A recent immigrant, a familiar story goes, is wandering through the streets of the Lower East Side, trying to find a friend from the old country. As he inquires of shopkeepers and passers-by, he learns that his friend is rather well known as a local rabbi. Each inquiry, however, brings a litany of complaints: he is slovenly in appearance, always late, mostly inarticulate when delivering sermons, not much of a pastor, and even less a scholar. Finally, the greenhorn meets his friend. As the conversation progresses, he is surprised to learn that the friend is taking no salary for his rabbinic services.

“You are not being paid? Why do you do it?”
“Only for the honor.”

While I imagine that rabbis, as a rule, are far more competent than the person in this story, the notion that one should engage in this vocation exclusively for the honor might actually be true. A brief discussion takes place in BT N’darim 37a. There it is suggested that taking payment for teaching Scripture is inappropriate. The ruling is based on Deuteronomy 4:5, which declares that God gave Torah freely, thus implying that one should receive no monetary profit for imparting it.

Once this assertion is made, however, the gemara seeks to find a way in which a rabbi might nonetheless receive compensation: for teaching the vocalization of the text rather than text itself or for being a guardian over the students rather than for the teaching. The argument is intriguing. It is a balancing act between the act of teaching Torah, which ideally ought to be done for its own sake, and the reality for those who engage in such teaching needing to have an income.

This question arises today in the classic chestnut: if a Jew is not supposed to work on Shabbat, just what is the rabbi doing? And the answer, adhering to the gemara’s discussion, is not to ask whether the rabbi is working on Shabbat, but rather, what is the rabbi being paid to do? Study and worship on the Sabbath is what every Jew
ought to be doing. The rabbi, being more adept at these activities than many others, naturally takes a leading role. But the rabbi is not being paid for what is done on that day, but instead for other responsibilities, which are taken up during the rest of the week.

The Talmud adroitly squares the circle. While it is inappropriate for a rabbi to be paid for learning and teaching Torah, a rabbi nonetheless has to make a living! From a personal perspective, in my forty years as a working rabbi, I never felt that I made “the big bucks” from applying Rashi to a difficult passage in Torah or explaining the outlines of Maimonides or Rosenzweig’s method. It rather came from providing a measure of comfort to patient and family in a hospital room, steering a Board of Trustees toward a practical vision of their work, or, most satisfactory, helping a congregant deliver a d’var Torah.

So, a rabbi is paid for being a rabbi. But, how much! What is the role of a rabbi in a congregation, organization, or community worth? The question is obviously not answered by quoting a figure. It rather arises in a context, mostly subjective, of relative value; that is, just how is a rabbi valued?

This is a millennium-old question, and until slightly less than fifty years ago, the issue arose within the environment of an exclusively male profession. For all the differences that can affect the decision of what to pay the rabbi, the variable of gender could be eliminated. With the advent in 1972 of the first ordained female rabbis, a whole new range of systemic (and mostly sexist) determinations are now added.

I am most grateful to Marla J. Feldman and Mary L. Zamore, who have assembled essays from rabbinic and cantorial colleagues, lawyers, administrators, economists, and entrepreneurs, which investigate the current imbalance in compensation between men and women rabbis. It is an impressive and wide-ranging collection that points to the challenges, examines halachah and Jewish sources, and also points toward realistic solutions.

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Included in this issue are two more articles and two book reviews. My essay explores the related topic of determining fair compensation by exploring a discussion on assessing monetary value that winds through the Talmudic tractate Bava M’tzia. Our colleague Bernard Mehlman and Dr. Gabriel Padawer introduce and
translate three radio addresses given by Rabbi Leo Baeck in 1946. Baeck is certainly one of the most influential Jewish thinkers of the mid-twentieth century. In addition to his contributions to the development of the foundations of a modern liberal Jewish theology, he had his thought and faith tested by surviving three years in the Terezin concentration camp. Rabbi Mehlman and Dr. Padawer do invaluable service by presenting Rabbi Baeck’s public comments just one year after his liberation.

The overwhelming majority of book reviews that find their way into the R/Q are of nonfiction works, which also reflects that the overwhelming majority of publications written by members of the Conference (a large percentage of the book reviews) are works that cover history, Jewish texts, and the rabbinic vocation. Fiction, of course, often entails research and scholarship as well, but is propelled by a narrative created in the author’s mind. Thus, the ideas underpinning a novel may be given greater space (a space not hemmed by “the facts”) to be explored. Our colleague Leigh Lerner has written a novel that plays with the notion of just how strict is strict Jewish traditionalism. Robert Orkand offers a thoughtful review.

In the years immediately following World War II, American cities began to hollow out as a result of a flight to homes with lawns in the suburbs. Jews were hardly immune to the trend, and many long-established downtown congregations began to relocate, essentially following their membership. In the 1990s, most cities began to enjoy a revival. One notable exception has been Detroit, whose tentative signs of rebirth are no more than a decade old. Elliot Gertel examines the greater Detroit Jewish community as reflected in two recent books in a review essay provocatively titled “Desertion, Deception, and Delusion: Synagogue Sociology in Detroit and in Other Cities?”

Moving On

A New Yorker cartoon depicted an executive office with a massive table, completely clean except for a framed photo and a pen set. One fellow speaks to another across the table: “The secret of good management is to delegate. As you can see, nothing ever crosses my desk.”

The task of the Editor of the Reform Jewish Quarterly is not so pure, but a great deal of the work is indeed carried on by others.
As this issue concludes my tenure at the helm of the Journal, I wish to extend my gratitude and appreciation to the many individuals who actually make the R/Q possible:

* To the dozens of contributors and guest editors who provided the essential material that filled the pages of the Journal.
* To the Editorial Boards of the past five years, who did the careful reading and evaluating of all the submissions. In every instance they saw to it that the contributions were better, more organized, and intellectually richer.
* To Dan Polish, *Maayanot*; Marc Dworkin and his predecessor, Adam Fisher, Poetry; and Evan Moffic and his predecessor, Lawrence Edwards, Book Reviews, who managed special areas of the Journal with expertise and sensitivity.
* To Michael Isralewitz, whose tireless copy editing fixed every grammatical miscue and rechecked virtually every citation.
* To Deborah Constantine and the staff of Publishing Synthesis for diligent work in typesetting.
* To Deborah Smilow, who handled printing and distribution on behalf of the CCAR.
* And most of all, to Hara Person, the Managing Editor, for constant support and advice, and whose efforts in ensuring the quality of the R/Q are incalculable.

I now take my place in a long line of erstwhile Editors. In my first “At the Gates” five years ago, I mentioned that I had known most of them and have been a consistent reader since becoming a member of the Conference. My aim then and throughout my tenure was to promote and maintain the objectives of the Journal: to publish material that reflected the profession and the vocation of the modern liberal rabbi; further, to adhere to Franz Rosenzweig’s dictum: “Nothing Jewish is alien to me.”

With great pleasure, I commend the next era of the R/Q to Elaine Glickman. She brings talent, experience, and bottomless enthusiasm to an honorable task.

Paul Golomb, Editor