Embedding Pay Equity into the Congregational Culture

Paul Kipnes

When Congregation Or Ami approached the contract of a new rabbinic position, our leadership made a series of significant decisions focused on pay equity to ensure enduring success of the person and position:

1. **Equity-Plus Compensation.** Our new rabbi would be paid at the top of the pay scale for newly ordained rabbis, with a full complement of benefits matching the best synagogue compensation packages. Prior to entering the process, we stretched ourselves, reasoning that if we wanted to attract the best rabbi, we needed to ensure that she was fully taken care of financially. If we wanted this rabbi to work her hardest for us, we needed to make sure that she felt well compensated and well respected.

2. **Paid Maternity Leave.** The leadership included three full months of paid maternity leave to ensure that our rabbi would not have to worry about choosing between her economic well-being and her desire to enjoy parenting. Additionally, we wanted to make a statement at the outset that we honor her both as our rabbi and as a parent. (Not incidentally, once her first pregnancy became public, leaders immediately acquired a new state of the art breast pump for her office.)

3. **Equity in Raises.** After the economic downturn, the leadership decided to standardize clergy raises at the same level as the “senior rabbi.” All agreed that the least senior member of the clergy (and the only woman) must receive the same

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increases as the most senior. Since her compensation started at the top, the package was more likely to remain equitable.

4. **Power Title.** While this rabbi would oversee the education portfolio, her contract purposely called her “Assistant Rabbi,” and not “Rabbi-Educator.” Around the congregation, she was to be known as “Rabbi,” because we believed that by removing hierarchical designations, we ensured maximum kavod for all rabbis and thus maximum earning potential. Additionally, we did not call her rabbi-educator because those positions (back then) tended to be paid on a lower scale than full assistant rabbis. Moreover, we did not want future negotiation committees to arbitrarily impede her salary reach based on this inexplicably less valued title.

These four decisions, made by our leadership with my guidance and support, help ensure pay equity and high clergy morale.

**Three Reasons That I as Senior Rabbi Easily Embraced These Decisions**

1. While pay equity is a social justice issue, it is also a matter of self-interest. If the congregation values compensating each of its clergy in the best possible manner, then all clergy will be content, including me personally and as head of staff. So, I advocate for even the newest clergy.

2. If the leadership were to embrace a pattern of low-balling one clergy member, what would keep them from doing the same with the other clergy?

3. Embedding an expectation that the newer clergy’s compensation will increase annually and meaningfully reinforces the notion that the compensation of the veterans will rise also.

Congregation Or Ami’s clergy compensation policies also trumpet another significant message: that we fairly and equitably compensate our clergy. While we hope that our current rabbi (now in her eighth year) will remain here for a long time, we realize that if she ever moves on, the next star clergy member will be even more attracted to Congregation Or Ami as a place of employment because she would know about the congregation’s reputation to treat our clergy fairly, pay them equitably, and hold them up with great kavod.