

By the Power Vested in Me  
Symbolic Exemplarhood and the Pulpit Rabbi  
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Being a walking, talking, living symbol is extraordinarily difficult. Though a component of the rabbinate that provides a major source of efficacy, influence, potency and power, it has over the years been a drain on many rabbis. Initially seductive, and often denied by "new" rabbis who say things like; "I'm just going to be a regular guy/gal"; I'm sure I can have good friends in the congregation; I'll have them call me by my first name, only to discover that their first name turns out to be "Rabbi". Rabbis find as they move towards mid-career, that their symbolic exemplarhood is at the root of their discontent. They complain about living in a "glass house," loneliness in the midst of the crowd, always having to be "on", and being treated differently than anyone else. Having picked one of the most public of callings, rabbis yearn for anonymity. Rabbis want to hold their husbands' hands, and not have congregants offer; "Oh, what a cute couple they are; look at how they kiss each other." They are relieved when going to the movies to find that no congregants are present. Yet no matter how hard rabbis try, there is no shaking off being symbolic exemplars. It clings to them, an irrevocable component of each rabbinate.

What makes rabbinic symbolic exemplarhood doubly difficult is its attribution to the rabbi of superlative inner qualities and inordinately deep set commitments which the rabbi must exemplify in a relatively unprotected private and public arena. The Queen of England has layer upon layer of insulation from her public. A political leaders inner motivations are not expected to be pure and holy. A star quality entertainer is measured by some verifiable talent. The rabbi's private and public life though uninsulated, is expected to be a seamless whole marked by the warp of integrity and the woof of caring love. Rabbis know instinctively that their career is always the hostage of others perception of the inner "soul" of the man/woman doing the job. Pulpit skills, whether preaching, pastoral, administrative or others are subordinate to others perception of ones inner qualities. This also makes the rabbi hostage to his/her own spouse and family. What happens in those ordinarily private arenas is perceived when opened to public scrutiny as an indication of what the rabbi's inner being is "really" like. Yet a level of inner integrity is demanded that has no fathomable depth. One can always be more caring and more dedicated. And the depth of ones caring, integrity and other inner qualities is often too exposed for comfort. Being a symbolic

exemplar has been until now perhaps the greatest source of rabbinic alienation, leading rabbis to rebel against the exemplarhood. The rabbi's protest is an elegant statement of "I just want to be me", "I just want to be human." As long as they have presented themselves as rabbis they are more than just "me", more than just human". Rabbis are symbolic exemplars. There is no choice!

### THE RABBI'S FAMILY

The pulpit rabbi is, most of all, a symbolic exemplar. He or she, as the case may be, is the symbol of something other than themselves. The pulpit rabbi is a symbolic leader who is set apart to function within the community as a symbol of that community and as an exemplar of their desire for moral perfection. The rabbi is thus a walking, talking, living symbol. He or she stands for something other than themselves and in order to function, he or she must be seen and perceived that way. And in order to function, a rabbi must act in such a way as not to destroy that symbol.

It is crucial for the rabbi to fill the symbolic aspects of that role. Perhaps the major expectation of the rabbi is that in some crucial way, he or she is expected to be a different kind of human being. He or she is the embodiment of what people ought to do but have no intention of doing and the rabbi is expected to be different in morality, in caring for people, and is expected to be different as spouse and as a parent. That, of course, has a lot of implications for spouse and family.

A pulpit rabbi must truly care and must fully believe or at least must be perceived as fully believing in what he or she is doing. Indeed, who one is, is more important than what one does. The perception of the rabbi's inner characteristics is what for the layman determines rabbinic efficacy and importance. Other people are hired or fired or valued in terms of what they do. The rabbi is valued in terms of who she or he is perceived to be.

And for the symbol to exist, the rabbi must have special attributes. The rabbi is expected to be a different kind of person or must at least be seen that way. That makes functioning as a clergy-technician, to say the least, a very hazardous kind of thing. A doctor may have his bedside manner; a teacher her classroom presence; an executive may be a tiger on the job and a pussycat at home but a rabbi is expected to be the same person on and off the job. Because if he or she is not, then how else do you measure really

caring and truly believing A doctor could get by --and I've seen a lot of them -even if experienced as not caring for people but was just a darned good surgeon; a rabbi could not. The rabbi could visit the hospital. The rabbi could say and do the right thing. But if people discovered that the rabbi did not at heart really care, he or she would be in a very difficult spot. The person whose inner heart we don't know is what must be found out and that question of authenticity and 'is this person real?' is the basic question down to this day. That symbol is the crucial piece of work, for again -and I want to repeat it purposely -it is not what the rabbi does that is crucial but who the rabbi is and more important, who the rabbi is perceived to be. Both rabbis and laity have to work at maintaining this symbol. It is the essence of the rabbi. To break the symbol is to lose efficacy. And both rabbi and laity participate in creating and maintaining the symbol.

Now you may say that rabbis are not the only walking, talking symbols. After all there are celebrities and royalty and presidents of countries. It is true that all of these people are public property. That's not an illusion. And the public has adopted the celebrity, or the Queen of England, or the holder of public office as an image of a certain kind and does expect him or her to be that image or that symbol.

Whatever private life the rabbi has is extremely vulnerable to that visibility. Is the rabbi different than the celebrity and different than the politician? The rabbi is expected to be a symbol without physical distance and is expected to be a unique and moral person. Now a celebrity is cushioned from the public. We saw in the Final Days what happens when a celebrity is not cushioned from the public. A politician is not expected to be moral. The rabbi is expected to be that as well.

Now, how do rabbi and laity participate in maintaining that symbol while still living in the midst of the congregation? A lot of rabbis won't do anything to destroy the symbol. They are careful and circumspect. And some accept the exemplarhood of being a rabbi and work hard at it--and try hard to be consistent, fair, sensitive, pious and moral models. Virtually all of us do some editing; we act the role; we try as far as we can to keep the private, private; We relish a little bit of anonymity. We channel our anger only to appropriate places. We try to keep some distance and be circumspect. And indeed prudence, politeness and restraint do help maintain the symbolic image.

But I maintain that no matter who the rabbi is, each of us has the sense that the symbol has limits and we always act in such a way as not to break those limits. Now what does the layperson do? He and she do a great deal to create the symbol. First, they attribute to the rabbi special attributes although not out of malice. Let's understand that. When the layperson says of the rabbi, "He or she is human, but" and attributes special attributes to the rabbi --the rabbi is supposed to be more moral, more learned, whatever it is—the laity do not do that out of malice. Remember that! We have presented ourselves as rabbis and as those special kinds of people.

The other thing is that once a rabbi, always a rabbi. Once you've presented yourself in this way, once you've functioned- for people in that priestly symbolic role, you're always a rabbi. You can be described as the goofy, hippie rabbi, as I've heard a rabbi described. Orthodox people have called a specific rabbi, the Goyisheh rabbi. I've heard of the tennis-playing rabbi and the flying rabbi and recently, some ten years after I'd been out of the pulpit and functioning as a Clinical Psychologist, I was introduced as the rabbi who isn't a rabbi. A rabbi is somehow seen and perceived as a different kind of person even if one denies one's rabbihood.

It is that kind of specialness that you never lose, as long as people know that. Now, laity of course, say that the rabbi is human, **but!** But I have not found any layperson who does not perceive their rabbi as being a different kind of human being in some way. We all know the downshift that happens when a layperson finds out that you're a rabbi. You can hear the gears clank as they start to talk to you about their Talmud Torah education, Sunday school, etc. All of a sudden, you know that an editing and a changing process has taken place in them.

In the research I did -research interviewing rabbis and their laity -a rabbi told me that he was chastised by his congregation for singing dirty songs to the teenagers. And the layman says, "I don't think I would ever tell a dirty joke in front of the rabbi, for some reason, although though I'm sure that the rabbi wouldn't object. I don't know, I've never told him one. Now, I would like to be able to have respect for the rabbi both as a human being and as a rabbi. I think that's what I'm trying to do, to find two people in one. And it's not easy."

We know, of course, that there are those congregants who will test the limits of a rabbi. The seductiveness of offering a drink, and another drink, and

trying to get the rabbi a little high, and so forth, are all doing the same thing, kind of testing that symbol, seeing whether it's really there.

Now, what are some of the consequences of that? Well, for those for whom symbol and self are really one, there's very little problem. They function very, very well in the pulpit for years and years and years, and they're some of the great rabbis of America. But I found that what happens with most, increasingly over the years, is a sense of set-apartness that increases with time, a kind of loneliness in the middle of the crowd, a sense of living behind a glass wall with other people.

The other side of the set-apartness becomes also a set-apartness from one's own feelings. Let me tell you a story that will exemplify that better than any technical work. In Fairfield, Connecticut, where I live, there's a supermarket called Sunshine, which is the Jewish supermarket: they have the bagels and the lox and the kosher style this and that. Now, I remember the experience when I was in the pulpit of going into Sunshine. Going into Sunshine to buy a container of milk was a work experience for me

"Hello, how are you? How's grandma, grandpa? Your aunt, your uncle everyone?" And then, God forbid, if I didn't smile wide enough to somebody, I heard about it.

I remember after coming back from Israel, that when I went into Sunshine market for a container of milk and I saw someone whom I really had a lot of feeling for, I was able to smile and say, "Hey, how are you? Long time since I've seen you." And those whom I really didn't care for. -tough! And I didn't have to hear about it.

In the words of one of the men at Mohonk,<sup>1</sup> we as "professional lovers", lose touch with a very important differentiation in us, that is, there are those whom we really love because we really love them, because that's in our guts, and there are those whom we love because we are paid to care for the flock and to love every sheep, even the blackest or the whitest. When I discovered that I was smiling because I really cared, and not because it was my job to smile and care, that was taking something very important back for me.

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<sup>1</sup> Mohonk Mountain House NY, where the first Career Review and Planning session of the Central Conference of American Rabbis took place in December 1975

Now, as for as the rabbi's wife and family, every rabbi's wife-and I've gone through the literature on all this -- maintains all kinds of things. I maintain unequivocally that every rabbi's wife has married both a man and a rabbi, and that changes many elements of a marriage. If the rabbi's a woman, the spouse has married a symbol. And marrying a symbol always has consequences, because the symbolic expectation of the rabbi is that the very fact of ordination will make one a special, caring, loving person who will have a model relationship with their spouse and family. This makes the relationship in the home the relationship with spouse and family the proof of the pudding. It also makes it terribly lonely. For a symbolic exemplar, the boundary between public and private is a dangerous, risky boundary or at least, it potentially is a dangerous, risky, vulnerable boundary.

For the pulpit rabbi, the backstage area is a very vulnerable place and sometimes very nonexistent. But that's the place where you must measure the rabbi. Is this authentic? Is this really the kind of person we expect a rabbi to be? That makes the rabbi's public image a hostage to his or her spouse's and family's behavior. This puts a lot more stuff into: the; marital and family pot that are not items for any other family.

I could give you some examples from my research, such as the rabbi who wants to keep kosher and his wife doesn't want to keep kosher. You agonize for a long time. How can I be a successful rabbi if I can't even convince my wife to be kosher? What are we going to do? Furthermore, the issue of kashrut in the home doesn't become an issue between husband and wife--it becomes an issue of the rabbi's relation to the congregation as well as to his wife.

One Rabbi reported;

“We had a whole big thing in this congregation because my wife wears pantsuits on Shabbat morning, and my Religious Committee had taken a position against it. They printed an article and I had to go print a retraction.”

In any other family that would not be an issue. I'm not talking here about what a rabbi should do. I'm saying that that is additional stuff put into the marital pot that has to be dealt with.

Listen to just one rabbi talk about his kids. He said,

"My children ride their bicycles on the Sabbath and I don't mind. I know that from: speaking with my colleagues in some communities that children have sometimes been criticized. Or the rabbi has been criticized for having children do something on the Sabbath. I have not been confronted with this although my children do ride their bicycles on the Sabbath, although if they were teenagers or adults, it would be something where that would cause public comment."

You name me one other person who'd even bother to talk about it. The extent, to which the rabbi and his wife or the rabbi and her husband take into account how their behavior is in public and how it will appear to the world, has an effect. It's not a question of what answer we give the teenager who on Friday night wants to go to the basketball game instead of to services. The very fact that that is an issue becomes a kind of test of his symbolic exemplarhood.

Can a rabbi have friends? Other areas also affect a rabbi's wife and family. I remember my wife and I having the following conversation in the first six years of my pulpit rabbinat at least, twenty times a year. We would come home on a Saturday night and we'd say,

"Aren't they a lovely couple? Do you think they could be our friends?"

And each time, they were lovely, and loved us and paid their dues and gave to the building fund and said, "Rabbi, you're wonderful", but they weren't our friends. When I came out of the pulpit later on, I said to them, "Hey, Lenny and Marcia; What happened- those ten years? How come you never called us? How come you didn't call us just to go out? And they said, "Well you know, we had a party and didn't want you to be a wet blanket." I was no more interested in being a wet blanket at a party than being the man in the moon. But somehow, that perception, that the rabbi either is busy or that being with the rabbi is going to cause them to have to downshift the gears, leads to that sense of isolation among people who love us. Incidentally-congregants don't understand this. You try to tell them what this loneliness is and if they really do love you, what they'll say is; "Rabbi, we love you." And they mean it. They mean it that they do love you. On the other hand, of course, you have what I call the clergy collectors. Those are the people who will take anyone who has been ordained in any way, and call them and invite

them and deal with them. They're often very nice people. They're sometimes the backbone of congregations. They're sweet, nice people, but that's what they are. And that affects social relationships. Jews often form friendships in the congregation. They choose congregations often on the basis of friendships. Remember, for the rabbi, his or her socializing is work. That's where you do your work. That kind of thing changes the nature of what Saturday night is, and how many Saturday nights you have available and what you can do on Saturday night. The very fact that the rabbi works when others are off, that the rabbi is out of synch with the rest of society, evenings and weekends -what does that do to a family?

First of all, overwhelmingly a rabbi's work is other people's recreation. Beyond that, when other fathers and mothers are with their kids, the rabbi is out. It puts another element into the family pot and it's hard to live with the rabbi gone so much of the time, especially when other spouses and parents are around.

Or of course, when something in the congregational family interferes with something in the personal family, that becomes a special kind of problem. Each time a decision has to be made, about a funeral, a wedding, and dealing with how personal plans are vulnerable to others' schedule.

I know some of you will fight with me on this, but I have the podium so I'm going to say it. I've learned since getting out of the pulpit that the rabbi's family never really belongs. No matter how long you've been in the community, you and your family are never really part of that community in the same way that other Jews are. We can kid ourselves about that, but I think that's so. Some of the evidence for that is that among rabbis whom I know, the best friends of rabbis I know are other rabbis whom they went to school with fifteen, twenty, twenty-five and thirty years ago. This is different than the situation with other professionals. I know of very few lawyers who say, "My best friend is someone I finished law school with, twenty-five or thirty years ago. But for rabbis, those are the people with whom they can really be close. I don't think that we have deep roots in the communities we live in. I think there's a lot of evidence for that. That's a painful fact, but I think it's so.

One other thing: the spouse's devotion and the family's devotion and loyalty are always tests of the rabbi's effectiveness and always on view.

There is no doctor's wife who expects to be treated by her husband medically. Even if he's an OBGYN and she's having a kid she'd go to some other OBGYN. If my family needs psychological treatment, the last one they'd come to would be me. But you just try as the spouse of a rabbi going to another schule.

Your rabbi is supposed to be your rabbi, your minister as well as your spouse. Only in this career is that so. Again, that puts the test to loyalty: what has the rabbi produced?

One rabbi was fired from a congregation because he sent his child to a different synagogue school. His own Talmud Torah wasn't good enough. You can get by with day schools, but his religious school wasn't good enough. He sent him to another religious school down the road and said, "It's my kid. I'm going to do what I want". And he was talking to me from a different congregation

Symbolic exemplarhood in the moral and religious realm provides the rabbi with a larger than life image. There is no way around that. Such an image is at the very core of being a rabbi. The rabbi is designated by others and volunteers to exemplify a caring, nurturing, involved, moral person. A rabbi is in a profession in which it is crucial to both appear to be something more than one is, while still maintaining ongoing contact with other people. A rabbi is the willing helper, the good parent, and the para-familial member of many families. And to help the rabbi maintain this role, the rabbi is given significant protection. The rabbi is treated with respect and deference and shielded overtly from others' anger and vulgarity. The rabbi is not subjected to, many of the stresses that others are subjected to. Without such protection, the rabbi could not continue to maintain close contact and still function as an exemplar of those attributes that a rabbi is expected to symbolize. The price of this protection for the rabbi is a sense of otherness and difference, of loneliness in the midst of the crowd. The barriers erected by both laity and rabbi that create this insulated and isolated existence is made up of masks put on, words edited and emotions- held in check.

Symbolic exemplarhood is inevitable. And, incidentally, I do believe that it can be a vitally useful way to live. It is the symbolic exemplarhood that gives each and every rabbi the power and the ability to affect and influence others, and perhaps to transform the future of the Jewish Community. I hold that the future of the Jewish community does rest on the shoulders of the

pulpit rabbi and that it is the symbolic exemplarhood that gives them their strength and their power. Know that I don't think you'll ever be free of being a symbolic exemplar. But knowing a burden, maybe we can deal with it.

When the spies explored Eretz Yisrael, the question was whether it was **ארץ אוכלת יושבה** or **ארץ זבת חלב ודבש** –“a land flowing with milk and honey or a land that devoured its inhabitants”, <sup>2</sup>My suspicion is that the pulpit rabbinat, with our work and with the help of such organizations can at least exist some place in between, and we can, along with Joshua, take God's promise that;

**חזק ואמץ: אל תערוץ ואל תחת.**  
**כי עמך אדוני אלהיך בכל אשר תלך** <sup>3</sup>

May God make us strong and resolute, going with us in the work that we have to do!

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<sup>2</sup> Numbers Chapter 13-14