

Synagogue communities are built around people. Klei kodesh, the professional and lay leadership, bring kedusha, holiness, into those communities. They are the unsung heroes behind the desk and on the telephone, the volunteers who visit the sick and welcome the visitor, rabbi and cantor, the teacher, the school administrator. How do these klei kodesh provide sustenance? How are they transformed by their service? What are the connections between the tasks they perform and a life of spiritual richness?

In Search of Klei Kodesh

Harold Schulweis

A few months ago I was asked to speak at a national convention of synagogue executives. Arriving early, I found the assembly participating in mincha-maariv services. I was taken aback by the competence and seriousness of the executives at prayer. Why was I surprised? Because I had not understood them as klei kodesh.

I had a similar experience speaking at a national convention of cantors last year. The cantors, I discovered, did more than sing. They spoke and not just to the choir. They spoke about issues pertaining to the life of the synagogue and the community. I had not understood them as klei kodesh either.

These moments of surprise made me realize that I, and perhaps others, have structured the contemporary synagogue on the model of the corporation. The very nomenclature within the structure of the synagogue betrays the mimicry of corporate culture. There are Boards of Directors, Boards of Trustees and a hierarchy of functionaries: cantor, executive director, ritual director, principal, teacher, secretary, custodian, and *primus inter pares*, the rabbi as ecclesiastical CEO. Everyone has his or her assigned jurisdiction and designated agenda. The rabbi speaks,

the cantor sings, the executive watches the budget.

This mismodeling of the synagogue is detrimental to its character and aspirations. The synagogue is not a profit-making corporation. Its success ought not to be measured quantitatively and its staff ought not to be seen as functionaries. The synagogue is not a commodity-producing factory.

Those who have tied their vocation to the synagogue are klei kodesh, instruments of holiness. They each share the common agenda of the synagogue — to transmit the wisdom, ethics, beliefs, and practices of Judaism to a variety of seekers. How the receptionist responds to the inquiries of a human being teaches Jewish ethics. How the executive helps

a person register as a member explicates Jewish theology. Klei kodesh are to be “humanly holy.”

Mine then, is a *vidui*, a confession and a resolution, before the Yamim Noraim.

There ought not be a division of labor in the synagogue. The rabbi cannot pretend to hide behind the pulpit of ideas and programs without concerning himself or herself with the fiscal responsibility of implementing programs. The executive cannot hide behind the desk and leave to others the intellectual or religious character of the synagogue's

*Klei kodesh are
vessels of holiness
serving the
Jewish people as
extensions of the sacred.*

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projects. The compartmentalization of the synagogue and its personnel threatens the collegiality of its workers and the organicity of the synagogue's aspiration. To segregate those who serve the *kehilla kedosha* is to distort the uniqueness of its sacred teleology.

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Rabbi as Vessel: Journeys of Holiness

Richard Hirsh

Two stories: (1) When my son was in 2nd grade at the local Schechter day school, I was invited to spend thirty minutes with the class describing what I do during the day while my son is in school. This seemed like an easy assignment. After all, how hard can it be to explain to a Jewish day school class what a rabbi does? A rabbi studies Torah ("so do we!"); a rabbi prays ("we do too!"); a rabbi performs acts of *tzedakah* and *gemilut hasadim* ("just like us!"). A rabbi visits the sick, cares for the bereaved, shares simchas and tzuris ("we did that once!"). Fortunately the half-hour came to a close before a precocious proto-rabbi could ask "you mean you get paid to do this stuff?"

(2) Several years ago as the rabbi of a large congregation, I met with an enthusiastic bar mitzvah parent. During our initial meeting, he presented me with a service outline and a list of English readings and readers, syrupy Broadway show tunes, and cantorial selections for the service. I was tempted to ask if I needed to show up; before I could, he informed me that my "part" was to call people up for the *aliyot*.

Somewhere in the lexicon of Judaism, the term *klei kodesh*, holy vessels, was coined to describe those who professionally serve the Jewish religious tradition. The Hebrew root for "holy" (k-d-sh) connotes "separate" with an implicitly positive spin. By extension, rabbis, who are (or at least used to be) seen as one example of *klei kodesh*, are/were supposed to be, in Rabbi Jack Bloom's felicitous phrase, "the set-apart people."

My encounter in the classroom reminds me that in America, what often separates rabbis from other Jews is perhaps only a question of degree, and not of kind. Ideally, rabbis only engage in an amplified, extended, and public way the mitzvot that all Jews are, in fact, called to fulfill. After all, as those sec-

ond-graders intuited, what makes rabbis different is that they are just like us, only more so.

What sets us apart is not so much who we are, but who we are perceived to be. My determined bar mitzvah parent reminded me that in the North American synagogue of the 21st century, the rabbi as *klei kodesh* can carry a distinctly negative spin. As Steven Cohen and Arnold Eisen have so clearly described in their book *The Jew Within*, this generation of Jews is mistrustful if not disdainful of rabbis and the authority they presumably represent. There is a profound ambivalence about needing and wanting rabbinic presence, especially at life cycle moments. Paradoxically, the very rabbis whose advice, positions, and opinions are often routinely disregarded (if invited at all — witness my bar mitzvah parent) are the same rabbis without whose presence an event, ceremony, or ritual is somehow incomplete or inauthentic — one might even say, lacking in "holiness."

Rabbis sit at the intersection of the horizontal ("just like us") and the vertical ("above/below") planes for relationship. We increasingly want to shed "aura" in favor of "approachability." And we readily relinquish the rabbinic robes of prior generations. Yet we remain different: from within, as a consequence of learning and leadership, and from without, as the reluctant, willing, or ambivalent beneficiaries of bestowed authority and expectations.

What are we to make of all this? Perhaps the problem is not in the Hebrew but in the English. A "vessel" conjures two images. One is of containment. Viewed from this angle, rabbi as *klei kodesh* becomes rabbi as embodiment; the one whose very presence reflects and refracts every spoken and unspoken, conscious and unconscious emotion and attitude Jews have about their Jewishness and their Judaism. As Rabbi Richard Israel (z"l) once wrote, when a