

Prioritizing the Roles of Pulpit Rabbis in Contemporary America¹

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A recent book by Stephen Fried² chronicles the tribulations of one particular synagogue, an affluent and well-established Conservative congregation in the suburbs of Philadelphia, as it seeks to replace its long-time rabbi who had served for 30 years. After mounting a national search for over a year, the congregation failed to hire a new senior rabbi, but rather sought to groom his assistant for the position, a man just a few years out of rabbinical seminary. As the book amply attests, the search process was seriously hampered by great uncertainty as to the qualities sought in a new rabbi. Some members, like the author himself, were enamored of the departing rabbi's "muscular and musical [voice], with an accent that sounded vaguely British". Another congregant wanted someone who could match the departing rabbi's powerful sermon on the Sabbath after JFK's assassination, a sermon all the more remarkable because the rabbi only joined this

particular congregation five years *after* Kennedy was shot. For some congregants the rabbi search was about whether the synagogue will be "great" for their children; for others, whether it will meet their own needs in middle age and beyond.

¹ A far more extensive report on this study appeared as Steven M. Cohen, Jeffrey S. Kress, Aryeh Davidson, "Rating Rabbinic Roles: A Survey of Conservative Congregational Rabbis and Lay Leaders, *Conservative Judaism*. Fall 2003, pp. 71-89.

² *The New Rabbi: A Congregation Searches for Its Leader*, New York: Bantam Books, 2002.

In an effort to negotiate these conflicting priorities, many congregational search committees embark on a quest for the rabbi who has—and does—it all. The problem is well-described by a placement executive at a rabbinic organization whom Fried cites:

Congregations all want to hire the same rabbi....They all want...someone who attends every meeting and is at his desk working until midnight, someone who is twenty-eight years old but has preached for thirty years, someone who has a burning desire to work with teenagers but spends all his time with senior citizens, basically someone who does *everything* well and will stay with the congregation forever.

Here the reader gets a glimpse at the confusion in congregational life today about what should be asked of rabbis and how unrealistic and contradictory are the expectations in some synagogues.

An examination of those expectations of the American rabbinate is especially worthwhile at the present moment, a time when growing numbers of congregational leaders find themselves unable to recruit the right kinds of rabbis, when synagogue boards are generating contracts for their rabbis that enumerate pages upon pages of "performance expectations," when rabbis chafe at demands that they serve primarily as the synagogue's CEO or even worse, as one rabbi lamented, as "religious MC or cruise director rather than as a scholar"—and when, not surprisingly, ever growing numbers of rabbis are fleeing congregational life or opting never to enter it, seeking non-pulpit positions, instead.

As part of a wide-ranging study of Jewish religious leadership conducted at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York under the direction of the Seminary's provost, Professor Jack Wertheimer, and funded by the Lilly Endowment, a team of three social scientists surveyed both congregational rabbis and their lay leaders in Conservative synagogues³ as to their rating of rabbinic roles.⁴ Their research was spurred by a desire to clarify how both congregational rabbis and their lay leaders define their expectations for rabbinic leadership, and whether those expectations resemble or differ from one another. Learning of those attitudes and expectations, and understanding similarities and differences in how each groups perceived such questions, could provide significant insight into the rewards and frustrations of rabbinic leadership, and of how to address those issues in practice.

³ The Conservative movement in Judaism occupies the middle ground of practices and traditionalism between Reform and Orthodoxy. In the middle of the 20th century it was the largest synagogue movement in American Judaism, but in the past decade it has slipped to second place behind Reform.

⁴ The researchers for this aspect of the project were Profs. Steven M. Cohen, Hebrew University in Jerusalem, and Jeffrey Kress and Aryeh Davidson, both of the Jewish Theological Seminary.

The Importance of Various Rabbinic Roles – The Rabbis versus the Congregants

A questionnaire distributed to rabbis and congregational lay leaders asked respondents to evaluate the relative importance of various rabbinic roles (e.g., pastor, scholar, manager, etc.), particularly in measuring the effectiveness of a rabbi. Both groups largely concurred in their ranking of the roles listed. The following five items were the most widely endorsed by both groups:

- Pastor,
- Jewish educator,
- Model of religiosity,
- Spiritual guide, and,
- Halakhic authority—i.e., arbiter of Jewish religious laws and rituals.

At the same time, both sets of respondents ranked the following roles relatively low in importance:

- Staff supervisor,
- Manager, and,
- Administrator.

The contrast between the two clusters of items is intriguing. The high-ranking cluster consists of items that combine two characteristics:

- 1) They entail personal or individualized service on the part of the rabbi;
and
- 2) They encompass the sacred skills of learning and personal piety.

In contrast, the items with the lowest rankings are distinguished by two other features:

- 1) They refer to service to the congregation as a collective system; and
- 2) They draw upon what may be regarded as "profane" skills, those that are far from distinctive to rabbis (or any cleric) and that indeed are widely shared by communal workers, human service professionals, and business leaders.

The significance of these rankings was further corroborated by other questions posed only to the rabbinic sample. Rabbis were asked to indicate the three roles they regarded as the most important. In their assessment, both Jewish educator and pastor vastly outscored all the others. Over 50% of the rabbis cited each of these as among the three most important rabbinic roles. In a second cluster of frequently mentioned choices, with each appearing on 29% of the rabbis' answers, were the roles of spiritual guide, visionary, and model of religiosity.

Still further support for the analysis came in answers to questions on specific rabbinic activities. Responding to a list of 22 activities, the survey asked rabbis to list the three they felt they did best, and the three from which they derived the most satisfaction. Consistent with their earlier stress on the role of Jewish educator, 63% ranked “teaching” as among the three activities they did best (more than any other activity), and 67% cited teaching as among the three activities from which they derived the most satisfaction. By way of comparison, Mainline Protestant clergy rate “teaching people about faith” as only their third best task, significantly trailing preaching and slightly trailing worship.⁵

Among the other frequently mentioned activities rabbis claimed to do best were funerals and comforting mourners (30%), preparing and delivering sermons (23%), and working with families around weddings, and bar/bat mitzvahs (22 %). These, along with helping Jews grow spiritually, were also ranked highly by rabbis when they were asked about work that brought them satisfaction. When asked to pick the three activities they regard as most critical to their success as a rabbinic leader, again the rabbis cited teaching far more than any other activity (47%), followed by helping Jews grow spiritually (22%).

The survey of congregational lay leaders differed from that administered to the rabbis in that it added three roles to the list presented to the rabbis: Institutional leader, Programmer, and CEO. Both substantively and empirically, these three items are related to the three low-scoring managerial functions in the list above. These items also elicited relatively little enthusiasm among the lay leadership sample, with “CEO” producing the lowest rankings of all.

In summary, these results demonstrate that both rabbis and their congregational leaders largely agree on the paramount importance of the rabbi’s role as a Jewish educator or teacher and that of pastor and pastoral activities around life cycle transitions. The two samples also concurred in their low ranking of managerial and administrative roles and activities.

Although the two samples often agreed in the importance they attached to dimensions of rabbinic leadership, with respect to specific roles, the responding rabbis and congregational leaders differed in instructive ways. The rabbis’ high rankings of Pastor and Jewish educator slightly exceeded the scores awarded by lay leaders. The latter, meanwhile, most highly prized rabbis as Halakhic authority (interpreter of Jewish religious law) and as Spiritual guide, even more than did the rabbis themselves. Other noteworthy gaps between the assessments of congregational leaders and rabbis appeared in connection with the role of rabbi as Counselor, *Talmid hacham*, (learned scholar), and Worship leader. The lay leaders ranked all three of these roles more highly than did the rabbis.

⁵ *Pulpit & Pew: Research on Pastoral Leadership*, 2001.

How do we explain these variations? One explanation may lie in the way lay leaders idealize the rabbis. Congregants prefer to see their rabbis as people of great piety, spirituality, and learning. Rabbis, by contrast, more often see the actual application of these qualities in teaching and pastoral care as the ultimate test of their effectiveness and success.

Allocation of Time – The Actual and the Ideal

Respondents were asked to estimate the amount of time that rabbis devote to various activities. In other words, rabbis reported on their own allocation of time, and the lay leaders shared their sense of how their rabbis spend their time. Respondents were also asked their views as to how much time Rabbis ideally should devote to these tasks. These questions, then, yielded four sorts of responses:

- Estimates by rabbis of their actual time allocation;
- Estimates by lay leaders of the rabbi's actual time allocation;
- The ideal time allocation, as expressed by rabbis, and
- The ideal time allocation, as expressed by lay leaders.

The researchers then compared the following items:

- 1) The gaps between the lay leaders' perceptions and rabbis' own reports of how they allocated their time. In particular, do congregants perceive the ways the rabbis spend their time differently than the ways the rabbis see their own allocation of time?
- 2) The gaps between actual and ideal time commitments, suggesting areas where the respondents (be they rabbis or lay leaders) would like to see the rabbi invest more or less time. In other words, if a rabbi says he/she actually spends little time teaching but believes he/she ideally would spend much time teaching, we can readily surmise that the rabbi would like to spend MORE time teaching than he/she does currently. Similarly, parallel gaps for congregational leaders would tell us of areas where the leaders would like to see their rabbis devote more (or less) of their time.
- 3) The gaps between rabbis and congregants in their views on the ideal allocations of the rabbis' time. These would point to different emphases in rabbinic leadership.

Consistent with their earlier reported emphasis on serving as a Jewish educator, the rabbis ranked teaching as their most time-consuming activity, followed by leading worship services; conducting funerals, and comforting mourners; program planning and execution; working with families around weddings, bar/bat mitzvahs; and attending board and committee meetings.

Regarding perceptions of current time allocation, rabbis saw themselves spending more time than their leadership perceives them to spend in the following areas:

- Teaching (rabbis' score of 81 versus lay score of 68);
- Administration (58 vs. 47); and
- Program planning and execution (73 vs. 63);

The gap with respect to teaching may reflect the rabbis' own idealized perception as devoted teachers, or they may define teaching more broadly than their congregants. The other areas of significant differences in perception between rabbis and lay leaders fall under the manager rubric, suggesting that much of the rabbis' managerial work is less than fully visible to the congregants, or the rabbis see administration as more onerous than do the congregants.

In contrast, rabbis actually reported *lower* time investment in some areas than did the lay leaders. The largest gap in perception revolved around the study of Jewish texts. This gap may be explained either by the idealization of the rabbi on the part of the congregational leaders, or by very different conceptions of what constitutes a great deal of time studying texts. What to the rabbi may seem a paltry and inadequate devotion of time to text study may seem to the lay leaders as both significant and substantial.

Other roles where rabbis and lay leaders differed in perception between low-reporting rabbis and high-perceiving lay leaders included:

- Involvement in the Conservative movement of Judaism,
- Professional development,
- Engaging in sermon preparation,
- Leading worship services,
- Counseling, and
- Conducting funerals and consoling mourners.

Some of these activities are the most visible activities performed by a congregational rabbi. Lay leaders over-estimate the time devoted to the visible work, and, as we have seen, under-estimate the time devoted by rabbis to "behind-the-scenes" activities. The survey data could also be examined with an eye to seeing where and how the rabbis and lay leaders would like to see the rabbis modify their time commitments. The gaps between the rabbis' current reported time investment and their ideal allocation of time signify interest in changing time priorities in one direction or the other. In only one area would rabbis wish to cut back their time substantially—attending board and committee meetings. Rabbis would prefer to invest less time in this activity than they currently report spending on such meetings.

In most other areas, rabbis would ideally want to spend more time than they currently devote. This nearly uniform pattern may reflect a built-in frustration with a job that seems to require more time than the rabbis have available. The two areas with the

biggest gaps between the actual time-and effort invested by rabbis and their ideals arose in regard to:

- Studying texts, and
- Professional development, in-service training.

In addition, rabbis also expressed great interest in increasing time they devoted to:

- Thinking about a vision for the future and
- Writing for publication.

Two other areas with sizable gaps between actual and ideal time allocations were:

- Helping Jews grow spiritually, and
- Helping laity assume leadership.

These two activities relate to the rabbi as an effective teacher and inspiration, working to elevate congregants' spiritually and encouraging the latter to take greater responsibility for the congregation.

For the lay leaders, by contrast, gaps between their current perceptions of the rabbis' time investment and their ideals suggested that congregational leadership is especially concerned about important changes in how rabbis function. From the lay leaders' perspective, the greatest gap between the actual and ideal allocations of their rabbi's time were in the following areas:

- Thinking about vision,
- Working with youth,
- Helping the laity assume leadership,
- Helping Jews grow spiritually, and
- Fund-raising.

Finally, when rabbis' and lay leaders' views were compared with respect to their notions of the ideal allocation of rabbis' professional time, congregational leaders almost uniformly expressed higher aspirations than did the rabbis, perhaps reflecting the rabbis' greater appreciation for the limits of their workweek, or the relatively cost-free stance of the lay leaders who can readily demand more of their rabbis. With that said, congregational leaders and rabbis report especially large gaps in their ideal time allocation with respect to conducting worship services (reflecting the high visibility of this activity). In addition, rabbis and laity divided significantly in three other areas:

- Fund-raising,
- Attending board and committee meetings, and
- Managing conflict.

The lay leaders wanted rabbis to devote more time-and-effort to these areas than did the rabbis. Significantly, all three concern the rabbi's role as manager and institution-builder.

The various dimensions of rabbinic work, in fact, may be combined further. The congregational rabbis, it seems, group these rabbinic roles into two groups of four. One consists of pastor, worship leader, model of religiosity, and educator. The other collection comprises visionary, manager, professional, and ambassador. The first cluster consists of functions that touch individual congregants directly. The second cluster represents those functions that occur either behind the scenes from a congregant's perspective, or that only indirectly feed into the direct delivery of service to the congregant.

The study compared the relative importance that rabbis and congregational leaders attach to these dimensions. Of all the rabbinic roles, rabbis identify their Jewish educational work as the highest ranked dimension and manager as the lowest ranked role. Other low-ranked roles included ambassador and professional. Congregational leaders agree with the rabbis in assigning least importance to the roles of manager, ambassador, and professional. Moreover, they assigned about as much importance to the role of the rabbi as Jewish educator, as did the rabbis themselves.

However, the lay leaders differed markedly from the rabbis with respect to two particular roles that they (the lay leaders) valued more highly—worship leader and pastor. Significantly, these are the two areas of rabbinic functioning that are most visible to the congregants. Alternatively, they may be viewed as the roles which the congregational consumer is most demanding of high rabbinic performance and attention. In addition, the lay leaders' rankings tended to exceed those of rabbis, suggesting the former are simply more demanding of the rabbis' time and attention than the rabbis are of themselves.

The low scores assigned by both groups to the managerial dimension (e.g., administrator or staff supervisor) versus those assigned to other dimensions (e.g., *talmid hacham*—religious sage, Jewish educator, visionary) may be interpreted as a consequence of the available nomenclature. "*Talmid Hacham*," is a title of great honor traditionally bestowed upon rabbis. It connotes traits that are far more prestigious and powerful than "administrator." But to attribute the findings to available nomenclature ultimately begs the point. The absence of honorific language to describe the rabbis' managerial functioning is itself testimony to the limited prestige attached to these roles, at least not in comparison with Jewish educational or pastoral functions. The notion of the rabbi as an institutional leader, manager, or CEO of a complex communal system is not captured by an honorific title whose very description commands respect, admiration and importance.

Summary and Conclusions

Rabbis and their lay leaders largely agree on the relative importance of many aspects of rabbinic leadership. Both groups concur on the importance of placing an emphasis upon teaching and pastoral roles – that is, on providing personal services in times of joy and sorrow. Congregants may also place more emphasis than rabbis on the leading of worship services. However, amidst all the legitimate concern over relations between rabbis and their lay leaders, one major finding achieves special significance: On the whole, rabbis and congregational leaders largely concur on that which is important and critical for the rabbis' success. The differences between the two, typically, are relatively minor and reflect different perceptual vantage points, but not sharply differing values or ideology.

At the same time that both groups value teaching and pastoral work, both groups also attach relatively less value to managerial functions: administration, staff supervision, conflict resolution, attending committee meetings, and fund-raising. The lay leaders would want the rabbi to do more fund-raising; the rabbi would want to spend less time and effort on board and committee meetings. Congregational leaders tend to idealize their rabbis and want them to serve as models of learning, piety, and goodness. The rabbis undoubtedly struggle with these expectations.

It is in the area of community-building, institutional leadership, and management that we found what may be the most crucial areas requiring attention. Significantly, neither rabbis nor congregants place significant emphasis on these areas of functioning. Rabbis see themselves, and are seen by lay leaders, primarily as teachers, pastors, and models of piety—in brief, as modern "Holy Men." But when they lead congregations, they also are responsible for complex institutions replete with history, personalities, memories, challenges, dreams, and fears. Synagogues, after all, generally consist of sub-communities, factions, and stylistic enclaves seeking recognition, attention, and influence.

Congregations require and consume resources—human, financial, cultural or otherwise. Accordingly, rabbis who serve as spiritual leaders of their congregations are almost always institutional leaders, in partnership with other leaders, both lay and professional. This has the potential to create dissonance both internally for the rabbi, as idealized role functioning comes into conflict with day-to-day demands of leadership, and between lay-leaders and rabbis, when expectations held by the one may go unfulfilled by the other. The survey suggests that both rabbis and lay leaders may lack the language of leadership in a contemporary idiom. Psychologists have long discussed the importance of "personal constructs" in helping to guide behavior; as we define the constructs through which we understand the world, these constructs in turn impact on the way people think, feel and act. If the managerial duties of the rabbinate are constructed as undesirable, "profane", or secondary, this will likely have an impact on the successful functioning of the rabbi in these roles, and the job satisfaction of the rabbi.

Today's rabbis seem willing and able to engage in professional development opportunities to enhance their professional practice. Moreover, congregational leaders seem to understand the importance of these development opportunities, although rabbis and lay leaders may have overlapping but distinctive ideas as to the sorts of development they might seek. Both groups would want rabbis to become more adept at helping congregants grow spiritually and helping them assume more leadership. The congregational leaders might want their rabbis to do more as fund-raisers and managers of people. Both groups want rabbis to improve their skills as builders of communities and transmitters of vision, but both may hold insufficient appreciation for the importance of a variety of administrative skills.

Any effort to enhance the skills of rabbis must take into consideration the fundamental love of rabbis for integrating text study into most of their in-service training experience. Rabbis insist of this for at least two reasons—one inherent and one instrumental. Inherently, rabbis love text study. It is, in part, why they became Conservative rabbis, to study, learn, and teach the sacred texts of Judaism. Instrumentally, rabbis want to learn how to translate the teachings of Judaism into their congregants' lives and how, specifically, to teach the texts they love to teach.

The challenge is to enable rabbis to engage in what is most compelling to them—teaching texts—while simultaneously developing skills to move from the role of teacher to that of community builder. To do so, rabbis will have to learn new skills in the administrative and facilitative spheres. And lay leaders will have to empower their rabbis to recreate synagogues as religious communities.