

We Have Created Our Rabbis and They Are Us. Why All the Commotion?

Rabbis are Symbolic Exemplars, walking, talking, living symbols of the best in humankind. They come to us ordained (no matter how done) by a higher power. Though originally rabbi meant teacher, today each is expected to emulate and “stand in” for God. Rabbis are also Symbolic Exemplars of the Jewish people, enjoined to teach love and care for every last one of us. Each is the embodiment of what every Jew ought to do, but has little intention of doing. Rabbis are expected to fully believe and truly care, be more moral, loving and faithful, superior as both spouse and parent. At least they must be perceived that way. It does no good for them or us to repeatedly proclaim that they are only human, with human needs, desires, and limitations. If we treated rabbis as simply human, we would not need them.

Yet we need them. We need exemplars of what most of us don't dare to be-- God fearing, moral, loving people. Some Jews volunteer to exemplify for us what we all might be, if we got this “created in the image of God” thing right. Together laity and rabbis create this vital living symbol.

Symbolic Exemplarhood enables rabbis to be taken seriously and make a difference. It is Symbolic Exemplarhood which distinguishes rabbis from the social worker, psychological counselor, or the devoutly committed layperson dedicated to and selflessly serving the Jewish people.

While making possible the multiple satisfactions that come from being rabbis, Symbolic Exemplarhood is a double-edged sword, for it also engenders the isolation, alienation, and loneliness that is endemic in the field, the criticism that comes from all sides, and the experience of living behind a glass wall. Rabbis of all denominations know what this is like.

Who the rabbi is, is more important than what the rabbi does. Others are hired or fired and valued in terms of what they do, the technical skills they have and the measurable outcomes they achieve. Though the preceding are not unimportant, rabbis are valued first and foremost by others' perception of the rabbi's inner life, and how that jibes with what the rabbi presents to the world.

Symbolic Exemplarhood, which accompanies rabbis everywhere, makes functioning as a rabbi-technician very hazardous. It leaves little room for

behavior that blemishes the exemplarhood. An uncaring doctor may be noted for surgical proficiency, a teacher having an affair can be an inspiring 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, inside and outside. How else can one measure truly believing and really caring? Visiting the hospital, a rabbi can say and do the right thing, but if others discerned that at heart, the rabbi did not really care but was just doing a job, their symbolic Exemplarhood would be tarnished, if not broken. Breaking the symbol means losing efficacy and provokes the anger of laity who, by how they act with the rabbi, participate in creating and sustaining their symbolhood.

Rabbis are not the only walking, talking symbols. There are celebrities and royalty and presidents. Yet as her memoirs reveal, Hillary Clinton, despite her anger and rage at her husband's infidelity, writes that "even if Bill had made mistakes in his personal life, his transgressions hadn't interfered with his ability to carry out his presidential responsibilities." That separation of morality and work competence would never be allowed a rabbi.

Rabbis are expected to be Symbolic Exemplars, unique and moral persons without physical distance and the buffers that most celebrities are afforded. This makes rabbinic private life extremely vulnerable. Among the most public of figures, almost always "on", they relish anonymity--times when they are not "on". Each knows that the symbol has limits and acts so as not to break those limits. In their struggle for privacy, they are circumspect, keeping some distance. Most, recognizing their exemplarhood, strive to be consistent, fair, sensitive, pious, caring, moral and religious models. Prudence, politeness, restraint and judicious editing of speech and behavior help maintain the symbolic image.

When those limits are broken, all hell breaks loose. When rabbis are involved in sexual abuse, or hire hit men to kill a spouse, or mishandle synagogue funds, when Symbolic Exemplarhood is shattered beyond repair, our anger and prurient interest seems to have no limits. Reams of newsprint and TV time are devoted to the event.

We all struggle to overcome our negative "selves": lust, anger, greed, envy, hate, and those bothersome "selves": anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, insecurity and fear. We hope that proper Jewish living will rid us of them. We have asked our rabbi to shoulder the awesome burden of exemplifying Judaism

and Jewish living at its best, yet when their exemplarhood collapses, we get furious. How could he or she have done it? They're God's anointed!!

Jewish laity and rabbis struggle to climb the Everest of religious and moral excellence. That we both will fail again and again is inevitable. We do well to be gentler and kinder with both them and us. We shall keep trying. Together, we are up to something big.