own tendencies to assume that I am responsible for everything, that I know what's best for other people, and that it's helpful if I rescue them.

In my experience, those three tendencies match up with the activist qualities that congregations tend to seek out in rabbis. I suspect that if I had continued in ongoing work as a pulpit rabbi during the past two years, I could not have written this essay. Given my own weaknesses, I would probably still be seduced by the distortions of responsibility that are an occupational hazard of that job. Perhaps I have grown more steady,[6] so that if I return to congregational work, I will hold fast to the "sustainable" approach. Only time will tell.

The approach outlined here is neither non-directive nor escapist. It simply restrains me from dictating my own terms to *tikun olam.* It prepares the soil for others to commit to transformative change for the sake of improving their own lives. And then it nurtures and boosts their motivation. Ah! Is that what Rabbi Heschel was doing when he marched alongside Negros who were reclaiming their dignity? If so, then perhaps I am following in his footsteps after all.

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1. It's difficult enough to determine "the Jewish answers" of the past, let alone the present. Aaron Kirschenbaum, a law professor at Tel Aviv University, pointed to the challenge when he wrote, "The rabbis of the Talmud and their medieval successors regarded the criminal law of the Torah as primarily a mighty instrument of character training, religious indoctrination, and spiritual edification, and only secondarily (and sometimes not at all) as of practical import" ("The Role of Punishment in Jewish Criminal Law," *Jewish Law Annual* IX [1991], 127). Contrary to popular belief, classical Jewish texts do not display the characteristics of definitive legal rulings. Perhaps their vagueness was *intended* (an assertion that cannot be proven). To my mind, the vagueness functions so as to challenge adherents to take responsibility: the Bible's multiple voices prevent it from becoming another idol; the Talmud's unfinished debates invite readers to continue the conversation; the medieval practice of treating a responsum (the considered opinion of a prominent rabbi) as merely *advisory* empowered litigants to define justice and achieve reconciliation for themselves; and the codifiers' insistence that their compendia never be seen as the final authority reminds us that "fresh" thinking is better than "frozen" thinking.

2. Instead of solid *answers*, my study of Jewish lore prompts in me challenging and clarifying *questions*, which I deem more valuable.

3. Ed Friedman, the late family therapist and

rabbi, told clergy with a wink, "It is probably very effective to conduct entire sessions where all we do is ask questions, and never point out things—that is, if our anxiety will permit it" (*Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* [NY: Guilford, 1985], 72).

4. R. Moses Nachmanides noted c. 1260 that asking a question could be a form of reproof. In his commentary on Lev. 19:17 ("reprove your neighbor"), he wrote: "When someone does something contrary to your wishes, go and reprove that person by asking, 'Why did you act that way with me?' " Furthermore, an act of questioning meets the famous Quaker challenge to "speak truth to power" if "truth" is defined as the fact of the questioner's catalytic presence and nonjudgmental curiosity, as in God's primeval question, "Where are you?" (Gen. 3:9).

5. Biblical prophets—especially Isaiah—deserve credit for being visionaries.

6. At least I have formulated a rabbinic activism that seems in harmony with all my most inspiring influences: the voice of Torah that sagely "mumbles"; the active nonviolence that quietly stands its ground; the Alexander Technique that delights in gracefulness; the art of aikido that neutralizes attacks by welcoming them; and the Bowen family systems theory that liberates human relationships from simple cause and effect. I thank my teachers and colleagues in those disciplines for our adventures together. And I praise the Power that makes the whole greater than the sum of its parts.

Vintage Perspectives

From the pages of early volumes of *The Reconstructionist*, a retrospective that addresses the theme of our current issue. We have not adjusted the language for gender-neutrality, allowing it to speak in the idiom of its time.

The Authority of the Rabbi: An Exchange of Viewpoints

1. The following excerpt is from an editorial, "The Place of the United Synagogue in the Conservative Movement," November 6, 1953, Volume 19, Number 13:

". . . In many congregations, the lay people have hardly any voice in matters of ritual or religion . . . they are given no authority in shaping religious policy. The rabbis and scholars who should serve as religious advisors and resource personnel, helping the layman to fulfill himself as a Jew, at present function as authoritarian directors of his religious life. The lay people, on the other hand, seem all too willing to abdicate their responsibilities and lamely to follow in paths cleared for them by rabbis and administrators. Or else they defer to rabbinic authority with their lips, while irresponsibly indulging their own inclinations in despite of rabbinic authority.

It is often said in defense of the status quo that our laymen are not qualified for making responsible decisions in regard of religious policy. They lack the education to enable them to function as effective Jewish leaders. That argument, however, betrays a deep-seated distrust of democracy, and a failure to understand how it works. It implies the aristocratic and authoritarian notion that rabbis and scholars know better what is for the good of people that they do themselves. To be sure, the laity needs education, and it is the function of the rabbinate to provide the education the laity needs. But we cannot educate people to discharge responsibilities by denying them the right or the opportunity to make responsible decisions. By vesting the responsibility for religious decisions in . . . rabbis and scholars, we absolve the laity from

concerning itself with the future of Judaism and undermine the motivation for their seeking a deeper knowledge and understanding of it."

* * *

2. The next excerpt is from an article by Ira Eisenstein, entitled "The Cantor in Modern Judaism," also in the November 6, 1953 issue:

". . . it appears to me that, in any institution one person must assume responsibility for the overall program; in the synagogue, that person is the rabbi . . . This does not mean that the rabbi should be arbitrary and dictatorial . . . [the rabbi is]the one who is responsible for coordinating and integrating all aspects of the synagogue program."

* * *

3. In reply to Dr. Eisenstein's article, Rabbi Jack J. Cohen suggested the following in a letter to the editors, November 20, 1953, Volume 19, Number 14:

"I should like to suggest that there is another route to effective leadership in a congregation than that offered by Dr. Eisenstein. Educational, ritual, and other activities of the synagogue might well be planned democratically by the entire staff of educators, teachers, cantors and rabbis, with execution of the decisions to be carried out by the best qualified staff members. If the congregational staff cannot plan cooperatively, chances are unlikely that they will wield the spiritual influence which is so essential to the synagogue. If we believe in democracy, we must employ the method that is most calculated to achieve its ideals, the method of cooperative planning. Dr. Eisenstein's assumption that the rabbi must have final authority . . . seems to me to perpetuate, at best, a tradition of *noblesse oblige* . . ."

* * *

4. Another correspondent, W. Belkin Ginsburg of Philadelphia, comments in the December 4, 1953, Volume 19, number 15 issue:

"All good Jews look to their rabbis for guidance and instruction, but somehow it doesn't sound quite democratic nor Jewish, nor (permit me) in the spirit of Reconstructionism that *the rabbi must make ultimate decisions* [italics in the original]. The rabbi's authority is undisputed. His flaunting of it betrays, among other things, insecurity or inadequacy. The *derekh y'sharah* ["correct way"] would be for the religious services committee (where the rabbi's opinion would carry the greatest weight) to set down rules and principles to be followed. Within the limits of these rules both rabbi and cantor ought to be free agents, albeit remembering that they are the servants of God and ministers of their people."

* * *

5. In this final excerpt, also in the December 4, 1953 issue, Dr. Eisenstein replies to his critics:

"What I had to say about the rabbi's having the responsibility for making

ultimate decisions, was not intended by any means to deny to all other professional servants of the congregation 'initiative and liberty of action.' I am merely stating what seems to me to be a palpable truth, namely, that every institution must, in the final analysis, be directed by some one leader . . . since decisions must be made by a spiritual leader, it seems to me that the rabbi is the logical person for that responsibility . . . This does not mean that the rabbi has a right to act in a dictatorial or arbitrary way. No rabbi with any sense would impose a personal decision upon the congregation which he knows the congregation is not prepared to accept. Nevertheless, if he is to be the leader, he must lead."

Three Models of Illness in Judaism

BY ALAN HENKIN

In the Talmud the rabbis discuss the wondrous book of medicines of the ancient Israelite king, Hezekiah.[1] In Hebrew it is called *sefer refu'ot shel Ḥezkiyahu*. Inscribed in this book were the recipes for cures to every known disease. But Hezekiah's book of medicines was buried, its location forgotten, and its wisdom lost for ever.[2]

Amazingly the rabbinic sages approved of the burial of this pharmacological treasure. Why? Why would the wisest of Jews condone the destruction of such a boon to humanity?

The answer lies in the maddening but ultimately perceptive Jewish attitude toward illness and injury.

In this article I want to suggest three Jewish models of illness and what each can teach us about the ways we respond to our own health crisis.

Illness As Withdrawal

Let us call the first model that of withdrawal. This model of illness was proposed by my teacher Rabbi William Cutter,[3] and it draws greatly from the Kabbalistic notion of *tzimtzum*, as developed by Rabbi Isaac Luria of Safed. The belief behind *tzimtzum* is that in order to make room for the universe, the infinite God, the *Eyn Sof*, who took up all space, had to withdraw, or contract, into the divine self. God had to empty the divine self, so to speak, to accommodate the universe. God's motive behind *tzimtzum* was *raḥmanut*, compassion, claimed the Ḥasidic Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav. The universe was thus created through an act of divine self-limitation.

Applied to the experience of illness, Cutter sees sickness as the emptying out of the self, the experience of hollowness and chaos. When one is really ill, the whole world feels topsy-turvy, and sometimes one cares about very little. One feels physically empty, emotionally empty, and spiritually empty. Things don't make any sense;

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no reason can be found for what is happening. Under these circumstances one simply wants to be left alone.

At these moments we pull into ourselves, not for intense reflection or contemplation, but because we have nothing to give. We create what Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav called *halal panuwi*, a vacuum in the middle of our being.

Rabbi Cutter argues that precisely at this time the mitzvah of *bikur ḥolim*, visiting the sick, must be practiced. In visiting the sick, the visitor helps to fill the void in the patient. By speaking words of kindness and comfort, the visitor pours parts of his or her soul into the patient's empty soul, so to speak, infusing the patient with a sense of well-being. The visitor restores a measure of good health to the patient by filling the void with his or her presence.

The importance of *bikur ḥolim*, of visiting the sick, is the lesson of our first model of illness.

Illness As Punishment

The second model of illness we shall call the punishment model. Did you ever feel that your illness was a punishment for your behavior? Feeling hung over after a night of carousing? Suffering a pulled muscle after overdoing exercise? Having a heart attack after a lifetime of chocolate eclairs? We often experience our illnesses and injuries as just desserts for abusing our bodies.

It is not that our diseases come to us as punishments from on High; although sometimes disease or injury befalls us as a natural consequence of our behavior choices. Rather, I mean that however disease comes upon us, we often interpret our illness as a punishment.

The Jewish parallel for this "illness as punishment" model is Miriam, Moses' sister. In Numbers 12, Miriam and Aaron challenge Moses' exclusive right to speak in God's name. Miriam alludes to Moses' problematic marriage to a non-Jewish Ethiopian woman. For this behavior God afflicts her with leprosy; God punishes her with a devastating disease. The disease abates, though, when ironically Moses, the brother whom she wronged, prays on her behalf. God's healing arrives after seven days of isolation. Ritual purity from leprosy requires fourteen days of isolation (Lev. 13:5), so Miriam's separation is not long enough to effect ritual purity. It must serve another purpose: to chastise Miriam and to mark her for life in the eyes of the Israelites—for defaming Moses.[4]

Miriam and Aaron attacked Moses, not God. God's punishment must therefore be intended to vindicate Moses against his brother's and sister's aspersion. Indeed, rabbinic tradition consistently ascribes leprosy chiefly to defamation, called in Hebrew *motzi shem ra*, which is a play on the word "*metzorah*" or "leprosy."[5] Miriam's disease is understood as punishment not only by the Bible itself but also by subsequent Jewish tradition.

What can we learn about our own experience with disease from the Miriam/punishment model? We learn about retribution and rehabilitation.

The goal of punishment is usually two-fold: to achieve vengeance (retribution) and to reform behavior (rehabilitation). Illness experienced as punishment can have the salubrious effect of challenging us to change our behavior. If we do not work out enough and our back goes out, then exercise should be the change in behavior. If we eat high-fat, high-sodium fast food, and grow overweight, then our obesity should teach us to eat more nutritiously.

One last example to illustrate that, like punishment, illness should provoke us to examine our behavior.[6] Headaches are often brought about by stress. You take two aspirin and relieve the pain temporarily, but until you deal with the sources of the stress, the headaches return. Headaches can serve as a springboard for us to examine our lives and to make some fundamental changes to eliminate the sources of stress and to avoid the "punishment" of the headache.

The point of the punishment understanding of illness in Judaism is the evaluation and improvement of behavior, even as the lesson of the withdrawal model is the way that visitors can fill the emptiness brought on by illness.

Illness As Impurity

The third Jewish model of illness I will call the impurity model, and it derives from the laws of leprosy encoded in chapters 13 and 14 of the book of Leviticus. To be sure, most biblical scholars do not believe the condition described here actually to be Hansen's disease.[7]

Whatever the illness, the Israelite infected with this condition had to be visited by a priest, a *kohen*, after the illness had passed. This visit took place outside of the Israelite camp in a place of isolation to which the diseased person was consigned until healthy. Then all sorts of rituals took place with two live birds, a cedar stick, a hyssop branch, and a piece of crimson cloth. After all this, the healed individual was allowed to enter the Israelite camp, and go through more purifications before he was allowed to fully reenter Israelite society. This skin condition was both a disease and a lessening of holiness. Conversely, the termination of the illness and the subsequent return to health resulted in the resumption of purity.

Of course, on one level we look with amusement at these antiquated laws, knowing that we enlightened people who understand the workings of viruses, bacteria, and genes would never equate sickness with religious or moral failure. Yet many of us blame sexually-transmitted diseases on lascivious life-styles, and we connect unhealthy diet and work habits with heart disease.

There are deep parallels between our experience with illness and our experience with desanctification. For one thing, disease often results in a contamination of the soul of the diseased person. A spiritual crisis ensues—why me? While we are ill, we no longer feel spiritually whole, spiritually strong. Somehow what our body is going through, our spirit is also going through; our soma is affecting our psyche.

For another thing, illness produces guilt in a patient, which has to be expiated for purification or wholeness to take place. What kind of guilt? As we have seen in the punishment model, people often feel responsible for their conditions—that their behaviors brought them on. More than that, patients feel guilty for the disruption they created in the family, in the hospital and at work. Patients imagine: now my kids won't go on their vacation because of me, my wife has to miss work because of me, these doctors have better things to do than to tend to me. Patient-guilt can become an obstacle to healing and has to be overcome, or atoned for, in order for healing to happen.

And finally, both in ancient and modern treatments of illness, a period of isolation is necessary and is followed by gradual reentry into society. Nowadays the isolation takes place in hospitals, convalescent hospitals, and bedrooms. The patient also goes through a period of withdrawal, a time of wanting to be alone, to be left to himself or herself in order to regroup. Then after this isolation, the patient slowly gets back into the routine until finally normality (healing or wholeness) occurs.

Quest for Purity

Purity rituals still govern our lives, though we rarely recognize them as such. We have to brush our teeth, shower-shampoo-condition our hair, soak our contacts, Efferdent our dentures, shave our faces. It is as though, in our world, sleep defiles us, much as illness defiled our ancestors. We don't recognize our purification rituals because they are so embedded in our day-to-day lives. We moderns are as interested in purity as our predecessors of thousands of years ago: we want soap that is 99.99% pure, we cook in pure canola oil or pure vegetable oil, we slake our thirst with pure water. The difference between us and our ancestors is that, in our world products are pure; in their world, people were pure.[8]

Experiencing illness as impurity gives us pause to find ways to neutralize the impurity. This is by way of stock-taking: we analyze our lives, we discover where we have been deficient in relationships with others and God, we resolve to live better, fuller, richer lives, and we reconnect with our community. Ovadiah ben Jacob Sforno, the sixteenth-century Italian-Jewish Bible commentator, talmudist, and physician, said of leprosy: "[Since this disease is a kind of punishment,] the periods of isolation are designed to prompt the victim to repentance."

The lesson derived from this impurity model of illness is the taking seriously of the patient's need for purification before returning to a normal life. Rituals, religious and otherwise, provide entree for the patient into his or her everyday world. In this area of transition from illness to health modern medicine has been deficient.

Now we understand why the talmudic rabbis approved of the burial of King Hezekiah's book of medicines. As the twelfth-century French talmudic commentator, Rashi, explains, the immediate cures offered by such a book would prevent people from ex-

amining themselves. Soul-searching is an important part of the experience of illness.[9]

Woody Allen once quipped that he was not afraid of dying; he just didn't want to be there when it happened. None of us wants to be there when the Angel of Death greets us, but we will. And most likely, we will be sick before we die. Let that sickness, and all sickness, be an opportunity for us to love better those we hold dear, to reform our ways, and to live life better. Our health is a precious gift from God deserving to be nurtured and sanctified; but when that gift is diminished and disease or injury ensues, they too can be life-giving, if we let them.

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1. B. *Pesaḥim* 56a.
2. Reuven P. Bulka, *Judaism on Illness and Suffering* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1998), 105-107.
3. William Cutter, "Visiting the Medical Voids," *Central Conference of American Rabbis Journal* (Summer 1992), 35-41.
4. Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers, The JPS Torah Commentary* (Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society, 1990), 98-99.
5. *Avot Derabi Natan* 9,39; B. *Shabbat* 97a; *Leviticus Rabbah* 16:1-6.
6. Bulka, 107.
7. Baruch A. Levine, *Leviticus, The JPS Torah Commentary* (Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 75.
8. For this insight I am grateful to the late Dr. Norman Mirsky, professor of sociology, Hebrew Union College-Los Angeles, in a private communication, June 1998.
9. Bulka, 107.

Appearance, Aging, and Identity

Frida Kerner Furman, *Facing the Mirror: Older Women and Beauty Shop Culture* (New York: Routledge Press, 1997) x + 218 pages.

REVIEWED BY RIV-ELLEN PRELL

An interest in the body has been one of the most promising developments in Jewish studies scholarship over the last decade. Scholars of both classical texts and contemporary culture have sought to understand how the Jewish body is portrayed, experienced, and regulated in order to decipher both the meaning of Jewishness in a broad number of contexts, and the place of the body in a highly cognitive tradition.

However, the concept of the "Jew's body," to draw on the title of an important book by Sander Gilman, raises as many problems as it addresses. The Jew is both male and female, and as such, Jews' bodies are differentiated from one another, as well as from both the men and women in the dominant culture where they may be living. Just as classical Judaism's texts are replete with very different notions of the body for men and women, so must any discussion of Jewish bodies be discussions of gender and the anxieties they create differently for outsiders and between Jews.

Natural Community

Facing the Mirror: Older Women and Beauty Shop Culture, Frida Kerner Furman's highly readable and effecting study of older Jewish women, makes an original and unexpected contribution to this trend in Jewish studies. Furman finds a "natural community," in the neighborhood beauty shop, where older Jewish women gather each week not only to have their hair coifed, but to share a meal, provide care and concern for one another, and enjoy the company of themselves and the non-Jewish profes-

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sionals who provide their services and much more.

Furman does a wonderful job of describing that social scene with careful attention to the nature of community for older women. In particular, drawing on feminist social ethics, she demonstrates how moral behavior is tied to interpersonal relations. The deep concern and care these women provide for one another through illness, death, loneliness, and pleasure creates a moral community for participants. Furman is particularly attentive to the tendency of scholars and citizens alike to trivialize the lives of older women, particularly in the act of pursuing "beauty." She provides an interesting scaffolding on which to construct a much deeper understanding of ethical behavior.

Facing the Mirror, though rooted in the study of a community, is about a great deal more. Its most important contribution is to the discussion of cultural issues of women and beauty in general, and to aged Jewish women in particular. Furman is both ethnographer and social psychologist in these efforts, and she very effectively takes us inside a painful and often devastating journey into the world of women who violate what is acceptable to American society simply by being aged and Jewish. The story is not without its examples of resistance, but Furman details with brutal honesty how painful the process of aging is for these women. The beauty salon is a fascinating setting for this discussion because in it these elderly women both embrace the world that judges them so harshly, and fight back against it.

Much of what Furman learns about women and beauty is derived from lengthy interviews that allow these women to look back over their lives often using photographs of themselves in the present and in the past as "prompts" to describe themselves. She discovers that for these women, like virtually all women in this society, an "external gaze" tends to define for them what is beautiful and desirable, hence denying them their subjectivity. With aging, as their bodies fail them and as their ability to match up to these norms disappears, they are left with shame and disappointment about themselves.

Solidarity and Affirmation

The beauty shop becomes an arena in which they can affirm their right to pleasure and can support their entitlement to value themselves. They have a range of strategies calculated to deal with their disappointment. Humor, solidarity, seeking the approval of their beautician, and admiring one another are all helpful in struggling against the losing battle to affirm themselves as aged women in a hostile society.

At the same time Furman presents women who have lived full lives, lives of care and accomplishment for which they feel great pride, and who have also suffered many losses. Furman is particularly effective in capturing the complexity of their lives, the limitations on their opportunities, and their

dignity and integrity. Her ability to present the complex losses and fullness of the lives of aged women is a striking and important feature of this book.

These women's Jewishness is an interesting feature of the study. They are fairly representative of women of their generation. Very few are observant Jews. Most strongly identify as Jews and express their Jewishness in family celebrations of the Jewish holidays. Virtually all of them have experienced anti-Semitism in the workplace and in personal relationships. When Furman inquired about what about their appearance was Jewish, she received interesting responses from the women. Most insisted that they did not "look Jewish," although most also believed that there were Jewish looks. Looking Jewish was rarely an affirmation of attractiveness. Furman persuasively argues that their own Americanization, either as immigrants or as children of foreign born parents, required the women to devalue what might appear different or outside the mainstream. Just as they struggled against social definitions of themselves as unattractive, any identification with "looking Jewish" only further burdened them with appearing undesirable.

This study of aged Jewish women suggests that the Jew's body must be understood along multiple dimensions. Furman's important contribution is to provide an empirical analysis that is based on the internal mirror of these women's experience that reflects back to us a culture of ugly values about women, aging, and Jewishness.