At the Gates — בשערים

Thirty years ago—in another lifetime—I was the director of Hillel for the colleges in Buffalo. The Hillel House was a converted private residence. One morning, I spent an hour or so taming a leaky faucet in one of the house’s lavatories. My staff did not include a custodian, so if the repair or maintenance was relatively minor, I handled it. When I finished my task, I went out in order to go to campus, and bumped into a professor I knew. He had long before stopped attending any house of worship. We exchanged pleasantries, and then he said, “I have always wondered just what a rabbi does.” At that moment, I could only think of doing light plumbing.

Just what does a rabbi do? I strongly doubt that I am a unique, or even infrequent, example of a rabbi who found him or herself with a wrench in hand, or changing a light bulb, or mopping up a spill. Or, for that matter, answering phones and making copies, or a myriad of other everyday tasks that arise in the operation of a synagogue.

Many of you, I am sure, are familiar with the classic story regarding an older rabbi who has announced her retirement. A congregant asks, “What are you planning to do?”

“I think I will now have the opportunity to finish my book,” she replied.

“I didn’t know you were writing a book?”

“T’m not. I’m reading one!”

The proper interpretation of this joke, I would suggest, is not to ridicule the rabbi’s lack of scholarship, but rather to recognize to what extent one’s pastoral, liturgical, and administrative duties can crowd out just what we think a rabbi is supposed to do. Being a rabbi and rabbi-ing occasionally only lightly intersect.

Throughout history, most rabbis have had to do something else in order to make, or at least supplement, a living. It is not only the case that the relatively modern concept of a fulltime professional rabbi has led to the incorporation of pastoral and administrative roles into their work—they have almost always been present—but further, these tasks have been professionalized as well. In this context, I invite your consideration in these pages to the contributions
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of the final section from the theme begun in the last issue of the Journal—“Sacred Teaching and Spiritual Learning”—which focus on the rabbi as a spiritual guide; to David Whiman (“A Prisoner Cannot Free Himself: Helping Very Smart Rabbis to Learn”) on the rabbi as a manager; to Reeve Brenner (“Spirituality and Appreciative Inquiry in the Jewish Chaplaincy and Elsewhere”) and Peter Hurwitz (“Sources from Talmud and Midrash on Dilemmas with End-of-Life Care”), who illuminate a rabbi’s chaplaincy functions; and to Mark S. Shapiro (“A Laboratory of Living Judaism”), who highlights a rabbi’s role in informal education, particularly the camp setting.

A contemporary rabbi must be a teacher, motivator, counselor, and manager, but in the last analysis a rabbi is one who knows the sources. Thus, I call appreciative attention to Steven Lebow (“Separation-Individuation and Oedipal Motifs in the Abraham Narrative”) for analysis of biblical narrative; Amy Scheinerman’s discussion on the formation of the Babylonian Talmud (“Rabbis Undermining Rabbis: Subversive Midrashic Narratives”); and Bernard Mehlman’s annotated translation of a midrash (“Midrash Al Yithellel (Do Not Boast): Introduction, Translation, and Exposition”).

What a rabbi is and what a rabbi does represents a constant dynamic that is clearly not without its points of tension. Further, the tension is both internal—how the rabbi orders one’s priorities—and external—how one is perceived and evaluated by one’s constituency. Our colleague Jack Bloom has characterized the latter as the rabbi being a “symbolic exemplar.” Thus, being a rabbi goes beyond one’s activities to, fairly or unfairly, how we live our lives. Robert Kirzane challenges the Reform Movement on precisely this issue with his paper “‘With Vision and Boldness’: Opening HUC-JIR to Applicants and Students with Non-Jewish Partners.”

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With this issue I begin my term as editor of the CCAR Journal. Isaac Newton’s famous comment about standing on the shoulders of giants seems particularly apt. I have had the honor of knowing most of the former editors since Bernard Martin z”l. They have represented among the best characteristics of the rabbinic vocation: scholarship, attention to detail, organization, compassion, and above all, the quality Franz Rosenzweig described as “nothing
Jewish is alien to me.” I am especially honored—and somewhat daunted—in succeeding Susan Laemmle in this post. Susan has set a very high bar in developing and maintaining the breadth and quality of the *Journal* for the past five years. Further, she has been a caring and generous mentor. I wish to dedicate this issue in her honor.

Paul Golomb, Editor