

Communication Strategies in the Rabbinate

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I want to approach today's subject from a slightly different point of view. My concern over the years has been with the rabbinate generally, not only the Conservative rabbinate. At times, I have also been involved with clergy of other faiths, teaching and learning about the very special kinds of stress clergymen of all kinds suffer, and what they can do to ameliorate their situation.

I am a graduate of the Jewish Theological Seminary, and spent ten years as a rabbi at one of those Conservative congregations that Rabbi Kelman has just spoken about. I was considered to have done an exemplary job in the congregation. Yet I found myself wanting to get out of the pulpit and ended up leaving for other pastures. Once out, I tried to figure out what had happened to get me out of a career I had loved so much. The result of that was my dissertation on "The Pulpit Clergyman as a Symbolic Exemplar." I then undertook, with the gracious assistance of Rabbi Joseph Glaser, the Executive Vice-President of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, something that might seem quite paradoxical. [I started, both in my office and going around the country conducting seminars, career reviews and self-evaluations to help rabbis look at themselves and consider ways in which they could continue successfully and strongly in the pulpit rabbinate.

For some rabbis I was the instrument of helping to find a way out of what they considered an impossible situation. Yet, overwhelmingly, my thrust has been to assist rabbis in dealing with the inevitable stresses and pressures of the rabbinate and helping them find new resources for making themselves more effective. Today I want to spend a few minutes in what is after all my own original spiritual home, the Rabbinical Assembly, in suggesting some things to consider about the future of the rabbinate, and your future in the rabbinate.

One of the most important things for us to consider in the Pulpit Rabbinate is deciding clearly the specific outcome we want to achieve, as well as discovering ways to know how we will know if we have achieved that specific outcome. One of the things that plagues the Rabbinate is that the range of our

outcomes is so wide and so varied and so nebulous that it is difficult to know whether we have achieved what we had started out to achieve or, as a matter of fact, whether we have achieved *anything*. If you were to ask a group of rabbinical students what they would want to achieve out of their rabbinate, the answer would be something like the transformation of the Jewish people.

During our rabbinical school days, many of us would have answered the question of outcome with some such response. How do you measure that? What will be the evidence that you have achieved your particular outcome? For one rabbi the transformation of the Jewish people means that, in a course of ten years, he will teach six people in this congregation to know the Mishnah by heart. For another, it may mean he is going to produce, at the end of twenty years in the rabbinate, a congregation that may be more loving, and he would know that he achieved that if every congregant who was in the hospital would receive at least ten visits from fellow congregants in a specific time frame and manner. For another it will be that, after fifteen years in the rabbinate, there will be three young people from his congregation going to rabbinical school, two to cantorial school, and one to the Brandeis School of Social Work. What I cannot emphasize too much is that it is very important for us to consider specifically the nature of the outcome we want. To avoid such specificity is to open ourselves up to a sense of non-accomplishment, and an inability to measure what we have accomplished, what we have done, and what we have achieved. Indeed, it may be that it is having such grandiose ends with such little specificity that may have led to the malaise that so many rabbis feel.

There once was at the Seminary, a Herbert H. Lehman Institute of Ethics. For two years I was in charge of arranging the programming of that Institute. One of the professors who served as a consultant considered one of the greatest sources of angst for both rabbis and teachers to be the fact that there was no way for them to measure their success. Measurements of success used by other people were not supposed to be used by rabbis, at least not overtly. How does a rabbi or a teacher measure how he has transformed some other human being? There being no way of measuring that, the professor pointed out, led to a great deal of concern and malaise.

One of the things I want to put into the hopper for the Rabbinical Assembly to deal with is to start to create mechanisms to help rabbis narrow and focus the aim of what they want to accomplish, and help them to develop ways in which they will know whether or not they have accomplished their goals and

achieved their outcomes.

In moving towards achieving your outcomes, whatever it is that you want to achieve that is a part of the transformation of the Jewish people, what are some of the tools, assets, and characteristics that you take with you as rabbis that give you the ability to do the job? I also want to suggest some of the tools and assets that you need to learn about, that you may not currently have in moving toward your task. One of the things you take with you, and it cannot be repeated often enough, because it is one of the very crucial aspects of being a pulpit rabbi, is that you are a symbolic exemplar. That is probably your greatest asset. It is also your greatest liability. In the minds of his congregants, the pulpit rabbi stands for all those things that the congregant thinks a human being ought to be, but has no intention of being. The rabbi is expected to be a finer human being, to be more loving, more caring, and more compassionate. He becomes a symbolic exemplar, not by what he does, but by the very act of presenting himself as a rabbi. Indeed, when he finished the Seminary he was not graduated; he was ordained. I don't minimize professional competence, but it does stand second to his ability to sustain being a symbolic exemplar. While professional competence is in first place for people in other fields, it is not as crucial an issue for the rabbi. A crucial issue for the rabbi is being a walking, talking, living symbol of Judaism. You may object that pulpit rabbis are not the only symbolic exemplars, and that is true.

I went shopping last week with my fiancée. She had been shopping for a wedding dress for a couple of days. I was a little tired, so when we entered this particular boutique I decided to sit down. And I read a magazine, *Town & Country*, which had an article about the pretender to the French throne. Reading the article, I noticed: "The king is the living symbol of unity, justice, and a man himself. The king is France." So yes, there are other symbolic exemplars, but you, as a rabbi are that kind of walking, talking, living symbol. This is an asset for you, because it is from that symbolic exemplarhood that your power to influence and change the Jewish community derives. Your symbolic exemplarhood is also a liability, in that it demands that you always be "on": that you always maintain it, that you cannot break it, that you cannot destroy it without destroying your professional career, your life as an effective rabbi. It does have some stretch, and will not mean the same in every congregation or every community. Indeed, what goes into being a symbolic exemplar will vary, depending on the history and the orientation of the people with whom you are working. Yet, within those broad limits, it does mean always acting in ways that sustain it. Much of that information is in the speech

I delivered to the Rabbinical Assembly a number of years ago, and a speech to the Central Conference of American Rabbis a number of years before that. It is available in the *Proceedings*.

Yet, your symbolic exemplarhood is the main cause of a great deal of the stress in the rabbinate. It does create a sense of loneliness, and it is not enough simply to say to people, "I am human, too." Your system is "on" overtime, and you need other sources of support and succor in order to be able to deal with what it means to be the walking, talking symbol. I want to encourage the Rabbinical Assembly to start to create ways rabbis can be with each other outside their symbolic exemplarhood. Many young people have come to the rabbinate through the Camp Ramah experience, where they found themselves in an environment, a support system, that allowed them to really be themselves. Thinking, mistakenly, that being in a congregation would be the same as being in Camp Ramah, they went on to become servants of the Jewish people. We have to go back to creating, for these servants of the Jewish people, the kind of support system that enables them to spark the idea of being in Jewish service for their entire lives.

It means creating groups of rabbis, places where rabbis can be with one another as brothers and sisters in a way in which they do not have to be "on" all the time. I have conducted three-day seminars for the Central Conference of American Rabbis for over ten years. The idea began in 1970, when Rabbi Joseph Glaser, who was to be the new executive vice-president of the Central Conference, and I met. Even then, I was dealing with the issue of how it happened I was no longer in the pulpit, and even then I had the beginnings of an idea of creating some kind of support system for rabbis. Joe Glaser listened, and tucked the idea away in his mind. A number of years later, the Central Conference obtained a grant for mid-career review. Joe called me, and we started the program, Career Reviews for rabbis who are having difficulties in their own motivations for remaining in the rabbinate. These three-day workshops were for rabbis who were unhappy in the rabbinate. That was the given. Yet, ten years later, something has happened here, during this convention, that is a repeat of an experience that I have had around the country. Colleagues here have told me that those seminars were responsible for their remaining in the rabbinate. Those seminars kept them in the rabbinate, feeling good about being a rabbi and enjoying their role as symbolic exemplar more than they ever could have enjoyed it before. It was not the work that I did, although that was part of it, it was the getting together, the sharing, the ability to take a look at what those realities of being in the

rabbinate are. The Rabbinical Assembly has to consider ways in which you can help support each other, not just in terms of professional competence, sermons, seminars and the like (though those, too, are important), but in ways in which you can nourish and sustain each other and in which you do not have to be symbolic exemplars. I consider this to be a very crucial item for the future agenda. You cannot hope to get rid of the role of the symbolic exemplar. Do not even think about it: it will not work. You can not not do it. It is part of being a pulpit rabbi.

The rabbi as symbolic exemplar is in a position of profound influence, and the rabbi needs to know how to use that influence. You must start to get an education in an area that I consider professionally most crucial to your work. **It** is an area that I do not think over the years really has been seriously offered by any of the seminaries on the American scene. The modern American rabbi has to be a master at communication. The very nature of the work you have to do means that you should go out there with no less than being an outstanding professional communicator. There is a growing technology of communication. Yet, beyond brief one-shot programs for rabbinic *kallot*, there are very few ongoing training seminars on communication strategies for the rabbi. What am I talking about? Walking into a hospital room, knowing how the unconscious mind functions, how to be able to talk to them in a way which promotes their healing, how to learn what it is they need from their non-verbal behavior. I am talking about learning how, as a professional, you can start to meet congregants' objections in a way that will forward your purposes. I am talking about learning to deal with congregants' complaints, such as, "Why did you not visit my old *bobbie*?" Rather than take it as an attack, turn it around in a way that will be useful for you and for the congregant. There are communication strategies that will affect all areas of what you do, whether it is teaching Torah, learning more effective ways to deliver a message, or learning what there is in hypnosis that could be used in sermon delivery. There is an endless array of material out there. You have to ask the Rabbinical Assembly to start to provide ways of teaching you that. You have an obligation to yourself to know those communication strategies. You have to go into every situation in your day as a professional communicator. And it may be that learning about yourself as a professional communicator will turn many of those daily occurrences that have been extremely stressful up to now into occurrences that provide fun and learning for you. If you go into a situation knowing that you are a walking, talking symbol, knowing how you can use communication strategies to achieve this or that specific outcome, you will find that the challenge will increase and the burnout will decrease,

whether what you are aiming to do is to get more people to come to services, or to learn to work with the Board in a more useful way.

We have learned communication strategies under the guise of learning counseling and psychotherapy. **In** my opinion, I think we rabbis do too much formal psychotherapy. I think that is the very least useful thing we do as rabbis because it really is a waste of our time. As a symbolic exemplar, the time could be used much more efficiently. Many of us, for instance, have given up on the effectiveness of the sermon. It has become a weekly onerous task. Yet how many of us realize the full potential of what speaking to people from the pulpit can do? How many of us know what the congregant's process is for listening to a sermon? How many of us know what we can really do with sermons that will touch people in a more profound way? We do much of that by intuition, we do some of it by good homiletics, but there are ways of talking in these communication strategies that could help you immensely in knowing how to move and influence your flock. A lot of us do it by instinct, but if you add this communication technology to it, you will not only raise the level of enjoyment of what you do in every context - a hospital call, counseling, a sermon - but there will be a chance for you to use skills that are exciting and interesting, and you will be able to have a more profound effect. I am convinced that the future of Jewish life lies in the hands of its rabbis and its congregations. I am convinced that during my first ten years as a pulpit rabbi, I touched and moved and really changed more lives than I will do in the rest of my career as a clinical psychologist. No doubt about that. I want you to know that I love rabbis, not only because I am one myself, but also I think that the work you are doing is crucial to all of us. And you know that many of you are rabbis because you were produced by other rabbis. The future is in your hands, and I want to submit these ideas for your consideration.