

The New Rabbi and the New Rabbinate

The New Rabbi: A Congregation Searches for Its Leader

by Stephen Fried

New York, New York: Bantam Books, 2000

REVIEW-ESSAY BY ALLEN GLICKSMAN

To be an active American Jew is to be an organized American Jew. Few Jewish communities of the past or present could boast of the number of possible organizational affiliations available to someone with the interest (and, not unimportantly, the funds) to affiliate. For many American Jews, their list of affiliations is, indeed, their only expression of their Jewishness.

Nonetheless, given the way most social scientists study Jewish life in the United States, one might never guess the critical role of organizational affiliation. The focus of most research on American Jewry has been on the impact of “identity,” that is, the influence of values and beliefs of American Jews on various behaviors, including ritual behavior, denominational affiliation (independent of synagogue membership), visiting Israel and, most important, one’s choice of marriage partner.

Focus on Identity

This focus on identity emerges from

the agenda of the organizations, primarily the federations that sponsor much of the research on the American Jewish community. These organizations want to understand more about the reasons American Jews choose to (or choose not to) affiliate with the Jewish community. The method of choice to accomplish this goal has been the community (or national) population survey.

These studies, conducted through phone interviews, allow planners and researchers to estimate the size of the Jewish community in a given geographic area and to identify some of the social, economic and religious characteristics of that population. One drawback, however, is that in a short phone interview, a person can be asked about organizational membership but not the personal meaning of that membership.

The lack of research on the day-to-day experience of being active in an American Jewish institution is unfortunate, because it is in those experiences that most of daily American Jewish life

Allen Glicksman is Director of Research and Evaluation at the Philadelphia Corporation for Aging and President of the Association for the Social Scientific Study of Jewry.

is to be found. Nowhere is this problem more apparent than in the lack of research on the most important American Jewish institution, the synagogue. This does not mean that there is a general lack of articles and books on contemporary synagogue life. Quite the contrary, there has been a continuing literature on the subject from rabbis, congregants and others involved in community life. But except for a few key publications, such as Samuel Heilman's *The Synagogue*,¹ social scientists have focused little of their research on synagogue life.

Synagogue Transformation

Why should a lack of studies of communal institutions, especially the synagogue, be of concern to American Jews? The key reason is that the role of the synagogue in the lives of American Jews is undergoing a vast transformation. As I will describe later in this essay, the expectations that congregations have of their rabbis, their synagogues and the rabbinic and congregational umbrella organizations have already begun to change. We need to develop a better understanding of these changes if we are to plan for the community's institutional future.

It is in this larger context that we need to consider Stephen Fried's *The New Rabbi: A Congregation Searches for Its Leader*. The basic story is a simple one. Har Zion Temple in Penn Valley, PA, one of the most prestigious Conservative synagogues in the United States, needed to find a new senior rabbi to succeed Rabbi Gerald Wolpe, who, after several decades at the congregation, had announced his retire-

ment. Fried, a journalist, chronicles the process by which the congregation sought to hire a new rabbi. The process ended unexpectedly, with the hiring of the person who was then serving as the congregation's assistant rabbi.²

A second theme that runs through the book is a story of fathers and sons. Fried's father died soon before the book was written, and it was his need to say *kaddish* for his father that led him to Har Zion. Wolpe had previously been the rabbi in the congregation where Fried grew up, and Wolpe himself was young when his own father died.

The book also illuminates other issues, albeit unintentionally: Fried identifies many of the specific changes appearing in American synagogues. Although Fried did not set out to analyze these issues, his book provides an important illustration of current trends.

The Changing American Rabbinate

Fried recognized that Har Zion was in a process of transition. But he did not recognize that the selection process revealed a more basic transition that was occurring in many American synagogues. This more basic transformation in synagogue life affects the roles of all players on the synagogue stage, including the rabbi, the cantor, the membership and even the umbrella organizations for the various professional and lay groups associated with the synagogue.

That more fundamental change, not in any way restricted to Har Zion, is a process of turning inward, in which the synagogue comes to exist to meet the

individual needs of each congregant. This is in contrast to the traditional role of the synagogue as a communal institution that each congregant must support to be a member of the larger Jewish community. It is this changing focus, from community to individual, that informs most of the key changes in American synagogue life that are documented in the book.

The rabbi of the contemporary congregation is expected to play a complex role in this new form of synagogue life. On the one hand, the rabbi is expected to be a chief executive officer (CEO). This transfers onto the rabbi much responsibility from the synagogue administrator (for those synagogues large enough to have such a position) for maintaining the health (especially the fiscal health) of the institution. That means that much of the rabbi's time must be spent with those congregants who can best help maintain the facility, that is, the richest members of the congregation. But if the rabbi is less the spiritual leader of the congregation and more the CEO of an enterprise, then the time spent with the wealthier members of the synagogue is totally appropriate, as well as necessary.

Employee or Spiritual Leader?

The other side of the rabbi's transition to CEO is that the rabbi becomes in every sense the employee of the congregation, rather than its spiritual leader. In earlier eras in America, the rabbi presumably focused on the spiritual, and was thought to lack a certain worldliness and sophistication about

material matters, such as strategies for negotiations about salary and raises. The synagogue members would then assist the rabbi by providing discounts on everything from clothing to orthodonture for the rabbi's children.

Fried explains at some length the support Rabbi Wolpe received from his congregation (such as a group of members who assisted him in making the down payment on a condominium in Philadelphia after his retirement), and contrasts Wolpe's salary with the salary of one of his sons who has also entered the rabbinate. Aside from whatever personal issues might emerge from the salary discrepancies between father and son, the fact that the son makes a considerably higher salary (in fact, one of the highest rabbinic salaries in the United States) also reflects a change, in which the rabbi behaves as an employee like all other employees, negotiating for whatever salary the market will bear.

Fried also points out that congregational rabbis are now more expected to serve their congregations than to be leaders of the community. He points out that rabbis who were community leaders of the past, such as Stephen Wise and Abba Hillel Silver, are not to be found today. He attributes this to the fact that Jews now are part of all areas of American society, and that in their new roles (such as university professors and senior members of the government), they use their positions to speak publicly on Jewish issues.

Meeting Needs of Congregants

While there is truth in that observa-

tion, it is also true that there is a transformation of the role of the rabbi in relation to the congregation. The role of the rabbi as the one who sets the religious standards of the community has diminished, while the role of the rabbi as the person who meets the religious needs of the congregants has grown.

Stephen Wise once stated, "The chief office of the minister, I take it, is not to represent the view of the congregation, but to proclaim the truth as he sees it."³ This is very different from the perspective of the search committee described in the book, which expects the rabbi to execute a vision that originates in the congregation.

In the American Jewish congregation, it is not only the rabbi, but the rabbi's family that have public roles. The tragic stroke that afflicted Rabbi Wolpe's wife Elaine is also a window into the place of the rabbi's family in the synagogue. The changing role of the rabbi's spouse, traditionally a woman known as the "*rebbetzin*," can be contrasted to some extent to the different roles played by Rabbi Wolpe's wife and the wife of the assistant rabbi. Rabbi Wolpe's wife had a more active presence in the synagogue than that of her successor.

Pastor or Administrator?

Aside from the public role of the rabbi, the pastoral role also has begun to take a second seat to the administrative function. Some of the pastoral work has been taken over by cantors, and this process is described in the book. The cantor at Har Zion contin-

ues to play a more traditional cantorial role, as a soloist in the tradition of cantors of previous eras. But the cantor also takes over some of the personal and pastoral services that had previously been provided by the rabbi, such as preparing the children for bar and bat mitzvah.

Two issues demonstrate that meeting individual needs is now a primary goal for the synagogue and for the synagogue's rabbi. The first has to do with a controversy affecting the assistant rabbi. In order to shorten the overall service, the assistant rabbi shortened the *Yizkor* service on Yom Kippur, which meant that he eliminated the congregants' opportunity to linger on pages listing the names of their departed relatives. The act of remembering a departed relative is central to why many people come to synagogue, and so rushing it to spend more time on other parts of the service showed little understanding of some of the personal reasons people attend services in the first place.

The second issue was the concern that the "synagogue down the street," Beth Am Israel (also affiliated with the Conservative movement), was attracting some of Har Zion's younger members. Most of the references are to the dynamic young rabbi at Beth Am Israel. The congregation may represent, as some Har Zion members fear, the wave of the future.

Much of the appeal of Beth Am Israel rests on the pluralistic approach to Jewish identity that is the hallmark of the synagogue. In much the same way that Mordecai Kaplan envisioned synagogues, Beth Am Israel offers multiple

ways of expressing Jewish identity, and does not treat one as better than the next. It is this recognition of the diversity within the community, as well as the quality of the rabbinic leadership, that makes the congregation thrive. Diversity makes the synagogue appealing for younger Jews who see the synagogue as a place that is designed to meet their spiritual needs. It is also the search for personal meaning that drives much of the decision making of American Jews in terms of their synagogues.

The Members Know Best?

The assumptions that the synagogue membership knows best, and that the synagogue should meet their needs, does not merely define the relationship with the rabbi. It also helps define the relation between the congregation and the larger, umbrella organizations that are supposed to support individual congregations and set the standards by which they are run.

In the case of Har Zion, the struggle between the congregation and the Placement Office of the Rabbinical Assembly (the Conservative movement's rabbinical association) plays an important part in the story, and at the same time is indicative of a willingness to challenge movement standards that would have been unthinkable a few years ago.

The particular issue was the rule that a rabbi needed a certain number of years of experience before applying to serve as senior rabbi of a congregation the size of Har Zion. The assistant rabbi, who was the candidate of at least

one segment of the congregation, had not been in the field for that number of years. A compromise was reached, but the struggle reflected not only the importance of Har Zion in the Conservative movement (evidenced by its ability to bend the rules) but the changing relations between individual congregations and the larger structure of the Conservative movement.

The Challenge for Research

Fried's telling of the story of Har Zion has received mixed reviews. While some reviewers have lauded the book for its insights and the quality of the writing, others have taken the author to task for the ways in which he portrayed certain events, or because of the amount of very personal information contained about individuals who are identified by name. Whether or not this is a good piece of journalism, there is no question that this topic is one that should be studied by social scientists.

While one cannot criticize an author for not writing from a perspective with which the author is not familiar, there are reasons to assume that a social scientist would have approached certain issues in a different way. Perhaps, from the point of view of learning something more general about trends in the American Jewish community, that different way would have been a more useful perspective.

Fried is aware of a personal side to the story, but lacks the tools to see how that impacts on his journalism. This comes out in three ways. First, he does not seem to be reflective about how his

own feelings, especially about Rabbi Wolpe, affect the way he tells the story. (In the last scene, the author and Rabbi Wolpe sit together, two men mourning for their fathers, in another Conservative synagogue in Philadelphia where both now pray.) Second, he misses the more general implications, as described above, of the tale he is telling. Finally, to make the story more compelling, he both uses actual names and includes personal information that is peripheral to the narrative, at best. In doing so, he has perhaps attracted more attention to the book, but he has deflected attention from the important issues he raises.

Lack of Discretion

Fried's use of actual names in the narrative is troubling. The characters could have remained anonymous, even if some people familiar with the events described in the book could identify some of them. Much of the publicity about this book is tied to personalities, and to the fact that some of the material is just plain old-fashioned gossip. Since the book was published, the new rabbi and the president of the congregation have both been forced out, in part, one can assume, because of what appeared in the book. A study of a congregation, if it wants to rise above the level of story and gossip, should help congregations with their planning, pointing out and analyzing some of the situations and circumstances that contributed to the bad process and the eventual bad outcome at Har Zion.

What is happening at Har Zion, for all its unique characteristics, is charac-

teristic of what is happening in many American synagogues, which is why, for whatever its weaknesses, this remains an important book. By overemphasizing what makes Har Zion unique, and focusing as much as he does on the personalities (and names) of many of the major players, Fried leaves the impression that this story could be played out nowhere else. There are unique things about the congregation, as there would be about any synagogue examined in detail, but generally, there is little in the book that could not have occurred at many other congregations.

There are, of course, challenges for the social scientist who wishes to write a similar story. Even if the individual names and some of the personal details disappear, the story does not always reflect well on the congregation. This problem exists in part because Jewish communal organizations have become the biggest funders for research on American Jews. One of the reasons that so many social scientists have focused on community surveys is that they are following the money, that is, they are often following a research agenda being dictated by those American Jewish organizations willing to fund research. This is true in the wider social scientific community as well, with the agenda being set by the government and large foundations.

Programmed Research?

The willingness of community organizations to fund certain types of research (sometimes in the very dubious hope that the same social scientists can "solve" the problems that are identified)

leaves other types of research unfunded. And, of course, it could be difficult to remain friends with people in most organizations that have been profiled.

In addition, at times, the high level of sensitivity of American Jews to anything perceived as negative can prevent a clear look at the institutional life of the community. Peter Novick's excellent discussion of the role of self-pity in the way American Jews shape their own identity in regard to the Holocaust can be extended to help explain the unwillingness of the Jewish community to accept criticism regarding most aspects of community life.⁴

Considering all this, it becomes difficult to write about the Jewish community from within in a way that is objective. The social scientist wants continued access (and continued funding) from community organizations. The public outcry that accompanied the release of the intermarriage rates from the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS), and the embargo of the 2001-02 NJPS (which some suspect was caused by its report of an even higher intermarriage rate), are examples of the difficulties that attend any attempt to portray the community in less than a glowing light.

Seeing the Bigger Picture

However, even with these caveats, a study of a synagogue in transition that focused more on the general issues raised and less on the specifics would not only have made this book much more useful but would have removed, at least to some extent, some aspects of

the book that have brought the most criticism. Such a book would also consider the impact of changes in the way American Jews perceive the role of institutions such as the synagogue on other parts of the organized Jewish community, especially the Federation system. This would require a general understanding of the structure and organization of American Jewry, something beyond the scope of the author of this book.

Further, a study of the changing role of the synagogues in American Jewish life could also help define a new role for the social scientist within the community. Helping understand issues of structure and organization, not merely "identity" and individual behavior, could provide insights and information that would enhance the ability of the community to plan effectively.

Where Is the Synagogue Headed?

So where is the American synagogue headed? If the various observations listed in the book are added up, and we account for the uniqueness of Har Zion, the trend is toward more individualized treatment and a greater desire to negotiate every aspect of the religious experience so that it is all "personally relevant."

Is this a good thing? Yes and no. It means that individual American Jews will see the synagogue as a relevant institution, one that can meet at least some of their needs. On the other hand, it also means that the communal agenda, and the obligations of each individual Jew to the community, take

a back seat, at best, to personal agendas. In either case, we need to consider the implications as community members and leaders. And we need to pay more attention to these processes by the academic community, as well as by others who are concerned for the future of the community and are trying to plan for that future.

1. Samuel Heilman, *Synagogue Life: A Study in Symbolic Interaction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976).

2. In the interests of fairness, I should mention that: 1) I am part of a group of social scientists who have spent a good deal of

time during the last decade working with community survey data; 2) while never a member of Har Zion Temple, I spent a good deal of time there growing up, attended Har Zion Day Camp and received a grant from Har Zion to attend Camp Ramah, so I know many of the people mentioned in the book; and 3) I am currently a member of Beth Am Israel, mentioned in the book and in this essay. Whether any of this affects the conclusions in this essay is up to the reader to determine.

3. Stephen Wise, at www.swfs.org/History.htm, retrieved November 12, 2002.

4. Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company).