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RENEWAL OF RABBINIC LEADERSHIP

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The abandonment by American Jews of *day-to-day* religious practice and *active participation* in their synagogues during the last half-century is an unmistakable sign that something essential to the needs of community is missing from our congregational life.

In the 2001 *American Jewish Identity Survey* of adults affiliated with major branches of Judaism, 48 percent of the Reform, 35 percent of the Conservatives, and 14 percent of the Orthodox identified themselves as “secular” or “somewhat secular.” The study concluded that, “There is a clear trend toward increasing secularism . . . widespread skepticism among large segments of the Jewish populace toward religious ideas, ideals, and institutions.”

Who’s to blame?

In naval tradition, when a ship goes down the captain is accountable. Rabbis, similarly, are held to a demanding standard of accountability for the vitality, morbidity, and mortality of their congregations, even with the very real limitations on their authority, unlike ship captains.

Rabbinic leadership, however it may be projected and perceived, is the *sine qua non* of synagogue survival and success. When it comes to *leading* the process in which the Torah vision and path are brought to life in Jewish congregations, it is the rabbi who has the education and commitment to carry the responsibility. Whatever our preferences or misgivings, we are bound to rabbinic leadership for the overall future of Judaism and congregational life.

Rabbinic Accountability

Knowing that rabbis play an indispensable role in Jewish life, questions touching on rabbinic leadership are inevitable:

Why has there been an historic out-migration from Judaism and congregations in the past 50 years? Why aren’t Judaism and congregational life

more powerful antidotes to the epidemic of intermarriage and the corrupting effects of the larger society and culture on Jewry and the Jewish way of life? Why is the number of self-identified Jews in long-term decline? *Is there something missing from contemporary rabbinic leadership?*

Rabbis certainly should not be blamed for the historical developments in Jewish life. They live professionally with the torturous bind of meager authority and unlimited responsibility. The issue is why rabbis don’t have an understanding of leadership development that would enable them to qualitatively enhance Judaism and congregational life in spite of the bind.

When we ask rabbis what they mean when they say they want to help people live more “authentic Jewish lives,” their answers are often fuzzy and contradictory.

One rabbi told us he wanted congregants to learn more Torah, do more home rituals (candle-lighting, etc.), and become more observant. But when we asked for examples, he mentioned only *ritual* practices.

When we questioned a rabbi about how Torah is to be taught and learned, his examples were unrelated and seemingly indifferent to the day-to-day demands of his congregants’ lives.

When we asked another rabbi what Jewish congregations should be doing about social problems that affect Jews—for example, violent gangs, weapons found in public schools, drug dealing and addiction, particularly by youth, lack of affordable housing, morbid and malignant obesity, and unemployment and underemployment—he insisted these weren’t *Jewish* issues.

We know a rabbi who is convinced he can renew the religious and spiritual life of his congregation by building a new sanctuary. Maybe a sanctuary is needed, but not to fix his congregants’ missing spirituality and religiosity.

We interviewed a rabbi who told us he wasn't much interested in the problem of Jews abandoning Judaism, because "there will always be a saving remnant," and "if that's what they want to do, that's their decision."

Withal, it's not defensible in Judaism to focus only on ritual Jewish practices, to ignore social problems that affect Jews because they affect other citizens too, to address spiritual and religious deficits primarily with bricks and mortar, or to ignore Jews who are estranged from Judaism and congregational life.

Widening the Leadership Circle

What are our expectations for contemporary rabbinic leaders? Have we internalized the absurd expectation that rabbis, relying on their own resources, can heal the religious and spiritual shortcomings of American Judaism and congregational life?

Joshua's report to Moses of Eldad and Medad's prophesying is a seminal event in Jewish leadership development theory and practice. When Joshua declares that Moses should "Forbid them," Moses replies: "Are you jealous for my sake? Would God that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit upon them." (Numbers 11:29)

Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch (1808-1888) comments that, "Moses' answer to Joshua remains for all teachers and leaders as the brilliant example they should keep before their eyes . . . to make themselves superfluous. . . . With his 'are you jealous for me' our Moses has broken down the dividing wall between 'intellectuals' and the 'lower classes,' between clergy and laity, forever in Israel."

The essential ingredient in demonstrations of successful leadership is a commitment to *widen the circle of leaders*. The indispensable requirement for senior leaders is to build relationships that include *challenging* others with tasks that foster leadership qualities. Yet we have met rabbis who seem to have little or no wherewithal to pose constructive challenges.

We conclude that many rabbis long for greater numbers of religious and spiritual leaders in their congregations, but they have not been educated and trained in leadership development. And within the American rabbinate generally, there is an abiding reluctance to challenge congregants, reflecting a rabbinic commitment to congregational *shalom bayit* (peace of the house) at all costs—as if the two were mutually exclusive.

Self-Limiting Challenges

Virtually every rabbi would say he or she challenges congregants, but we have observed some self-limiting characteristics of rabbinic challenges:

- Rabbis' challenges often focus on "peace and justice" or intellectual issues, which the *rabbi* regards as important, ignoring the relevance of Torah and Judaism to congregants' day-to-day pressures and hopes;
- Rabbis' challenges often are "broadcast" from the bimah to an amorphous "audience," without the benefit of a circle of leaders who can pose challenges personally and consistently to their fellow congregants;
- Rabbis' challenges to congregants in one-to-one situations often come off as ineffective *suggestions* or insistent *demands*; and
- Rabbis' challenges are often "floating," unconnected to any follow-up or accountability.

We have heard several rabbis privately bewail the shortcomings of their congregants when explaining their reluctance to challenge them, although in the words of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-1972), "Our greatest sin is to underestimate the layman."

And why should we expect Jews to respond to challenges if many of us with teaching responsibility act as if our top priority is to have everyone be comfortable and like us personally, whatever our formal pedagogy and curricula?

Methodology of Challenging

Certainly we can never go back to the shtetl's integration of community, authority, and faith. But rabbis can lead in recreating the *kehilla* (congregational community) by challenging congregants.

Envision a *kehilla* in which the rabbi and lay leaders together are committed to posing thoughtful challenges that continuously expand the circle of members who are leading by individually and communally living in accord with Torah and Judaism. The rabbi's role is to model the spirit of *clarifying reproof*. Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo ben Yitzchak, 1040-1105), the dean of biblical commentators, teaches that, "*hochacha* [הוכחה] refers . . . in every place to a clarification of matters." (Genesis 20:16) Rabbi Hirsch teaches that, ". . . the solidarity of all for all. . . way of taking *tochacha* [admonition—תוכחה] [makes] every individual know and feel how, by every furthering of faithfulness to the Torah, he is only ensuring his own welfare. . . ." (Deuteronomy 28:1)

The prerequisites of challenging to serve Jewish values and objectives in contemporary congregational life include:

- Building relationships of mutual trust and confidence, reflecting mutual self-interest, in which challenges are *welcomed*;
- Offering up-front support in the form of time, energy, tangible resources, and spirit to the person to be challenged;

- Gauging challenges to match the wherewithal—experiential, intellectual, educational, religious, emotional, etc.—of the person to be challenged.
- Using language that is respectful of the person being challenged, such as: “Would you be willing to do _____?”;
- Responding respectfully when a challenge is refused, even if the person has a moral obligation to respond—but nonetheless repeating the challenge at opportune moments; and
- Following up with new challenges and mentoring when a challenge has been accepted, regardless of whether the person succeeded or failed to meet the challenge.

Making Torah Authoritative

The mission of rabbinic challenging is to make Torah and Judaism authoritative in the lives of individual Jews, their families and congregations.

Under what circumstances are many more Jews likely to come to know Torah and Judaism and actively choose to take on the ironically *liberating yoke* of their vision and path?

Jews accept Torah and Judaism as authoritative when they serve as *guides to relieving their pressures and realizing their hopes in this world*. When Torah and Judaism are not tied to our practical pressures and hopes, our investment of time, energy, and spirit in a *kehilla* is shallow. But when their vision and path are linked to the pressures and hopes that affect our families, we act communally from self-interest in our own well-being and that of our loved ones, and in the interests of others with whom we have common concerns.

Authentic Congregational Community

It’s not surprising that many Jews, unlike their rabbis, regard themselves as *American Jews* rather than *Jewish Americans*. The rabbi’s life is focused on the tradition and the synagogue.

What’s needed for most Jews to make the tradition and the synagogue the focus of their lives?

The mission of the synagogue, its leaders and staff, its religious and spiritual teachings, and its allocation of resources, all reflecting the vision and path of the tradition, must be more carefully targeted to its members’ pressures and hopes—which brings us back to the question of community.

We understand that three key elements of Torah suffuse authentic Jewish *kehillot*:

- *Gemilut khasadim* (loving-kindness)—face-to-face contact by many members of the *kehilla* to deepen relationships with other current and potential members;
- *Kriat Torah* (reading of Torah)—linking Torah learning to the pressures and hopes of the *kehilla*’s members and their contemplation of action together to address them; and

- *Kahal poalei tzedek* (a congregation of doers of justice and righteousness)—doing *mitzvot* together, in the synagogue and larger community, to uplift their own lives and the lives of others.

An authentic *kehilla* has many members who have face-to-face relationships. They have a history of responding to pressures and challenging others to do so. They have evolved faith, beliefs, customs, and rules. They have learned to resolve their conflicts constructively. And they have flourished individually and as a *kehilla* by promoting their Torah vision and self-interests in the larger world.

For example, how we value children in an authentic *kehilla*, their upbringing, and the essentials of realizing their potential in the image of God, are directly connected with our ability to protect those children from threatening conditions in the larger world—including ethnic and racial intolerance, the failure of public schools, joblessness, the drug epidemic, and youth gang violence.

Without such capacity, there is no reason to suppose that many Jews will commit themselves to congregational life, albeit they maintain perfunctory memberships. But congregations can become empowered communities, fulfilling the hopes of their members by achieving practical solutions to the conditions that are damaging their lives, their families, their neighborhoods and cities.

The obstacle to congregational empowerment is a generation of Jews who have not learned a way of life in which Torah is the wellspring of relevant meaning, community, and action—that Torah is “a tree of life to those who lay hold of her; those who hold her fast are called happy.” (Proverbs 3:18)

Leadership for Congregational Relevance

Rabbis believe that to promote Torah and congregational development, more resources should be devoted to Jewish education and educational outreach to the congregationally unaffiliated.

The barrier to more Jewish education, however, is not a lack of resources per se, but a lack of Jews who want religious education in the context of conventional synagogue life. The authority of Torah and Judaism in many congregations is so weak, congregants are immobilized in the face of an historic out-migration. And many synagogues have little appeal because they are rightly regarded as inauthentic communities.

On the one hand, the synagogue can’t succeed if it operates on the assumption that its members have joined in search of opportunities for sacrifice and sainthood. On the other hand, synagogue programs and activities that reflect the “bazaar model” have been a desperate and destructive reaction to the out-migration of Jews from Judaism and congregational life.

The remedy is an authentic congregational community, a *kahal poalei tzedek*, which is not a *fel-*

lowship (a small number of similarly spirited souls) or a religious *agency* (a few active producers and many passive consumers)—the models most of us know in congregational life, unfortunately.

But Rabbis often apply marginalizing labels, such as “social action” and “*tikun olam*,” to the activities of *poalei tzedek*. In doing so, they unwittingly relegate such action and the concerns behind it to the margins of congregational life.

When rabbis equate a marginalized social action committee with a *kahal poalei tzedek*, they forsake congregational development that can serve the commonweal of their congregants and the larger community. They obscure the relevance of Torah and Judaism to the day-to-day lives of their congregants, who in turn become estranged from congregational life and its call to righteous action in their own shared self-interests. The sanctuary then becomes a place to escape from the pressures of daily life, instead of where congregants may reflect on, commemorate, celebrate, and recharge their commitment to action that relieves those pressures.

It’s not surprising that most Jews who are living with destructive pressures and disappointed hopes don’t commit themselves to such congregations and don’t want to rely on them for education.

Revitalizing Judaism & Congregational Life

The lack of rabbinic understanding about leadership may explain why many rabbis can point with pride to activity in their congregations, and simul-

taneously be dejected by their congregants’ spiritual and religious impoverishment.

The search for Jewish identity by increasingly secularized American Jews, in an environment devoid of *relevant* religiosity and spirituality, has ironically been accompanied by demands that their children have the minimum religious benchmarks of that identity. One outcome is the huge number of *b’nai mitzvah*-motivated congregational family memberships that dissolve in dust and smoke after the *simcha* (joyful celebration).

Rabbis, although regularly responding to onerous demands for direct services, may be unaware of the extent to which their synagogue’s activities are irrelevant to congregants’ pressures, spiritual emptiness, and absence of community. It plausibly explains the decline of rabbinic authority, why Jews are not following Torah and Judaism behind their rabbis.

Torah historically has remained authoritative because of its potential for uplifting lives. It has not only given the Jewish people a vision to live for in the future, but the communal path to transform that vision into present practice.

Only a dedicated renewal of rabbinic leadership for revitalizing Judaism and congregational life in that image will restore widespread Jewish faith, community, and authority—a restoration in which Torah and Judaism will warrant the devotion of the people because of their practical relevance to Jewish lives.

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