Introduction to This Issue from the Guest Editors

Michael Shire and Marcus Burstein

This special issue of the CCAR Journal sheds light on the pathways people take to shape and develop their rabbinate after their initial seminary training. This process takes place over succeeding years in the rabbinate with experience of the profession and exposure to its challenges and opportunities. Beyond seminary years, rabbis continually mold, reimagine, and re-create their role through impacting their communities and organizations, which in turn impact them. Over the last generation, the rapid changes in society have determined that the diverse roles of the rabbi must change, too. We see in the personal narratives of rabbis in the field how that change has manifested itself in their own expectations of success for a rabbinic career over a lifetime.

This symposium of the Journal brings together research findings, professional development approaches, and thoughtfully refracted personal experience. Fifteen rabbis, writing as reflective practitioners, contribute articles about the formation of their rabbinate and the impact it has had on them.

We asked rabbis to respond to the following guiding questions:

1. In what ways was seminary training a formative but incomplete preparation for your rabbinate?
2. What experiences have transformed and shaped your rabbinate and impacted upon your self-perception?

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3. How do you continue to reflect on your original aspirations and reflect on the changes and developments that have changed your formative perceptions?

4. How have you grown or changed in the rabbinate?

5. What has diminished your rabbinate or what have become obstacles to development?

6. How have you developed the intellectual, pastoral, and spiritual components of your rabbinate?

Three opening articles establish the context and the methodology of reflective learning in the rabbinate. Dr. Carol Ochs, longtime mentor for developing rabbis, sets the rabbinic profession in its religious and theological setting. The practical theology that is the day-to-day work of the rabbinate reminds us of the power and sanctity of the role as *k'lei kodesh*, even as we are employees and executives. Through this awareness of practical theology and personal liturgy in the rabbinic role, we continue to refresh and nurture our relationship with God, the source of our religious modeling. Professor Peter Jarvis, professor of adult learning, writes of the importance of reflection for the process of active decision making and the ability to determine how such practical learning from experience is a vital factor in personal and professional change and development. Learning to do this reflection is an integral part of preparing for the profession and enables us to know how to interpret our experiences and understand the disjunctures: those things we know we don’t know yet. Rabbi Debbie Prinz, director of CCAR professional development services, gives a rationale for the work of continuous professional development in the rabbinate and outlines the opportunities and obstacles that have impact on rabbis today. Her work highlights the complexity of the rabbinate in all of its facets and the ways in which mentoring, learning, and reflective practice can support and guide a growing and changing rabbinic career.

Four general themes emerge from the articles written by rabbis in the field about their reflected practice. Though not trying to be representational of the rabbinate at large, we are delighted to include articles by rabbis serving in the United States and Great Britain; men and women; rabbis serving in congregations, healthcare facilities, chaplaincy, youth organizations, academia, and in a variety of emerging new roles for rabbis. These themes derive
from the portraits drawn by our contributors but may have wider significance for a vibrant, dynamic, and successful rabbinic career and the ever-evolving expectations of contemporary liberal Jewry.

1. Searching in Uncharted Territory

The rabbinate is uncharted territory for many. Though perceptions of a long-term career in congregational pulpits remain normative, many rabbis have taken alternative pathways into different roles that they have made rabbinic. This has been a journey into the unknown, sometimes initially pushed away from the demands of congregational life and/or pulled into an emerging rabbinic role that is personally chosen after much deliberation. Though alternative rabbinites bring great personal satisfaction and fulfillment, congregational rabbis who still uphold the congregational rabbinate as the only model can be condescending, or even disrespectful, to these non-pulpit rabbis. Finding such a path requires personal strength in a time of uncertainty, opportunities for retraining, and a search for mentors to guide along the way. Such rabbis feel that their seminaries did not prepare them adequately for this shift in rabbinic role, and they only found their mentor by emerging from crisis or confusion. However, what is newly learned and incorporated brings surprise and excitement that one can be a rabbi in an alternative way. The changes in career involve much reflection and re-examination of what the rabbinate means to them. As experience develops, whether in chaplaincy, youth work, or wilderness experience, rabbis come to learn new ways to be rabbis that were previously unknown. Sometimes they even create entirely new ways of being a rabbi to our people.

Vicki Tuckman writes of such experiences in the camp rabbinate, Jamie Korngold writes about the wilderness adventure being a form of Jewish outreach, and David Zucker and Shira Stern share their moves from the congregational rabbinate to chaplaincy work.

2. Searching for Mentors

A means to understand a rabbinic career is being able to reflect deeply on the experiences encountered and the successes and challenges that confront a rabbi. To do this, mentors of many sorts are required. These mentors may be provided initially during seminary, and certainly members of rabbinic faculties remain firmly
fixed in the minds and hearts of working rabbis. Further mentors are continually needed after ordination, including those guiding practice, professional skills, role modeling, and spiritual nourishment. Mentors are often found at will rather than with planning and are chosen because of their ability to impact rabbis personally when significant choices have to be made or obstacles overcome. In many cases these mentors are not other rabbis, but rather those who can reflect back a picture of the rabbinate that the rabbi aspires to fulfill. Such inspiration may also come from an inner structure of internal mentoring in which a higher spiritual consciousness emerges that radically affects one’s rabbinate.

Scott Aaron describes how a series of mentors supports him in his work and the characteristics that exemplify them. Judith Abrams reflects on external voices and her internal voice that acts as her mentor, and Jennifer Jaech draws upon the lessons of horseback riding in a coaching framework.

3. Searching for a Pastoral Theology

Pastoral theology is the branch of theology concerned with the practical application of the study of religion in the context of rabbinic spiritual leadership. This approach to the rabbinic role gives practical expression to the questions of theology “equipping” rabbis with pragmatic solutions and answers to the questions and issues confronted in their work. Here rabbis use homiletics, pastoral care, teaching, and ethics to further their role. Often initiated in the seminary, rabbis devote themselves throughout their careers to developing this source of spiritual energy to enhance and refine their abilities and conceptual understandings.

Leah Doberne-Shor writes movingly in the homiletic mode to reflect on this pastoral theology in her care for others. Mordecai Finley narrates the sometimes painful and difficult journey to a new spiritual consciousness and ability to give spiritual guidance. Dan Alexander describes himself as a “man wandering in a field,” which also describes the psychological and midrashic journeys of Howard Cooper.

4. Searching for My Rabbinate

Rabbis use their interests and passions to actively build their rabbinate. The work/life balance that needs to take into account families
and children determines eventual choices that will be made. Developing interests in further Jewish study or in completely new fields gradually shapes the emphasis of a rabbinic role.

Edwin Goldberg uses his developing knowledge of business management to mold his rabbinic leadership and better respond to the workings of a community organization. Shari Shamah struggles with her rabbinic and family demands, resulting in a variety of roles that better fit her personal circumstances and rabbinic skills as an informal educator. Joel Mosbacher learns from what he doesn’t know and avails himself of the continuing professional development to find his center of gravity. Sylvia Rothschild, one of the first women in the British rabbinate, had to deconstruct attitudes. She describes doing so through the tools of the rabbinic trade—teaching, preaching, and liturgy—which have opened up new possibilities for women and men in alternative modes of rabbinic employment.

For the two of us, who have shared our changing rabbinate together, it has been both personally moving and stimulating to read the many submissions that give us a wide and deep understanding of the rabbinate today. We hope that it will be inspirational for rabbis in the field and clergy of all types, as well as rabbinic students aspiring to a career that they will only come to know after their ordination and initial service. We hope this refracted view of the rabbinate will motivate, energize, and renew all who read of these rabbinic journeys and will more successfully enable us all to reach the destinations of our sacred service wherever that may come to be.