

9:10 - 9:30

Conference Charge: Rabbi Hayim Herring

"Study Leads to Action: Energizing
Rabbinic and Congregational Growth"

Introduction

We're able to be here today with the support of the Jim Joseph Foundation, the Marcus Foundation and the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation, a foundation which has invested heavily in Rabbinic and Continuing Rabbinic Education for approximately a decade. I want to express special appreciation to the Lasko Family Foundation, represented today by two trustees, Bernard Eizen and Dr. Maury Hoberman. The Lasko Family Foundation has been the quiet, visionary force behind this endeavor and Maury has been unflagging in his efforts to realize this wonderful gathering of today. Steve Kraus from JESNA also deserves our gratitude for his meticulous conference planning, as well as UJA-Federation of New York for being such gracious hosts.

I'd like to read excerpt from remarks which a congregational rabbi in one of STAR's continuing rabbinical educational programs made. In each of our programs, under the rubric of self-care, we ask participating rabbis to make a personal commitment that they are willing to work on for a year to which they are willing to hold themselves accountable to, with support. By all outward appearances, this individual is perceived by others as a very successful rabbi; here's what this rabbi wrote (with a few editorial paraphrases):

I don't know the answer (about commitments) not because I don't know what I'd like commit to, but because I haven't known for the last 2 years what I'd like to commit to and have made very little progress in doing so (read: I haven't made any). This has been a cause of great shame for me. I am ashamed of the fact that I seem to be incapable of reading, studying, or praying on a consistent basis. I am ashamed of the fact that I can't seem to go to the gym or eat healthily on a consistent basis. I am ashamed that I have not treated my spouse a person should...

I have known for the last few years that I really must do these things not just for my health or my career, but really, for me. But I allow myself to drown in administrative work and meetings with bar mitzvah kids and counseling.... "

Several years ago, prompted by these kinds of poignant statements, a small group of us informally began discussions about what we saw happening in the world of the congregational rabbinate. We began with a simple question: understanding the importance of continuing rabbinical education, how might we work together so that rabbis and their congregants will find greater enrichment, meaning and connection to community? We recognized that we

would need to expand our circle to include a much broader group of experienced individuals and experts involved with rabbinical and post-rabbinical education to pursue this question and any resultant action. And so we are here today, now raising that question around a much larger table, our presence affirming the critical role of rabbis and synagogues in touching Jewish lives and shaping Jewish community.

The Conference theme is taken from: "Great is study, for study leads to action," *talmud gadol she-ha-talmud mayvee liday ma'aseh* (TB Kiddushin 40b). We'll be asking variations of the question, "What kind of action, *ma'aseh*, might we take together around continuing rabbinical education so that it will be a source of perpetual energy to rabbis and help congregations become or remain vital and vibrant communities, pulsating with Jewish meaning?"

By focusing on rabbis, I don't mean to diminish the contributions of volunteer leaders, educators, cantors and cantorial soloists, executive directors or others who work so hard and often go unrecognized. But, a rabbi is either an agent of congregational excellence or an obstacle to achieving it. Rabbis either lead congregations forward or contribute to their stagnation. Rabbis help to set a compelling vision of community, or the congregation muddles through with mediocrity. Rabbis set the spiritual tone of the congregation, or congregations languish in their spirit. While rabbis should never abuse their power and authority, they should also not underestimate the tremendous potential they have both to change the lives of individuals and families and shape an entire community in a unique way.

Continuing Education: A View from Other Vantage Points

Any discussion about **continuing** rabbinic education, suggests that we look first at the **origins** of rabbinical education, namely rabbinical school. In the not too distant past, the congregational rabbinate was viewed by many seminary professors as a refuge for second-rate rabbis. As a result, there was a gap between what rabbinical students learned from academics, who valued scholarship, and what they actually needed to know for the congregation. However, most seminaries have recently undergone or are undergoing curricular revisions and the newer accredited seminaries have already incorporated more sophisticated, real-world training into their curricula.

To be fair, in all professional schools there is a gap between professional education and the actual needs of future practitioners. That is especially so when it comes to rabbinical school education, as the rabbinate is one of the last vocations for generalists. The most essential job of any rabbinical school is to enable rabbis to speak with authenticity about the Jewish tradition, and to learn how to model that with integrity. Given the diverse backgrounds of rabbinical school students today, this is already a monumental challenge. Add

to that how different the vantage point of the classroom is from the board room, and we understand the crucial need for continuing rabbinic education.

That is why most professions actually require continuing education. If you are a lawyer in the state of Minnesota, you are required to take 45 continuing education credits every three years, with five of those in professional ethics. If you are a doctor, the number is 75 hours over a three-year period. There are similar requirements for teachers, psychologists and other professionals. A congregational rabbi must be educator, counselor, healer of the spirit and exemplar of Jewish law. Yet, the rabbinic profession does not even have a suggested number of hours in which rabbis engage in continuing education. While these other professions make professional practice contingent upon fulfilling continuing education requirements, members of the clergy are not licensed by state, so there are no state mandated continuing education requirements. Nonetheless, shouldn't rabbis who are entrusted with the well-being of so many individuals and an entire organization, be expected to fulfill continuing education requirements as well? Shouldn't the rabbinical profession be committed to holding itself to at least the same standard that other professionals are required to fulfill?

It's true that many rabbis are in a constant learning mode as they must prepare for weekly *divrei torah* and classes to a range of learners, and represent their communities on a host of issues. Additionally, rabbis frequently attend local or national conventions, or may participate in some other learning opportunity for several days at a time each year. However, other professionals make time to read professional journals, books and articles related to their field, attend conferences and, depending upon their profession, may have to do a considerable amount of background time preparing for seminars, meetings or teaching. And, they still have to fulfill their continuing education requirements.

Let's consider the state of affairs in continuing rabbinic education with an analogy to the medical profession. You make an appointment with a medical internist who you are seeing for the first time. Your new doctor has a degree from a prestigious medical school and has been practicing medicine for fifteen years. Unlike other doctors that you've been to before, you observe that while her medical degree is hanging on her wall, there are no other medical certificates of more recent vintage. So you gently ask about this with your doctor and discover that she has not taken any continuing education courses and her last formal medical training was when she was a medical student. How quickly would you be looking for the exit sign from that office?

Seminaries, rabbinical organizations and independent providers of continuing rabbinic education understand the critical need for continuing rabbinic education. The number of programs and services available through denominational channels and independent providers appears to have grown,

especially in the last five years or more. I use the word “appears,” because we don’t have baseline data for a comparison. As with other Jewish issues, there is no smooth path for locating essential information about our topic because we have not invested sufficiently in creating universally accessible channels for locating such information. In fact, I want to thank the Lasko Family Foundation for commissioning the environmental scan of continuing rabbinic education programs—the first effort of its kind.

Examples of What We Might Do Together

By way of illustration, let me suggest several fundamental challenges which all of us grapple with, that might be made more fruitful through a broader collaboration:

- developing the rabbi’s role as cultural mediator;
- educating in a multimedia, multigenerational environment;
- and, cultivating faculty who are well-matched for this kind of work.

Awareness of the Role of Cultural Mediator

In the words of the psalmist, congregational rabbis get to work “...in the courts of the Lord” (Ps. 92: 14), *b’chatzrot elokeinu*, often all day, every day. Many rabbis are privileged to work with a dedicated team of staff and volunteers who spend most or a significant part of their lives around the synagogue as well. They also interact with the “regulars,” those who come for Shabbat and holy day worship, and those who can be counted upon to be present for almost any program. These are the people who anchor their lives in synagogues and they are grateful for the meaning that it gives to them. For them, the synagogue is working quite well.

However, these individuals are the minority. Ask yourself: outside of the Orthodox community, how much time does the average dues-paying, American Jew actually spend in the synagogue in an ordinary year? Here’s my unscientific estimate:

- 8-12 hours for Rosh ha-Shanah and Yom Kippur;
- 6-8 hours at other Shabbat and holy day services;
- 5-7 hours for lifecycle events of family or friends;
- and, 3-5 hours for special programs.

If these estimates are close, that means the average, non-Orthodox American Jew will spend between 22–32 hours per year in the synagogue, with most of that time being spent passively (and informal discussions with colleagues suggest that the number of hours may be closer to 15-20). Thus, while synagogues work well for a narrow percentage of individuals, the vast majority of American Jews, even those whom we label as “affiliated, have decided that the synagogue does not speak their language—literally and metaphorically.

That means that the synagogue has to take on the role, in the words of Dr. David Kaufman, an historian of American Jewry, of “mediating institution¹,” helping to connect timeless Jewish values, practices and beliefs with timely events in the outside world, where the majority of Jews spend most of their time. And that is a complex task which transcends denominational boundaries.

Being a cultural mediator does not mean latching on to the latest trendy fashion. Rather, it means speaking in a way that address people’s real, everyday concerns—about health, relationships, work, play, spiritual and intellectual growth, children, loss—the “stuff” of daily life. And, it also means having the capacity to speak inspirationally about the “grandeur” of Jewish life, in the words of Abraham Joshua Heschel, of blessed memory. In an increasingly interconnected yet polarized world, we will have to equip rabbis to use Torah, in its broadest sense, to respond to the pressing existential issues of our age, like:

- If I live in a world where we have seen the consequences of environmental exploitation unfold before our eyes, what is my responsibility in creating a more sustainable world?
- If I live in an age of unlimited power, how do I ensure that that it is used with restraint?
- If I can watch images of human abuse in real-time, how can I work to ensure that that all people are treated with basic human dignity?

Enabling Torah to address routine and extraordinary issues means re-framing the meaning of core Jewish values and practices to resonate with contemporary perspectives. This work is no different from rabbis of past ages, who said in a similar vein, “Let the Torah speak in a contemporary idiom,” (See TB Berakhot 31b and Tamid 29a).

Many rabbis do this already, to a degree, but are not fully aware of the centrality of this task. This kind of mediation project has to be done more consciously, systematically and frequently. Then, we might see more people being shaped by the synagogue and more individuals who value the potential richness of being a part of a community—a hunger that we know keenly exists. This isn’t “selling out,” but enabling people to “buy in”--and a rabbi’s essential role is indeed to enable individuals to find their place in the Jewish narrative and to increase the number of connections people make to a rich civilization.

Without elaborating here, helping Gen X and Gen Y Jews make these connections is an especially acute challenge. For a small slice of them, their memories of synagogues as places of meaning are negative, so they’ve created new spiritual alternatives. For many more, they have few or no memories of

¹ David Kaufman, “The Synagogue as a Mediating Institution,” *Re-Envisioning the Synagogue* ed. Zachary I. Heller (Boston: The National Center for Jewish Policy Studies at Hebrew College and STAR, 2005), 3-37.

synagogues and rabbis, so what will attract them to Jewish life as embodied by the synagogue community?

Educating in a multi-generational, multi-media environment

Another clear area where we can learn from one another is in helping congregational rabbis fulfill one of their key roles: being educators in a multi-generational, multimedia environment. I want to unpack this phrase for a moment as each part of it conveys a different meaning.

Let me illustrate the interrelated meanings of “educator” and “multi-generational,” with two true stories, which reflect the challenges of being an effective multi-generational educator. A colleague of mine once brought his father-in-law with him to a lecture that he was giving at a Jewish Community Center. When this colleague had finished lecturing, he asked his father-in-law, “how did you like the lecture, Dad?” His father-in-law responded, “It was the best lecture that I ever heard.” His son-in-law was quite pleased to hear this and asked, “What did you like about it?” His father-in-law answered, “I told you, it was the best lecture I ever heard. Usually, because my hearing isn’t so good, I can’t hear what the lecturer is saying. But you, I could hear.”

The next true story involves a group of pre-school children. When I was a newly-minted congregational rabbi, I was once telling a story to them about *sefirat ha-omer*. I had an *omer* counter with me as a visual aid, one made of olive wood that was shaped like the *kotel*. I asked these youngsters if any of them knew what I was holding in my hand. One of them eagerly shouted out, “It’s a picture of White Castle.” This wasn’t exactly the response that I was prepared for!

There are very few professions in which one might be teaching a group of preschoolers in the morning, seniors at lunchtime, middle school-aged children in the late afternoon and adults in the evening. Yet, that is not an unusual schedule for congregational rabbis. While many people have difficulty in relating to prayer and other aspects of spirituality, Torah, broadly defined, is a much easier access point for many people into the Jewish community and tradition. Given the heavy expectations of rabbis as educators, more attention needs to be paid in developing rabbis who can work in a multi-generational educational environment and provide them with ready-made, customizable resources that will simplify this work.

And as to the last part of that phrase, “in a multi-media environment” Until recently, the phrase, “*I’dor va-dor*” implied that one older generation possessed wisdom to transmit to the next. But when it comes to technology, the reverse is also true—we rely upon younger generations to keep older generations technologically aware. And I don’t understand why, but synagogues tend to lag behind in the wise utilization of technology. STAR has studied this topic, and we’ve spoken with experts more recently who have

written about it (see, for example, the article in the Forward, on June 18, 2008 by Monique Cuvelier and the excellent post on our Conference blog by Rabbi Ruth Abusch-Magder). They, like me, are puzzled about the wide-spread inability of synagogues to grasp the power that multi-media channels of communications present them for telling the story of their great work and extending the synagogue's reach to those who are removed from it.

So we have to ask, **when will the people of the book also become the people of the byte?** If we don't already shift to a web 2.0 platform, before we reach web 3.0, we will be in serious trouble. Flickr, twitter, Facebook, blogging, YouTube, Second Life, podcasting, video casting, Utterz, Yelp... these are the venues where Gen X'ers and Gen Y'ers are at home. While the individual tools may change, the environment of being able to connect with anyone, anytime, anywhere about anything will only accelerate. When younger generations notice that synagogues are technologically outdated, they often conclude that the substance of synagogues is also antiquated.

Cultivating Faculty

When STAR initiated its PEER Rabbinical Executive Leadership Development Program (for congregational rabbis who had between two and seven years of experience), we struggled to find the right kind of faculty for the program. We were looking for individuals who were not only **content** experts in their field, but also knew the **context** of the synagogue. We needed to find faculty members who were scholarly practitioners and who also had a deep love for synagogues and for congregational rabbis. Unlike other fields of continuing education, we understood that the trust that rabbis were able to place in our faculty would help to determine the success of the program.

Over the years, we were able to cultivate a core team of faculty members, all with shared values about the critical roles that rabbis play in synagogues and the importance of synagogues for the Jewish community. As we know, cultivating a faculty team that exhibits the highest level of professionalism and caring is a significant endeavor. Yet, while we share in this enterprise we have no easy mechanism for sharing experience and information with one another on faculty development. This is another example of the kind of work which an alliance might be able to accomplish together.

Conclusion: Dreaming About the Future of Continuing Rabbinical Education

I began with the premise that there are tasks we might be able to do better together than we can alone, and I addressed three areas, by way of illustration, which are potential fertile ground for collaboration through an ongoing alliance:

- developing the rabbi's role as cultural mediator;
- educating in a multimedia, multigenerational environment;
- and, cultivating faculty who are well-matched for this kind of work.

There are many other questions and issues which could benefit from joint exploration, which will emerge from the rest of the day's discussions, including:

- How do congregational rabbis grow their own sense of *kedusha* and preserve the sacred in all of their encounters?
- How do we break the pattern of isolation that is often prevalent in the rabbinate and create additional channels for rabbis to reach out to one another for support at all stages of life?
- Are there certain kinds of learning which are more necessary and beneficial during one stage of personal and professional development than another?

In conceptualizing and developing continuing rabbinical educational programs, we operate most often from intuition and not systematic knowledge. Given the high stakes, it's difficult to comprehend why we shouldn't pursue these kinds of questions together.

In fact, can we go even a step further and also imagine a world in which congregations, rabbinical organizations and rabbinical seminaries would eventually require rabbis to take a minimum number of continuing education credits over a set number of years? Rabbinical education, like other kinds of professional education, would then be seen as having a continuum of training, coordinated with the seminaries.

Why not raise the bar of expectations for the Jewish community about what constitutes professional rabbinic excellence? Why not provide congregations with greater assurance of developing the highest caliber of rabbinical quality and enable rabbis to pursue continuing education, with the support and encouragement of their congregations (something which does not always currently happen)? While we do not have nor should we need the incentive of state licensure to require continuing education for the congregational rabbinate, let's hold ourselves to a set of continuing education expectations which parallel those of other professions. Our communities will recognize and appreciate the added value of leadership and knowledge of a rabbi who is immersed in continuing education.

The creation of some kind of organization of those represented here, along with other stakeholders, will help us all continue working toward asking significant questions and providing the very best approaches to continuing rabbinic education. That is the least that we can do to support congregational rabbis, whose work is of ultimate importance.

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