

The Rabbi As Spiritual Leader

BY SIDNEY SCHWARZ

Ever since the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College started to graduate rabbis in the mid-1970s, the Reconstructionist movement has been struggling to understand the implications of its philosophy as it pertains to the role of the rabbi in congregational life. I have been an active participant in that ongoing discussion. In particular I have been an advocate of rabbis implementing congregational processes in which laypeople play an active role in shaping the principles, religious policies and standards which subsequently guide and govern congregational life.*

These are among the areas that I explored in my recently completed study of American synagogues entitled, *Finding a Spiritual Home: How a New Generation of American Jews Can Transform the American Synagogue* (Jossey Bass, 2000). The book looks at what makes certain syna-

gogues "work" and what separates them from others that don't. My criteria for the paradigm that I call the "synagogue-community" were certain characteristics pertaining to communal culture, articulation of mission, serious Judaism, and spiritual leadership. The synagogues from each of the four denominations that I profiled distinguished themselves by their ability to attract a significant number of marginal and unaffiliated Jews. The book concludes with an analysis of what it would take to transform the rest of American synagogues to the synagogue-community paradigm which has a unique ability to attract the next generation of American Jews.

Shaping Communal Cultures

Of significant note was the fact that the most successful synagogues that I found were places in which the rabbis played some central role in

either the founding of the congregation or in being its first full-time rabbi. As such, the rabbi was essential in shaping the communal culture that came to define the community. By communal culture I mean an attitude of mind and spirit that permeates a community and comes to animate all areas of institutional functioning.

Every institution has a communal culture uniquely its own. Such cultures evolve over time, almost imperceptibly. Once in place however, an institutional culture is extremely hard to change. Even the most effective and politically savvy rabbi will find it hard, if not impossible, to change an existing communal culture in a short period of time, although some change can be effected over a five-to-ten-year term. If there is not a match between a rabbi's personal style and the communal culture in which they are retained as the rabbi, s/he needs to engage in strategic planning, preferably with key lay leaders, around the way the culture might be changed. Failure to anticipate this "culture gap" will invariably undermine the effectiveness of even the most talented rabbi in that community.

Thus a congregation that functions as a small, informal *havurah* for ten years in members' homes will have significant difficulties adjusting to their first paid rabbi. If that rabbi was inclined towards a more formal style and was to conduct his/her first High Holyday services in the new congregation with little to no lay involvement, there would be an early and serious clash of styles. The unwritten rules of the communal culture would

be violated. If the rabbi continued in the same vein, the seeds of a rocky, and most likely short, tenure would be sown. Conversely, if a rabbi came to a congregation that was used to a formal service and immediately launched into *havurah*-style services, with the rabbi him/herself dressed down and "winging" parts of the service that were always well prepared ahead of time, an equally problematic relationship would ensue.

Communal cultures touch many other areas of congregational life as well. They include things like the linkage between wealth and leadership; the relationship to the organized Jewish community and the federation world; the expectations of the rabbinic family; the attendance patterns at services, classes and congregational programs; the extent of commitment to social justice issues; the attitude to experimentation in services; the musical style; the role of the board and committees; the relationship to the national movement and to neighboring synagogues; the attitude to classically marginal populations (e.g. gay and lesbian Jews, intermarried Jews, singles, the disabled, the elderly); the attention to youth. The list could go on.

The point is that no healthy rabbi-congregational relationship can be created without significant symmetry between the communal culture of a congregation and the approach and style of the rabbi. The fact that rabbi-board relationships are so often troubled has to do with the failure of both parties to identify and articulate what the cultural norms are in the re-

Rabbi Sidney Schwarz is founder and president of The Washington Institute for Jewish Leadership and Values, an educational foundation dedicated to the renewal of American Jewish life through Torah, *tikun olam*, and civic engagement. He was the founding rabbi of Adat Shalom Reconstructionist Congregation in Rockville, MD. He is the author of *Finding a Spiritual Home: How a New Generation of American Jews Can Transform the American Synagogue* (Jossey Bass, 2000) from which this article is excerpted.

spective congregation. A new rabbi who is politically active may be able to move the congregation in that direction but if there is no tradition of such activism in that community, a good deal of preparatory work will be necessary to introduce activism without it backfiring in the face of the rabbi. A congregation whose last rabbi was a consummate pastor, diligent about visits to any member who fell sick and conscientious about weekly follow-up phone calls, will be unforgiving to that rabbi's successor if s/he is not inclined to do the same.

Rabbi-Congregation Culture Clashes

Let none of this be construed as suggesting that rabbis always have to accommodate to the cultural styles of the congregations that employ them. Indeed, I am convinced that congregations are hungry for rabbis to assert themselves as the spiritual leaders of the community. In other words, congregations desire rabbis who, by force of character and commitment can shape the communal culture of the congregation. But to emerge as a spiritual leader, rabbis must avoid being overly passive or overly strong-willed. A rabbi whose only goal is to keep the board happy, and who will do anything and everything to please, will quickly find that the demands made on them will be impossible to meet.

Instead of commanding respect, every constituency in the congregation will want a piece of the rabbi. Without a well-designed process in which the board and the rabbi can

state mutual expectations resulting in some agreed upon set of short- and long-term objectives, the rabbi will feel like he/she has been put on a beach and are expected to remove all of the sand with a teaspoon. Frustration, disappointment, and burn-out is inevitable. Rabbis in this situation will sacrifice their own health and well-being, and that of their families, and will still find it impossible to please their constituency. If the congregation doesn't precipitate the end of the rabbi's tenure, the rabbi will either move on to a new congregation that they hope will be better or find another career.

An overly strong-willed rabbi will not fare much better. To come into a congregation with an agenda that bears no relationship to the existing communal culture or to the expressed needs of members will invariably earn the rabbi a reputation as arrogant, aloof, and unresponsive to the congregation. The rabbi might be a brilliant teacher, who in his/her first year offers an exciting array of high-level adult-education courses. But if, given the age and life cycle of the community, the most important need is the development of a youth program and the rabbi gives that need no attention, failure is inevitable.

Of the two models outlined above, it seems to me that the Reconstructionist movement has erred on the side of training rabbis and congregations to think that rabbis are no more than teacher/facilitators. In a desire to close the unhealthy gap between rabbis and laity that is so characteristic of the other movements in American

Jewish life, we have suggested that rabbis are, at best, first among equals. This is not enough.

I recall being part of a committee at the congregation that I helped to found, Adat Shalom, that was charged with selecting a student rabbi to work with me. Most of the candidates were upper-year students at the RRC. One member of the committee, a past president of the congregation, asked the same question to each of the candidates: "What is your vision for American Jewish life that you would like to be the legacy of your rabbinate and how will you use the congregation to advance that vision?" Now this may have been an overly ambitious question for students who were not yet finished with their schooling, and the jaw-dropping reaction of most of the students to the question supports that observation. But it is a great question. Our rabbinical schools should prepare students to answer such a question, and congregations should be trained to expect no less from their rabbis.

"Eating Up" Our Leaders

This brings me back to the model of the rabbi as spiritual leader. In the book of Numbers(13:32) the land of Israel is called "*eretz okhelet yoshvehah*," a land that consumes its inhabitants. To paraphrase that verse, America is a country that consumes its leaders. Baby-boomers who grew up on the war in Vietnam and Watergate have an acquired distrust of any individual in leadership. The probing eye of the media, which now reveals to us every sexual and ethical indiscretion of public persons, contributes to the per-

vading cynicism of our society about leadership. Yet I also believe deeply in the aphorism, "Where there is no vision, the people perish." People are desperate for true spiritual leadership; rabbis can and should provide it.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the most successful, creative, and innovative congregations that I found in America were those in which a rabbi played a central role in founding the congregation or in creating it from its nascent stages. These were situations in which rabbis had a clear vision for the kind of community they wanted to create. People coming to the congregation had no question about who the leader was.

Now it is true that few rabbis have the opportunity to start their own synagogues, though it is most certainly a fantasy that tempts almost every rabbi at some point during his/her career. Nor do too many rabbis have the opportunity to serve as a new congregation's first full-time rabbi. Yet the dynamic that exists in those unique situations reveal important insights into the kind of rabbinic-lay relationship that can lead to much more exciting and vibrant synagogues.

When a rabbi is permitted to emerge as the spiritual leader of a community, there is an opportunity for a vision to be put forth that motivates and inspires. The people who join such congregations will be drawn to the community because the vision will animate the communal culture which, in turn, is felt in every facet of congregational life. People drawn to such a community become not only loyal followers of the rabbi and his/her

vision for the synagogue but, within a short time, became advocates and missionaries for that vision as well. In this kind of environment, officers, board members, and committee chairs see themselves less as lay supervisors of the rabbi and more as members of a community being nurtured and led by a spiritual leader with whom they are in a sacred partnership.

The Art of Empowerment

For a rabbi to take on the role of spiritual leader of the community involves undertaking far more than the traditional roles of rabbi as religious functionary. It has as much to do with guiding how the congregation sets its priorities, what kinds of programs become featured, and how the message and mission is articulated and given shape. This requires both board and rabbi to be clear on the distinction between having rabbinic functions performed and having a spiritual leader 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 formal and informal educational settings. These are services that can be "sub-contracted" to individuals as long as they understand the general approach and needs of the community. For a community to have a rabbi functioning as a spiritual leader implies that it wants its religious, educational, social action, life cycle and organizational life guided, in part, by a person who can both shape and reflect the community's ideals and aspirations.

This is the rabbinic work of build-

ing 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, etc. It is the art of empowerment—taking power that would normally be invested in a given office and sharing it with others in the system in a supportive way.

I used to say that this agenda amounted to a rabbi putting himself/herself out of a job. I was wrong; this is the job. I now understand better how central this empowerment strategy is to establishing a healthy communal culture in a congregation and it can only be done by the rabbi. It is about the rabbi moving beyond the role of exclusive religious functionary in the congregation and assuming responsibility for the health of the entire communal system. It is the way that a rabbi can emerge as a true spiritual leader.

One of the most vital roles that can

be played by rabbis seeking to offer leadership to their communities is the way that they recruit lay leadership and the way that they invite various members to share their particular gifts with the community. Rabbis are seen as the guardians of the Jewish tradition; they are in a unique position to empower their congregants to become active shapers of that tradition instead of passive recipients of it.

As such rabbis should play a central role in deciding who should be invited to come on the board, and thus be drawn into the leadership cadre of the congregation. They should reach out to congregants to offer a *devar Torah* or to lead some musical piece during a service. Rabbis should think strategically about a talented member who might chair a new congregational initiative. It is in this way that the rabbi also elicits from congregants their spiritual stories. Each and every Jew has a powerful and poignant journey in their soul. A rabbi who can help Jews get in touch with those stories and find ways for those stories to be shared in a congregational context will be fulfilling one of the most critical functions of a spiritual leader. It will set a tone for the entire community.

The Power of the Rabbi

Over the years I became keenly aware of the power of my office to do some of these things. Where my president would struggle to find volunteers for one project or another within a congregation of highly successful and overly busy adults, it was a rare occasion that any member that I would call to take some leadership position

would decline. The same was true about soliciting people to give talks in various congregational settings. Indeed, congregants are flattered when their rabbi notices them and singles them out for some leadership role.

I was acutely conscious of reaching out to relatively new members on the periphery of the congregation and bringing them into positions of leadership. In most synagogues, leadership is notoriously inbred. Despite the stated desire of lay leaders to find "new blood," most laypeople are not very skilled at engaging others in the congregational enterprise. Those who often rise to positions of congregational leadership are usually outstanding "doers" and only mediocre "delegators." Left to their own devices, leadership will rotate among a relatively small coterie of people, not because of any desire to exclude others but because most people don't want to appear to be imposing on others.

There is no bigger challenge to a growing congregation than having a constant influx of new members entering into leadership and decision-making positions. It insures ongoing input of new ideas and it prevents the old-guard leadership from becoming too smug and self-congratulatory.

The rabbinic role that I am outlining here is no bed of roses. A rabbi functioning as a spiritual leader will need to have the courage and the fortitude to withstand pointed attacks on their leadership. There is no true leadership that is not tested. The two most difficult professional challenges of my life both involved situations in which people in significant lay leadership po-

sitions sought to re-define my rabbinic role in ways that were much more conventional than I am setting forth here. These were individuals who would flatter me in public over how well I led services and taught courses and then work behind the scenes to deny me the prerogatives that I believed were critical to being the spiritual leader of the community. In both situations I was too trusting and therefore too slow to pick up on what was happening. Only the eventual "outing" of the behaviors and a re-articulation of guiding principles of the community enabled me to continue to function in the way that I thought was most healthy for the community.

Challenging the Corporate Styles of American Synagogues

Unfortunately, the corporate organizational structure of most synagogues is inhospitable, if not antagonistic, to the kind of singular rabbinic leadership that I am outlining here. Boards hire rabbis and give them a job description which is usually limited to the conventional areas of clerical function. The rabbi may have some success in changing the tone of religious services and they will have relative freedom to speak and teach as they wish, but changing the communal culture is next to impossible. One rabbi I interviewed for my study is one of the most successful and highly regarded Reform rabbis in the country. He noted that if he were to go to an established Reform congregation,

he would need a good five to seven years to establish himself in the same leadership niche that he enjoys in his current congregation, where he has played a central role in building the community. Most rabbis go to congregations with a lot less skill and experience than this rabbi. To say that they face a formidable challenge to change the way a congregation understands itself and functions is a vast understatement. Most consider themselves lucky to get a good evaluation and have their contracts renewed.

Obviously, it is impossible to raze all the synagogues in America and recreate them from the ground up although there is evidence that it is much easier to build a synagogue community which desires and is hospitable to a rabbi as spiritual leader than it is to re-engineer an existing synagogue into one. It is possible however, to begin a conversation in the American Jewish community that recasts the roles and responsibilities of rabbi and board in American synagogues, moving away from existing corporate structures and closer towards spiritualized models of religious fellowship led by rabbis.

This speaks to the need to raise the issue of spiritual leadership at a level beyond the congregation although, eventually, the congregation must to transform itself as well. Most rabbis are not hired to be spiritual leaders, even though that is often the nomenclature that attaches itself to the rabbinic office. They are hired instead to be religious functionaries, orchestrating religious services, performing life-

cycle rituals and teaching the tradition. But a generation that is starving for spiritual direction will not be drawn to religious functionaries. And while many younger rabbis are inclined themselves to move in the direction of becoming spiritual mentors to Jews searching for meaning, there is a serious question whether the congregations that hire them understand and support such a change in the way a rabbi might interact with his or her community. On a more promising note, the seminaries that train rabbis are now starting to better understand the need to cultivate these skills in the next generation of rabbis.

Challenging the Rabbinic Mind-Set

Moving towards a spiritual leadership model does not only call for a change in the way synagogue boards function. It requires a different mind-set on the part of the rabbi as well. One of the ways that rabbinical schools and associations have responded to the corporate structure of American synagogues is to give more attention to training rabbis how to function in such an environment. It has had the effect of "professionalizing" the rabbinate to an unhealthy extent. Rabbis are now instructed how to set limits on the time they are available to congregants. Days off are sacrosanct. Rabbis hire lawyers to negotiate their contracts with the other lawyers on the board. Congregants get the sense that the rabbi spends more time thinking about the perks of the

office than about their "calling." Rabbis may, as a result, be a tad wealthier than the generation of rabbis that preceded them, but they are not happier. I know of rabbis who spent five to six years in rabbinical school who were never once pushed to think about their rabbinate as a vocation. It is a disaster.

Can synagogues burn out their rabbis? Sure. Can congregants be insensitive to a rabbi's need for time alone or time with their families? Sure. But a true spiritual leader never runs an hourly clock on the time spent helping an individual with a problem, leading a crusade for social justice, or teaching Torah. Rabbis who understand what it means to be a true leader of communities and of people are also prepared to shoulder the responsibilities that come with that role. They will, in turn, be rewarded with congregants who are devotees and not employers. I believe that there are communities hungry for spiritual leaders and rabbis who would give anything to serve in such a capacity. The tragedy is that the institutional design of most synagogues does not allow such a relationship to emerge.

It would be easy to dismiss the model that I am promoting here by saying that it is only the rare rabbi, possessing extraordinary qualities of character, charisma, and vision, who can fulfill the role of spiritual leader for a community of Jews. I would not argue that the above mentioned personal qualities are unimportant. But spiritual leadership is only partly about the leader. It is as much about the context. I have seen people of

modest ability invested with trust, love, and loyalty in a certain organizational situation and I have seen their leadership ability blossom. I have also seen rabbis succeed in emerging as spiritual leaders of communities even though they have had far fewer personal qualities of leadership than certain other colleagues. The difference is the context of communal culture in which the respective rabbis work.

Sacred Partnership

There is an exercise done by organizational development consultants in which a room full of people is divided up into small working groups of five to seven participants. All groups are given the exact same task. Half of the groups are told who among them will serve as the leader of the group. The other half are left to their own devices. Despite the fact that the groups are divided randomly and the designated "leaders" of half the groups are not chosen based on any personal qualities of leadership, the "led" groups invariably accomplish their tasks more quickly and with higher quality.

What has happened is that the group has ceded certain prerogatives to the leader which would otherwise have bogged the group down in unproductive ways. Most congregations evidence the dysfunction of the leaderless group. The elected lay leadership feels responsible for a wide array of decisions that have ramifications for the way that the community functions, many of which significantly impact on the communal culture. While the rabbi may have some input into

some of these areas, it is mostly in the realm of sacerdotal functions that the rabbi has primary influence. Who is the leader in this organizational setting?

A subset of the board takes the responsibility to hire and then supervise the rabbi. And while there are certainly issues of fiduciary responsibility that must be executed by board members, the irony is that it is the very lay leaders who take on the responsibility to "supervise" the rabbi that are, themselves, robbed of the kind of spiritual leadership that may benefit them. The rabbi, in turn, often feels humiliated and undermined by this kind of corporate accountability, finding it hard to minister with a full heart to the very people with whom s/he might be in contention.

Consider an alternative model. A community finds a rabbi that it believes is a match for that particular congregation. The mandate given to the rabbi sounds something like this: "We have called you to this pulpit to teach and interpret Judaism for us, to engage us in the process of wrestling with an ancient tradition that has much wisdom but that also needs substantial reconstruction, and finally, to give us the tools to create a loving and compassionate community that will help us deal with each other and with the rest of the world in a way that is consistent with the noblest vision of our heritage. Help us create, together, a 'faith community' a 'spiritual fellowship.'"

Imagine what that rabbi might be able to accomplish with such a mandate for leadership! Is failure possible?

Of course. But I think that American Jews are hungry for their rabbis to be true spiritual leaders. But it will only happen when rabbis and the communities that they seek to lead enter into a sacred partnership that allows for such a model to emerge.

* Sidney Schwarz, "Reconstructionism as Process," *Reconstructionist*, October 1980; "The Rabbinic Role in Reconstructionist Congregations," *Rayonot*, Spring 1991; "Reconstructionist Halacha," *Reconstructionist*, Spring 1993; "Democracy and Lay-Rabbinic Relations: A Symposium," *Reconstructionist*, September 1985.