

Dynamics of the Rabbinate

Rabbi Jack H Bloom *Fairfield, Connecticut*

I want to share some of my personal history, which brought me to the work I ended up doing for my dissertation at Columbia. I began very much adoring and loving the pulpit, to some extent being seduced by those years, but by the time the sixth or seventh or eighth year came along I found myself isolated and alone, living behind a glass wall. That feeling became intolerable for me and I left the pulpit. On the way out, I got a Ph.D. To get a Ph.D., a student needs a lot of energy. While wandering around the first couple of years trying to think of a topic for my dissertation, what finally hit me was one, which could mobilize most of my energy.

What I tried to do with my dissertation was to figure out what had happened during the ten years of my pulpit existence, because in many ways I enjoyed being a rabbi and it would have been a worthwhile career to continue. What I came to realize was that probably the most distinguishing factor of the pulpit rabbi, and the pulpit clergyman in general, is that he is, most of all, a symbolic exemplar. The rabbi is the symbol of something other than himself and the pulpit rabbi is a symbolic leader who is set apart to function within his community as a symbol of that community and as an exemplar of that community's desire for moral perfection. The rabbi is a walking, talking, living symbol and stands for something other than himself. In order to function effectively he must be seen and perceived in that way so he can have the power to change the future of the American Jewish community. In order to be effectual the rabbi must not act in such a way as to destroy that symbol.

It is crucial for the rabbi to fulfill the symbolic aspects of the role. The major expectation is that the rabbi in some crucial way is expected to be a different kind of human being. He is the embodiment of what people ought to do but have no intention of doing. He is expected to be different in his morality, in how he cares for people and thus different as a husband and as a father.

The pulpit rabbi must truly care and must fully believe, or at least he must be seen as fully believing, in what he is doing. Who he is, is much more important than what he does. In my own work I've measured what laymen expect of rabbis vis-à-vis other professions. The crucial factor in terms of their expectation of the rabbi always has to do not with the rabbi's skills, not with how he functions, but who the man is and, most importantly, the authenticity of the rabbi. Other people are hired

or fired or valued in terms of what they do. The rabbi is valued in terms of who he is perceived to be. For the symbol to exist the rabbi must have special attributes. He is expected to be a different kind of person and that expectation makes functioning as a clergyman a hazardous job. A doctor may have his bedside manner, a teacher his 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. If he is not, then how do you measure real caring and true believing?

What was intriguing to me was how rabbis and laymen work together at maintaining the symbol because the symbolic exemplar is the essence of a rabbi and to break the symbol is to lose efficacy. You may have an objection, you may say that rabbis are not the only walking, talking symbols. There are celebrities in royalty and presidents of countries and it is true that all of these people are public property and are symbols. That's not an illusion. The public has adopted as celebrity the queen of England and our President as a certain kind of symbol, and they expect them to fill the role of that symbol. President Carter recently held a news conference and his face was somber concerning Iran, but one of the newscasters at a local station pointed out that when the President was off-stage talking to his press officer, he didn't look solemn any more. He was pleased with how things had gone and the solemnity about Iran was part of his public image. Having the private image and the public image contradict becomes risky because the newscaster asked, "Did he really mean it?" If he didn't mean it, "Can you trust him?"

Let me tell you a story about a man who played at being a symbol. Some of you may remember the TV serial, Ben Casey, starring Vince Edwards. Listen to Vince Edwards' description of himself after he had been Ben Casey for a while. Vince Edwards had become uncomfortably aware of the discrepancies between his own life, which happened to include a devotion to betting on horses, and the god-like image that he had come to represent to the public. "I won't do anything to destroy the image," he said, and he tried to keep his private life subdued and separate, yet it was not easy because magazines published pictures of his horse playing and the public watched him every possible moment and even his close friends began to be affected. Vince Edwards stated, "Some of my old friends begin to weigh their words when we get together now. They don't see me as plain old Vince Edwards. What they see now is the image. They see Ben Casey. And it makes a difference, believe me. Their attitude changes, they stiffen and I can't say I like it, and I'm not sure I like losing a little privacy. I wish it were different in some ways, the whole success thing, but that's how it is. How do you fight it?"

That happens when a man is only a role on T.V. He is playing at being a doctor. He is not a doctor, and not only not a doctor, but also not even a rabbi. You can imagine what happens to a rabbi, who is so visible and so unprotected, because the rabbi is expected to be a symbol without this physical distance, and is expected to be a unique and moral person.

Rabbis maintain the symbol. There is variation, of course. Not all rabbis are the same. Some accept the exemplarhood of being a rabbi, 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 to keep the private private and relish anonymity when we can get it. We channel our anger only in what we consider to be appropriate places, keep some distance and act circumspect. It is true that prudence, politeness and restraint help to maintain the symbolic image. Each of us has the inner sense that there is a limit to the symbol, and we act in such a way so as not to break those limits.

The layman does a great deal to create a symbolic exemplar of the rabbi. If you ask a layman, "Is the rabbi human," he says, "Yes, he is human, but. ... " And he always attributes special attributes to the rabbi. The rabbi is supposed to be more moral, more learned.

Let me tell you a story, which is a superb example of this. Back in 1973 my wife Meryl was about to go to Israel, and she was going for the first time by herself. She got her own passport. It was the beginning of women's liberation and she was going off to be the solid independent woman I always wanted her to be and I was scared out of my wits. Our congregation was just starting to give *aliyot* to women, and I called the Ritual Chairman and asked him to give my wife an *aliyah* because she was going to Israel. Unfortunately he did not tell our rabbi about the trip. Meryl got up and went to the Torah with her knees knocking. It was her first time and she was nervous. The rabbi went through the announcements, didn't say a word about Meryl and the trip, and Meryl sat there, poked me, and said, "You know, for ten years I sat with the congregation, I slept next to you at night, I listened to you do all that junk, wishing people well on their twenty-fifth anniversary, fiftieth anniversary, all kinds of occasions. I listened to you do all that stuff. I'm nervous about this trip and if he doesn't say anything and he doesn't bless me and he doesn't wish me well, I'm going to be as sore as hell." And she said to me, without another word, "You can't do it for me. You are not my rabbi."

Once a rabbi, always a rabbi. Once you've presented yourself in that symbolic role, once you've done a wedding, a bar mitzvah, you are always a rabbi.

In the course of my research one of the men who I interviewed had replaced another rabbi who had gone into the stock market. In his congregation the new rabbi was constantly being asked by the *balebatim*, "Do you think it is right for a rabbi to be a stock broker?" The rabbi asked them what they might have accepted as a legitimate change for a rabbi, and they said, "A social worker, you know, a non-mercenary kind of enterprise." The rabbi asked them why they felt that way, and they said, "Because you fellows are in the rabbinate. That's a lifetime calling, and there is no way out. There is something special about it and people depend on you."

What are some of the consequences for the rabbi and his wife? For those rabbis for whom the symbol and the self are really one, there is very little problem. They function very well in the pulpit for years and years and years, and they are some of the very great rabbis of America. But I found that over the years, there is a sense of being set apart that increases with time, a kind of loneliness in the midst of the crowd, a sense of living behind a glass wall, the rabbi looking out and other people looking in. The rabbi is often aware that he is loved for being what he appears to be and not for what he feels himself to be. The more he is rewarded for his appearance, the more his humanness becomes a source of embarrassment to him, and the more inadequate he feels in his ability to authentically fulfill expectations. You get a greater sense of discomfort and the glass walls become thicker.

I swore the first two years of my career that as I watched other rabbis living behind the glass walls that that would not happen to me. I would wear Bermuda shorts, which were fashionable at that time, play tennis, be a regular guy and be the rabbi. At the end of six years I found myself behind a glass wall. I didn't know how that had happened. Now I know.

There is another danger in addition to being set apart from others. When I had a pulpit, going to the kosher-style supermarket to get a carton of milk was hard work. I had to ask everyone about their families. If I didn't smile wide enough or if I ran through in a hurry to get milk, people would say I was cold. When I got back from Israel and was no longer in the pulpit, I discovered something very interesting. When I went to the same supermarket for a carton of milk, I said hello to some people because it was important for me to say hello to those people and I

didn't say hello to others, and I couldn't have cared less.

A Reform rabbi explained that we rabbis are professional lovers. One thing about being a professional lover is that you're paid to love every sheep in the flock - and the measure of your loving is that your loving has to be authentic. You really have to love them all. What happens is you start to lose touch with your own feelings and that becomes very dangerous. There are rabbis who can't get out of the role.

Let me say something about rabbi's wives and families. There is no rabbi's wife who has not married a symbol. They all want to say that they married a husband who happens to be in the rabbinate. They also married a symbol and there is an overflow from the symbol onto their lives because if the symbolic expectation of the rabbi is that he be a special, caring loving kind of man, the expectation is also that he will have a model relationship with his wife and his family and that his family will be the exemplar of the Jewish family. His family as a matter of fact is the proof of the pudding that he really is the authentic kind of model that he has presented himself and laymen have perceived him to be. Thus the boundary between the rabbi's public life and his private life is a dangerously vulnerable boundary. The relationship with the congregation is a marriage, and the experience of splitting with it is a divorce. The rabbi has to pay first concern to his own family but that whole relationship puts extra stuff into the rabbi's pot.

Rabbis never belong in the communities in which they live. The rabbinic community is your community. The proof of that pudding is not only what happens in those communities. The proof of the pudding is that rabbis are an anomaly. When you ask rabbis to describe who their best friends are, they'll describe people they went to school with fifteen, twenty, twenty-five years ago.

Symbolic exemplarhood in the moral and religious realm provides the rabbi with a larger-than-life image. There is no way around it. Such an image is at the very core of being a rabbi. The rabbi is designated by others and volunteers himself to exemplify a caring, nurturing, and involved moral person. He is in a profession in which it is crucial to appear to be something more than he is, while still maintaining ongoing contact with other people. He is the willing helper, the good father, the para-familial member of many families. To help him maintain this role, he is given significant protection, he is treated with respect and deference and shielded, overtly at least, from others' anger and vulgarity, and he is not subjected to many of the stresses that others are subjected to. Without such protection he could not continue to maintain close contact and still function as an exemplar of

those attributes he is expected to symbolize. The price of this protection for the rabbi is a sense of otherness or loneliness in the midst of a crowd. Barriers erected by both layman and rabbi which create this insulated and isolated existence are made up of masks put on, words edited and emotions held in check.

I don't want you to go away with the idea of denigrating this symbolic exemplarhood. It is your symbolic exemplarhood, which makes your words count. There are very few people who forget who officiated at their wedding. They may even remember the words the rabbi said. They will remember the experience of their bar mitzvah. It is your symbolic exemplarhood that makes it possible for you to do your work and the work of changing the future of the American Jewish community. It is the source of your power. One of the sad things I see from time to time is rabbis railing against it, wishing it wouldn't be, trying to destroy it, without the awareness that they would be destroying the very thing that gives them the ability to do what they do.

In my ten years as a congregational rabbi I did more important work, affected more lives, changed more people and made more Jews than I will in the rest of my career. I know that it was me and my symbolic exemplarhood role in the end that changed and moved these people. Every time you get up to speak, you do so as a symbol, not only as a man and as a human being. If you are really unhappy with it, then you may have to take a look elsewhere. To try to continue to be a rabbi and destroy the symbol will not be useful to you as a pulpit rabbi. Symbolic exemplarhood is inevitable, and it is a vitally useful way to live. It is that which gives you and every rabbi the power and ability to affect and influence others. I don't think you will ever be free of being a symbolic exemplar, but knowing the burden, perhaps we can deal with it.