

The Rabbinic Role in Reconstructionist Congregations

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The expectations of a rabbi in the contemporary American synagogue are numerous. While most Jews are familiar with the highly visible "public" time of the congregational rabbi, far fewer understand the "private" time dimensions of the job that are central to the effective functioning of a congregation. In a Reconstructionist congregation, with its emphasis on lay participation, there is proportionately more private than public time, because part of the rabbi's role is to enable others to perform tasks that in other synagogues would be exclusively the domain of the rabbi.

The other factor that affects the way a rabbi carves out his or her role is talent and predilection. No rabbi does all things equally well. It is natural to put more time into the areas of one's greatest strengths. Of course, congregational needs must be considered as well. When the rabbi's strengths mesh with congregational needs, a maximally fulfilling relationship exists. When the match is not complete, negotiation must take place, and, with flexibility, a mutually satisfactory arrangement can be reached. What rarely works is for a congregation to try to make its rabbi into something he or she is not.

Off the Bimah

Because congregants see their rabbi primarily during public time, board members must help the rabbi interpret to the congregation the ways in which the rabbi is involved with the synagogue beyond that public time. This requires being clear on the distinction between having rabbinic functions performed and having a rabbi 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 educational settings. These services can be subcontracted to individuals as long as they understand the general approach and needs of the community. For a community to have a rabbi implies that it wants its religious, educational, social action, life cycle, and organizational life guided in part by a spiritual leader 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; and so on. I used to say that this agenda amounted to rabbis putting themselves out of a job. I now understand better how critical the rabbi is in empowering Jews to assume this level of responsibility. Additionally, in most congregations, the rabbi will continue to be the primary teacher/leader by virtue of both training and office.

How Decisions Get Made

One of the thorniest issues for Reconstructionist congregations is how decisions get made and what role the rabbi plays in that process. Reconstructionist congregations are committed, in principle, to the democratic process. Not only is this principle in keeping with Reconstructionism's concept of evolving religious standards (halacha) throughout history, but it is the starting point for laity to engage in serious study and consideration of issues that, in other congregational settings, are reserved for the rabbi. Of course, even in a Reconstructionist congregation, the rabbi plays a crucial role as teacher and leader of the communal process, shaping a decision with religious implications. Still, using as primary criteria 1) the importance of standards that deepen a community's spiritual/religious experience as Jews, and 2) ensuring the creative survival of the Jewish people, a community is ultimately responsible for guiding its corporate Jewish life.

The flip side of this empowerment of laity is the need to avoid the sharp bifurcation of rabbi/board that is such a common feature of many synagogues, much to the community's detriment. When the board sees itself as the constitutionally elected leadership of the congregation with the authority to act completely independently of the rabbi's input, it becomes the equivalent of any of the thousands of non-profit organizations that do not pretend to have as their primary purpose the spiritual, educational, and religious growth of a community of Jews. Since that should be the primary goal of a synagogue, the rabbi cannot be seen or treated as an employee hired to carry out

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the tasks assigned by the board. Rather, the relationship between rabbi and board should be so intimate that discussions between the two parties take place about every facet of congregational operations. The way the complex set of relationships in a congregation take place (including those involving the rabbi) says more about the Jewish quality of synagogue life than what happens on the bimah.

The grey area in rabbinic/president/board/committee/congregational relationships is very great. No magic formula lays out which issue gets decided at what level. Much is a matter of the personalities involved. Most synagogues alternate between very centralized decision-making and highly decentralized decision-making. Because there are costs and benefits associated with each model, the best the leadership can do is to make the model it chooses explicit to all parties involved so that expectations are clear. I have long been an advocate of major religious policies being taken through a communal decision-making process and have discussed elsewhere how this can work. The question arises, however, whether the rabbi may ever exercise the prerogative of initiating something in the congregation without full committee and board review.

What differentiates a synagogue from a typical non-profit organization is that the rabbi is not the hired hand of the board, but rather the religious heart of the organism. A synagogue does well to encourage its rabbi to be creative, challenging, spiritually exciting, thought-provoking, and innovative. If a synagogue is blessed with a rabbi who has just a few of these qualities, it must realize that creativity does not thrive in an environment with innumerable levels of review. For some time, it has been obvious in havrot as well as in Reconstructionist congregations that a commitment to maximal communal input and egalitarian functioning is not always hospitable to the virtuoso instinct. At the same time, no rabbi, however creative, can continually act unilaterally in a congregational setting without making a mockery of the lay structure that takes seriously its stewardship of the congregation.

Religion tends to bring out the most conservative in people. In some ways, this is natural, since religion provides a sense of heritage and rootedness that is disturbed when conventional practices and routines are changed. Yet the goal of a Reconstructionist congregation is to balance the very positive function of tradition with a willingness to try new things. The Reconstructionist rabbi has the difficult task of simultaneously nurturing a knowledge and observance of Jewish tradition while continually challenging the congregation with innovative approaches to Judaism. In this task, the rabbi should solicit input and try to gain consensus for innovative ideas as much as possible but also should feel that she or he has the license to take risks.

Ultimately, a dynamic synagogue-community relies on the good instincts of its rabbi. Expect that any innovation will disturb some people; if many are disturbed, persisting in the innovation is probably unwise. It would be unfortunate, however, if such rejection of an innovation discouraged the rabbi from trying other ideas or dampened other creative impulses from the congregation. If the rabbi's instincts about appropriate innovations for the congregation prove wrong repeatedly, the congregation-rabbi match probably is not a good one. For as long as the rabbi is in place, though, the congregation and the board should be maximally supportive of rabbinic creativity. ✚