Fostering a Relationship between Rabbi and God

Carol Ochs

Rabbis have multiple roles and tasks, among them CEO of a synagogue, social worker, teacher, arbiter, liturgist, social conscience, and prophetic voice. But few have taken the long road to ordination solely in order to fulfill any one of those functions or even all of them together. I am not a rabbi—ordination in the Reform Movement, much less in the Conservative or Orthodox communities, was not an option for women when I finished college—but for fifteen years I taught and provided spiritual guidance to rabbis and rabbinic students. I have found that most people who study for the rabbinate do so in order to pass on a passion that lives within them: a relationship with God.

Jews do not usually talk about a call, even though our ancestors originated the idea with the calling of Abraham. On the one hand, we have grown shy of the language that most accurately describes our own experience of finding a route that is more than simply a reasoned professional choice. On the other hand, we sense a deeper mystery far beyond anything discussed in the formation years at seminary, where we study texts, learn pastoral counseling, and practice writing sermons but rarely address our own sense of purpose.

During your seminary years, you get increasingly comfortable with the ecclesiastical demands of the week, the month, the seasons, and the holidays. You are recognized in the street and people begin asking you for advice. But with all that is new and exciting, with everything that confirms your growing sense of becoming a

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genuine rabbi, you may begin to feel that you are not as authentic as you want to be.

By the time you receive s’michah, you are able to read a text analytically and choreograph a meaningful service, but your experience of the holy, which is probably what led you to attend seminary in the first place, has been sidetracked. You find yourself more aware of synagogue politics than of the God you have covenanted to serve. Here you are, about to become k’lei kodesh (sacred vessels) and you don’t know how to talk about the sacred. How can you recover that flame of passion that persuaded you to enter a five-year program that uproots you and deeply affects your partner, family, and friends?

Jews often feel uncomfortable talking about the sacred and talking about God in any personal sense. This silence, which probably is well understood by some rabbinic students, becomes an obstacle to many of us in talking to God. Most of us had no trouble, as children, perceiving the holy in our lives. We remember people, places, and material objects that generated emotions in us of wonder and awe. We want to recover these experiences of the holy but do not know how and where to begin on the unmarked path of religious engagement. The magical feeling that had come to us so easily and regularly in our youth has become much more problematic as we enter day-to-day living. We have become estranged from what is naturally ours. A few gifted people retain this sense of wonder and some recover it after a drawn-out process of self-recognition and rededication.

If we are to deepen the formation of a religious life in others, we must nurture a growing intimacy with God in ourselves. Oddly, we have to put aside the first question we may ask—What do we mean by God?—so that we can overcome the distance required for analytical thought and enter the closeness aspired to by a lover. Within the framework of this essential relationship with God, reason proves inadequate, even unhelpful. The relationship, begun in earliest childhood, did not in fact stand still. Education has aided it in some cases but harmed it, or at least derailed it as the central focus, in too many others. And now, faced with the powerful human events that beset your congregants, you may well find an awareness of your own inadequacy for performing the tasks required of you and fulfilling the needs of people who look to you for guidance and inspiration.
You recognize your own limitations when you refer a congregant to a doctor, an attorney, a social worker, or a psychiatrist, but as someone’s rabbi, you are much more than a name on a Rolodex card. The ultimate referral is to bring the bereaved, the depressed, the outraged, and the overwhelmed to what alone can sustain us: looking to God.

It has been my experience as a teacher and guide that rabbis and rabbinic students need to come back to a recognition of God’s reality. The return should not be merely an intellectual assent to the existence of God, or an acceptance of a tradition whose major grounding is in God, or even a wish to believe in God as fervently as our ancestors did. It should be a return to our own personal experience of the presence of God—not in the past nor in a hoped-for future, but here and now. If we can get even partway there, we confront the further question: How do we relate to God, who is now the center of our reality?

The obvious answer lies in prayer, though our whole notion of prayer needs to be rethought. Few of us have ventured beyond liturgical prayer to the very natural conversations we used to have with God that run from anger to bliss, cursing to blessing. Our student rabbis also need spiritual guidance to help them recover and build on their earlier intimacy with God and to help them convey this relationship to their congregants. All the same practices take on new depth and meaning when our perspective is based on a relationship with God. Even in reciting our traditional prayers, when God is the starting point, all the texts read differently. We still are interested in the context within which the prayers were written, but when we pray, the historical data fades into the background. What remains is an opening up and an opening out.

We might wonder what the possibilities are for us if we did not find a sense of the holy in our childhood. We are reassured when we recall the prayer from Shacharit, “God renews the work of creation every day, constantly.” We, too, can be renewed. Each day is the possibility for us to return to the wonder and freshness of childhood with an openness to the holy.

We are sometimes led to believe that having a relationship with God requires some secret or esoteric knowledge or practice, such as those found in the Kabbalah or in the writings of “specialists” in spirituality. So in seeking a spiritual life, we may be tempted to look for a new technique of prayer or study, a new practice of mind
or body—or perhaps a new teacher. But the real way of achieving a spiritual life is much more straightforward: it simply requires maintaining consistent attention, dedication, and faithfulness to the task of regular prayer. A story told about Rabbi Akiba in *Avot D’Rabbi Natan* holds true for all of us:

Akiba, as a shepherd, saw a large rock with a hole in it. He wondered what could have caused the hole in this large stone. He realized that it came from the slow dripping of water over a long period of time. If this large stone could be bored open by the action of the water, then even he could be opened up by the study of Torah. He knew it would take a long time (when he saw the stone he did not even know the *alef-bet*) and that he was already forty years old, but he also knew that devotion would allow him to learn Torah (ch. 6, sect. 2).

II

We do not have to go through the entire *Tanach* to discover that the text becomes new and enlivening when we have an enlivened heart. When we can truly experience in our own being what we read in the traditional morning service, as I previously mentioned, that “God renews the work of creation every day, constantly,” we can come to biblical and other religious texts with renewed faith and face our own calling with freshness and joy.

I would like to illustrate this point with a fictional case study about a character I will name Jeremy, who is partly a composite of former mentees and partly invented. When Jeremy was a second-year student at HUC, he came to me for spiritual guidance. He continued coming through his two-year appointment as an assistant rabbi in New York, then took a pulpit in a nearby suburb. Over these six years he kept a comprehensive journal, which he shared with me from time to time; he also reflected back on his entries, which he found to be embarrassing. The first entry he shared was a poem he wrote during his second year at HUC that expressed the depth of his commitment and the intensity of his engagement:

My God, I remember You,
Those hot prayers burning
My scalding eyes,
Whispered in darkness
And ignorance.
Why should You,  
In Your force and might,  
In Your nebulous form  
That I mentally conceive,  
Comfort me in a father’s shape?  
An emotional illusion.

You would not tamper  
With ordered laws  
Though I cry to You  
In despair.

Dark. While everyone slept,  
In a part of the night  
When I alone was awake  
I called to You.

But in the day  
I did not believe—  
I was a denier...

“It’s a terrible poem,” he pronounced at one of our sessions.  
“What does it mean to you?” I asked.  
“That line—’Those hot prayers burning my scalding eyes’—I haven’t prayed with that intensity in an awfully long time.”  
“Do you want to?”

After a long while Jeremy answered softly, “No, not really. I don’t think that intensity can carry me through the long haul of the life of a rabbi. It made sense when I was ‘testing the waters,’ trying to decide if this was really my vocation. But that decision feels pretty settled now.”

In his fourth year Jeremy filled in temporarily for a rabbi on leave. He told me about the wonderful day when he was in a 7-Eleven store in the town where he was conducting bi-weekly services. A woman came up to him and greeted him as Rabbi. He wasn’t at the pulpit or even wearing a kippah. The incident caused a thrill to run through him and inspired him to write:

I am!  
I exist!  
I am a nation just recognized.
I received their ambassadors today, and spies (a diplomatic courtesy to send spies).

And they tempted me with
Sweet pacts. I shook my head, No!

I like aloneness, it’s all so new.

I bowed to the ambassadors and set up committees for the spies.

It was all a game, how jolly.

But I am recognized.

A New Nation Is Born.

But a little nation and such big ambassadors

Have recognized me.

I am!

I waited for Jeremy to explain to me why he had written the poem and why he had chosen to share it with me. “I am totally embarrassed by the poem,” he admitted. “The poem is all about me, me, me! I’m supposed to be a servant of God, but I see that I’m only a servant of my own ego. Yet it felt so wonderful to be recognized. I can see how seductive it can become to be a central figure in someone else’s spiritual journey. Week after week, the congregants see you on the pulpit, and they find it easier to focus on you rather than on an amorphous stirring within themselves. I wrote this poem in a moment of egocentric pride, but I read it to you because it has become a cautionary tale for me. I’ve been told that rabbis tend to have God-complexes, and I don’t want to be one of them.”

Toward the end of his second year as an assistant rabbi in his congregation, Jeremy told me he had written another poem. I was surprised, but I let him read it to me and then asked him to explain it:

One day the sun didn’t shine,
The blue turned purple,
The green drab.

One night the seas raised their heads,
Bared their fangs,
And ate most of my world.

In the morning I was alone
And wept at my aloneness.

I turned to the world
And You were there.

You were part of a gentler sun.
I couldn’t see You diffused at first
But You were there in a thousand days
And sang in a thousand songs.
And I was no longer alone,
So I wept.

Jeremy then explained: “The four stages of love are supposedly attraction, courtship, commitment, and long-term marriage. It seems to me that description perfectly describes what I have experienced in my journey through seminary. The initial attraction was electrifying but not sustainable. The long years of study were like a courtship (with little spats and revelation of how deep the attraction really was). The s’chmah ceremony was the formal commitment. I guess last year was the honeymoon. The whole adventure was exhausting and exhilarating at the same time. And then—well it’s like I wrote: one day the sun didn’t shine. The prayers felt like rote (Is that supposed to happen so soon?); all the trappings felt like—just trappings. But then I entered a time that had a deeper sweetness and authenticity than I had ever known. Ordinary days became more sacred than the High Holy Days. It was an overpowering realization. It wasn’t an idea or a conclusion, it was just something I knew in every fiber of my being.”

Jeremy’s journal entries beautifully illustrate the path of his unfolding vocation. Reflecting back on his first poem, Jeremy remembered the intensity, but rejected it as a goal. It was a fire that could not warm him for the long haul. Jeremy’s embarrassment by the second poem led him to ask where God was in this entry. Then he read the third poem. The long-ago but not forgotten lessons of spiritual guidance surfaced to consciousness: In good times you build the structures that will support you in bad times. You cannot build in bad times.

So what had Jeremy built? The structure of the day: get up, shower, dress, and take time for quiet prayer and reflection before going to shul. “You never know what is waiting on your desk or at your door once you enter the public space of the synagogue,” he remarked, “so the quiet, early hours are sacred time for me.” The other structures also came to mind: the short prayers uttered alone before each counseling session: “God, help me counsel a bereaved person.” Inviting God into the session opened Jeremy up. But when he tried the prayers in the prayer book, they felt mechanical.
He realized then that he should not go broader by looking for new texts but go deeper—to let the familiar words enter a deeper level of their being. And the words may well be just what someone out there needs to hear.

Jeremy was by no means the first rabbi to encounter problems with the traditional prayers. The more often we repeat them, the more easily they become stale. We are not taught how to pray. But over the years we discover passages in the liturgy that speak to us when we cannot find the words and that may lead us beyond words. We may have collected a few poems that touch a rare place of resonance. We have even had moments of silence that seemed richer and more fruitful than the prayers we inherited from earlier generations. Although the word for prayer, avodah, means “work,” prayer is not so much work as it is discipline. We use the words and structures of the siddur, but we know that they are simply the forms that we will fill with our lives and help us open ourselves to a deepening relationship with God.

III

Some key lines in the Tanach have served as touchstones for me on the unmarked journey to a maturing relationship with God. I present them here as they may help you, or even better, inspire you to find your own quotes.

“Although you intended me harm, God intended it for good” (Gen. 50:20). Through all that occurs, you will be tempted to find anger—and justification for the anger—in relation to the board, the senior rabbi, the educator, the cantor, even the congregants. Your task, however, is to go beyond anger and to try to locate what good is intended. But these are just words, a platitude given to someone who has been wronged; the clichéd advice to “make lemonade” when handed lemons does not work—unless God has become a real partner in your life. Then, like Joseph in Genesis, you begin to understand your life as meaningful, and by remaining open you may find that thwarting your own plans becomes an invitation to discover God’s plans for you.

It is a long, long process until we fully experience and recognize that we do not know our own deepest good. We think about the dreams we had at an earlier time in our lives and recognize that we
have to thank God for unanswered prayers. What if those prayers had been answered? So now, in the face of all that is currently causing anger and outrage we discipline ourselves to look for a slowly rising sense of excitement and curiosity as we begin to explore our new life.

Beginning with our experience of the reality and presence of God, what is the good we can find in this situation? Even something as potentially devastating as the loss of a job can, over time, allow us to discover new talents; losing our health forces us to re-define ourselves in a way that requires less strength and vitality. Some people who have lost much of their life’s savings have found how much they can do without and have focused on simplifying their lives.

“You must not go back that way again” (Deut. 17:16) and “Go forth from your native land and from your father’s house to the land I will show you” (Gen. 12:1). We often feel tempted to return to what once worked in the past—the old texts, the old practices. But we are new and cannot go back to what was once comfortable. It is wonderful, if perhaps somewhat embarrassing, to remember the fervor of youth. But we are no longer youngsters and what we needed then is not appropriate now. It is scary to let go of the old practices—the familiar (if somewhat hackneyed) prayers we used as part of our personal practice—and leap yet again into the unknown. As in all relationships, ours with God is always evolving. We are always invited to go deeper. Think of yourself as a permanent explorer always in transition, always growing, acting on new insights, always pursuing some new idea or activity. Then you are taking seriously the call to be a nomad, to “go forth from your native land.”

“I will be with you” (Exod. 3:12). When we feel most alone, we must believe that we are not alone and are not serving our own egos or even our own agendas. You are here as a k’lei kodesh. Can these words from Exodus really comfort us on a cold dark night? For you, surrender to a God known in faith is the center of your life, but for too many of your congregants it is secondary. Can anyone else really understand what makes your life meaningful? People go to professional meetings because they need colleagues to affirm their choices and goals. And daily, hour by hour, moment to moment, we can turn to the One who affirms to us that our choice has
been right. We are not alone: we are part of a chain of tradition and partners in the most significant relationship available to human beings.

“Choose life” (Deut. 30:19). Life entails risk; how well we know that it requires constant growth and change, and that when we feel most comfortable, that is the time to think about moving on. Nachman of Bratislav wrote that he falls six times a day and gets up seven. We would love to believe that the falls will end, but life, as we know, keeps happening—always rising and falling and giving and taking. We must continue searching for the unchanging ground within the constant flux we are in.

“See, I will bring a scroll recounting what befell me” (Ps. 40:8). We should keep a journal, not to recount to God what has befallen us but to pause and get a perspective on what has occurred. A journal is, by etymology, something to be kept every day. If we write irregularly we tend to record only what angers or aggrieves us and then find ourselves unable to get a perspective on what really happened. Keeping a journal allows us, over time, to look back and get some sense of the distance we have traveled. Some rabbis find spiritual friends with whom they can share their stories. They “check in” once a month, remind each other of their fundamental commitments, and encourage each other.

“Why so downcast, my soul, / why disquieted within me?” (Ps. 42:6). Frequently we don’t even know what has changed. Why has something that once thrilled us become mechanical? Why do our feet slow as we approach our office door? Emotions are our internal weather, and while we must pay attention to our emotions, we also must resist confusing the weather with the deep structure of our being.

“Taste and see how good Adonai is” (Ps. 34:9). One of the great insights and gifts of Jewish spirituality is that it celebrates the material world. It allows us to really notice and appreciate the wonders around us. We need not turn away from beauty or fear being tempted by the song of a bird. We need look no further than nature to find much to praise, celebrate, and bless.
“And lo, Adonai passed by. There was a great and mighty wind, splitting mountains and shattering rocks by the power of Adonai; but Adonai was not in the wind. After the wind—an earthquake; but Adonai was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake—fire; but Adonai was not in the fire. And after the fire—a still, small voice” (I Kings 19:11–12).

From earliest childhood we have been led to pay attention to loud noises, blaring trumpets, flashy fireworks. Gradually we come to realize that many of the most significant messages in our lives have come more quietly, growing within us rather than being blasted from the skies. That inner voice is still, and even small, but with our growing attentiveness it can grow and can increasingly guide our lives.

“Be still and know that I am God” (Ps. 46:11). When we have finally learned that God is not in the wind, the earthquake, or the fire, we begin at last to get quiet and listen to that still, small voice. Listening, as in the Sh’ma, “Hear, O Israel,” is the central sense in Judaism, but it is a talent that has become increasingly difficult in our decibel-overloaded culture. When we are not listening to our various media we are hearing the voice of the internalized values of our culture: noise and busyness. But silence and staying centered can help us get in touch with that inner voice.

“Fear not” (Gen. 15:1, etc.). The phrase appears dozens of times in the Tanach, suggesting that it is a central obligation. But taking this precept seriously is difficult. Could we go through even one day without being afraid? So much of life seems to be structured so that we divert our attention from our own contingency. We need to know that crossing the street is dangerous, but we do not need to bring that to the forefront of our consciousness. That fear returns when, from a distance, we watch our child cross the street alone for the first time. Would she survive? Yes! We need to know, for example, that stoves burn, but we do not need to be afraid of stoves. Similarly, we need to remember that wet hands and electrical outlets do not go well together. Although we must be awake and aware, fear is not essential for survival; moreover, it gains us nothing. But should we also resist fearing evil? We must understand that evil is the unhealthy condition of the soul and should therefore be avoided. But fear keeps us from examining evil carefully if only to learn what it is that is trying to tempt us.
FOSTERING A RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RABBI AND GOD

IV

As a rabbi, you need to know what will nourish you, your congregation, and the rabbinate and what will help you grow, stay fresh, and remain engaged. You must always remember who you are and, above all, Whom you are serving. Everything you do and say should be thought of as an offering to God. Over a lifetime as a dedicated person, you will have to retool many times. New skills are required as the needs of your congregation change. You will try to keep up with the latest findings in counseling, ethics, biblical studies, working with children in difficult family configurations, responding to current social and political issues—the list is endless. You need to be both flexible and grounded.

During your seminary years and your first few years as a rabbi you may participate, or may have participated, in study groups, but your significant grounding comes not from study groups or texts but from your deepening relationship with God. You learn to find sacred time for your silence and openness. You learn to pray beyond your role as sh’liach tzibur. And you learn to find God not at a set time of the day, but in and through all the many tasks that crowd your days. This is a slow discovery and you cannot always retain its fruits, so those moments of silently gathering yourself remain important, but it is a discovery that transforms every day.

It is surprising and dismayng that we do not always perceive that we have a relationship with God. We may discover that we no longer know to Whom we are praying. However, the desire to pray, the desire for God is itself prayer. The arid moments put us in all our incompleteness before God and allow God at the proper moment to still our hearts and renew our trust. Moreover, to pray is to come to know ourselves and who we are before God. The better we know who we are, the more aware we become of our incompleteness and our yearning for wholeness. Once we have truly taken in the contingency of our existence and the tremendous blessing and gift of our being and consciousness—and the ongoing gift of its sustenance—we know an essential aspect of ourselves. At the same time, we grow in attending to the wonder and beauty around us, which hints to us of God.

Finally, the most important way of helping ourselves and our congregants awaken to the reality of God’s existence and presence is to search our memories for experiences of the holy and to have
our congregants and those we guide search their memories. We can’t talk people into a belief in God or overwhelm them with texts or authority. We want them to re-experience the wonder they have felt in the course of their lives and to name it with its own appropriate dignity.

During the Ten Days of Awe between Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur we often do a cheshbon hanefesh (an accounting of our soul), looking for sins, oversights, and errors. Over the years I have found how boring sins can be, not least because they are so repetitive. But what remains new and wondrous are the many ways God comes to us: sometimes in the guise of a new friendship, sometimes in seeing a baby respond to our smile, sometimes in finding just the right book we need when something feels beyond us. I challenge those I guide to use the Ten Days to collect their own experiences of giftedness. Gratitude collects gratitude, and before long we find how much love has embraced us over all these years. Our tradition gives us the language to name our experiences, but it is our lives that provide the essential text that needs this naming. We discover that Torah is not something we look at but something we look through to make sense of our lives and our deepening relationship to God.

There is no book we can read or trick we can learn that will be of much help in forming and maintaining a love relationship. We need only the day-to-day faithfulness and attentiveness to the loved one. Similarly, there are no secrets to guide us along our own spiritual path. When you are in love, you see the world through a lover’s eyes. And when you love God, you see the world through the lens of this primary relationship, which entails the full attention of mind, body, and spirit.

As a rabbi today you have multiple roles and tasks, but the most significant one is enlivening and inspiriting Judaism by passing on a passion that lives within you: a genuine relationship to God.