The rabbinate can be a lonely profession. In most institutions where rabbis work—synagogues, hospitals, military bases, and university campuses, among others—there is only the one professional. There are a number of ramifications from this solitude, and they are highlighted both directly and indirectly in the articles that make up this issue of the Reform Jewish Quarterly.

One consequence—reasonably obvious—is that rabbis do not encounter other rabbis very often. Unless they make an affirmative effort to contact colleagues, they are on their own. The benefits of such contact are clear: who else knows just what our work entails? And yet, establishing those contacts are daunting. Rabbinic work is comprehensive and for the most part intensely interpersonal. Rabbis spend their days teaching, counseling, making pastoral visits, leading worship, and sitting in meetings. This regimen is not only time-consuming—leaving precious little time for personal study and engagement with one’s own family—it is also exhausting. After spending so much time with so many people, how many more do you want to see?

There are, on the other hand, a myriad of opportunities to be in touch with colleagues. I am bracketing out the Internet: ravkav, hucalum, and the like. Whatever their value, which is not inconsiderable, it does not measure up to personal face-to-face encounters. Thus, there are, inter alia, local Boards of Rabbis, informally organized study chevruta, and the regular meetings and kallot of regional associations within the CCAR. I personally cannot stress more the benefits of setting aside some time over the course of the year in order to engage in one or more of these gatherings.

With the value of rabbinic assemblies in mind, this issue of the Journal commences with papers that were delivered at the 2015 CCAR Convention in Philadelphia. The three are quite distinct one from another. Yoel Kahn (“Marking the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of the Acceptance of Openly Gay and Lesbian Rabbis in the Reform Movement”) delivered a keynote address that describes
the dramatic changes in attitude and practice within the Reform Movement regarding sexual choice. Richard Address (“Growing Older, Growing Better”) surveyed the challenges and opportunities in providing rabbinic service to the elderly. And Andrew Newberg, M.D. (“How God Changes Your Brain”) presented his neurological research that connects the religious notion of spirituality to physiology of the human brain. The late science writer, Stephen Jay Gould, called science and religion “non-overlapping magisteria.” Committed atheists, such as Richard Dawkins, would challenge this characterization as giving too much credit to religion. Dr. Newberg reminds us of a different sort of challenge; that scientific and religious thought might indeed overlap and inform each other.

Each of these articles is valuable in its own right. I present them together in order to acknowledge the importance of such assemblies as the CCAR Convention. In the combination of study, schmoozing, and catching up that is the hallmark of the Convention and the many smaller meetings, rabbis are given the extraordinarily valuable opportunity to break out of the solitude that defines much of this profession.

II

As normal work conditions separate one rabbi from another, it also creates a direct and potentially fraught relationship with one’s constituents. As a matter of shorthand, I will refer to the synagogue in which the constituency are congregants. A similar relation exists for rabbis who serve as chaplains (hospital, military, or campus). Rabbis, particularly solo rabbis in a congregation, are the principal and often only source of Jewish information for a congregant. When confronted with an inquiry or request, how the rabbi responds therefore becomes the Jewish response.

Now, most rabbis have a sufficient amount of integrity that their response comports with mainstream Jewish practice and thought. There are, however, liminal issues. There are situations or circumstances in which a choice is presented to the rabbi: do I remain within the conventions of Jewish tradition or do I not? (My teacher, Michael Chernick, once gave an example of the dilemma: a person brings a newly cut up chicken to the rabbi. There is a needle stuck in the bird’s crop. Is the fowl kosher? The rabbi carefully examines
the chicken, and realizes he has no idea how to rule. So, he pulls a few dollars out his pocket and invites the person to buy a new bird.)

No rabbi, in the last analysis, is an island. Each is subjected to a range of pressures: the weight of tradition and conventional practice, the approving or disapproving attitudes of peers and response of the congregation itself. A number of articles in this issue touch upon the tensions arising from the assertion of rabbinic authority—the role of being *mar d’atra* (the master of the place) and expectations arising from above (tradition) and below (the demands of the congregation).

Stephen Passamanecck (“Rabbinic Criminal Justice”) provides historic distance by examining the ways medieval Rabbis handled being a judge in criminal court proceedings. David Whiman (“When Efforts at Synagogue Transformation Fail”) examines the pitfalls in trying to push a congregation into a new social, structural, and spiritual context that might be more suitable to the demands of times. He does not address the role of the rabbi directly, but it is all but impossible for a project of synagogue transformation to be successful without rabbis taking a central role. In both Passamanecck and Whiman’s articles, the rabbi is thrust into a role that is somewhat outside the norms of rabbinic training, and yet can be considered central to one’s duties and expectations.

Anthony Holz (“Authority and Religion”) revisits the philosophy of Alvin Reines, a strong proponent of personal autonomy over and against the concept of a commanding God. Dr. Reines taught for many years at HUC in Cincinnati, and given the depth of his scholarship and the firmness of his beliefs, he was also among the most controversial figures, producing both devotees and opponents among his students. Reines passed away in 2004, and his influence necessarily has receded. Rabbi Holz reminds us of the significance—and the challenge—of his ideas.

Few issues pertaining to rabbinic authority are more fraught with tension, both for the rabbi and congregants, than officiating at a wedding between a Jew and a non-Jew: the mixed marriage. Since 1973, the CCAR has been formally on record as discouraging officiating, but it has also recognized the autonomy and individual authority of every rabbi in determining how to proceed. Over the years, the argument within the Conference, and throughout the Reform Movement, has been posed mostly in sociological terms:
is it good, bad, or irrelevant to the future well-being of the people Israel if a rabbi participates in a mixed-marriage ceremony? The survey material—some of the most comprehensive systematic investigation was conducted by the late sociologist, Egon Mayer—is inconclusive. For the most part, the conversation has been impressionistic and anecdotal. One aspect of the discussion, however, has been widely accepted by both supporters and opponents: officiating is halachically impermissible.

Brian Stoller (“Saying ‘Yes’ to Mixed-Marriage Officiation”) has chosen to confront the halachic issue head on. His *t’shuvah* (halachic response) is surprising and not without nuance. In response, Arnold Gluck (“Davar Acher: Rabbis Should Stand for Jewish Marriage”) reminds us that halachah itself is not merely a matter of interpretation of a sacred tradition, but is rather situated right in the vortex of forces that press and shape rabbinic authority and Jewish practice.

III

The Spring 2015 issue of the R/Q was devoted to loss. The articles collected and edited by guest editor, Ruth Gais, covered both the role of rabbis in dealing with congregants’ losses and the personal experience of loss on the part of rabbis themselves. Arthur Gross-Schaefer, along with Ilana Lazar Schachter, provides an addendum to this theme, by proposing a new ritual for dealing with the loss of a child on the occasion of the anniversary of the child’s birthday. The article sits astride the dual focus of the Spring 2015 issue, as it reflects both a proposal that can be embraced by any rabbi working with congregants who have suffered a similar loss, and a personal response on the part of Rabbi Gross-Schaefer to the loss of his own son. I invited colleagues who had experienced the death of a child to respond to Gross-Schaefer and Schachter’s ritual. Eric Wisnia kindly offered his own perspective.

This year is the fiftieth anniversary of S. Y. Agnon’s receiving the Nobel Prize in Literature, to this day the only author in the Hebrew language to achieve this honor. Larry Edwards, former book editor for the Journal, acknowledges the storytelling abilities and rich literary style of Agnon with an annotated translation of his short story, “The Great Synagogue.”
It is always my hope that this and every issue of the Reform Jewish Quarterly can assist us in overcoming the necessary solitude of the rabbinate.

Paul Golomb, Editor

Note

1. There is some confusion as to what a marriage between a Jew and non-Jew should be called: intermarriage or mixed marriage. Let me suggest the following: A Jew and a non-Jew celebrating a wedding are intermarrying. A rabbi who is formally competent to oversee a Jewish wedding ceremony is officiating at a mixed marriage when a non-Jew is involved.