



■ **Fostering Excellence In Rabbinic Leadership**  
Since **1889**

## The Complexities of Rabbinic Life

CCAR Chief Executive, Steven A. Fox (Reprinted from CCAR Newsletter ©2009)

**O**n occasion, I am requested by rabbis and lay leaders to describe the work of rabbis and, at times, to supplement the way in which you describe your service in both congregational and community settings. With much gratitude for the many blessings you, our colleagues, bring to your communities and to the Jewish world, I share this with you.

The rabbi of a community is the religious, spiritual, educational, pastoral, and organizational leader in every facet of the Jewish community's life—responsible both for the health of the synagogue/organization itself and for the well-being of the individual members.

It would be impossible in the span of a few pages, or perhaps even in a monograph, to capture all that a rabbi's "job" entails—it is far more than a profession which can be simply quantified. The rabbi's capacity is at all times many things including without limitation:

- The professional with ultimate responsibility for the overall health and operations of the synagogue/organization, working with elected leadership in need of cultivation and training, collaborating with committees in search of guidance and wisdom, facilitating financial development which can often be done only by the rabbi as she/he is the one with the most impactful personal relationships, and supervising other staff members serving the community;
- A teacher of adults and children in every possible venue from adult education to religious school, to informal learning opportunities to community education, and the person responsible for the creation of many of these learning opportunities and the supervisor of others who teach;
- The one who creates, plans, leads, teaches and preaches at every type of religious service be it weekly Sabbath services, all Jewish holidays and every lifecycle moment for community members ranging from birth to death and everything in-between;
- The pastor, counselor, and spiritual guide who stands by her/his people at key moments in their lives be they moments of sickness or health, joy or sorrow, birth or death;
- The person who applies Jewish tradition to the challenges of daily life and the contemporary world in which we live

including topical issues such as coping with the current economic crisis to the Gulf oil spill;

- The "chief engagement officer" who takes the lead in reaching out to community members—leaders and others—to cultivate involvement in the community, to listen to a multitude of voices, to convene participants from all walks of life in conversation, and ultimately to teach others to undertake this sacred work for the community;
- The educator and facilitator of relationships to Jewish communities throughout North America and other parts of the world, and with some unique emphasis on building strong ties with the land of Israel including leading people to visit the Land;
- An advocate for the Jewish community in building bridges between the Jewish community and other religious communities and non-profits in the community;
- A model of Jewish life in personal practices, studies and behaviors. For this reason the rabbi is sometimes called the "symbolic exemplar".

Indeed, there are many more hours of "invisible work"—not seen directly by members of the community but manifest in the details listed above. For example, for the rabbi to teach or preach, the rabbi has to study, learn and prepare; to provide spiritual sustenance, the rabbi must engage in personal spiritual practices; for the rabbi to run an organization or fundraise, the rabbi must learn instrumental skills.

Often people ask me to quantify a rabbi's hours or work week. Well, in our tradition we believe that God created the world in six days and rested on the seventh. We only hope that the work of a rabbi can be done in six days—many a time the rabbi may not even have a weekly day of rest. Rabbis are on-call at all times to the needs and desires of congregant constituents, extended family, members of the community and others. In today's parlance we would say the rabbi works "24/7".

The work of a rabbi is demanding, high pressured and often without boundaries; it requires energy, focus, and perseverance. The rabbi uses all capacities—intellectual, physical, emotional and spiritual. The rabbi is indeed a gift to your community.

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