

Five Qualities of Successful Religious Leaders

By Tsvi Blanchard

What kind of religious leadership helps to build strong Jewish communities? Recently, I interviewed five successful Jewish religious leaders from different denominations. The interviews revealed important insights that are, I believe, of value to anyone wishing to exercise leadership in a Jewish community.

Although each interview contained much wisdom, I have limited myself to presenting five key insights that I culled from the interviews.

1. *Religious leaders honor personal integrity.* They teach others that one can negotiate the tensions that inevitably exist within a truly diverse community without compromising oneself and without asking others to compromise themselves. Good religious leaders model for the rest of us the preservation of one's integrity in a manner that does not require that one be judgmental of others who make different choices.
2. *Religious leaders are not afraid of imprecision.* They acknowledge and appreciate the ambiguities of Jewish communal life. Communities that are as internally diverse as our own cannot be led by leaders who insist upon uniformity, unanimity or the logical coherence of all communal positions and policies. Capable leaders will cultivate their capacity to tolerate ambiguity.
3. *Religious leaders are willing to take unpopular stands and to advocate on behalf of unpopular positions.* They accept that this means that they will sometimes feel as if they are out of sync – or unpopular -- with the communities they lead. They accept that as leaders they must sometimes bear the burden of being “the heavy,” of being the “bad guy” rather than the “good guy,” of leading by being out in front of the community even when the community is lagging behind. Their commitment to the community is a long- term commitment and this helps them to avoid the temptation of being overly concerned with short-term popularity.
4. *Religious leaders are committed to serious Torah study and scholarship – both for themselves and for their communities.* Leaders are learners and they help communities to educate themselves. They work to build community by offering people a vision of religious possibilities and then work together with them to help them to become the Jews they want to be. They never pander to Jews by presenting Judaism as a product that Jews can “buy” and completely customize to fit their own preferences. Leadership means helping communities to learn from Jewish traditions and teachings.

5. *Religious leaders lead through vital personal relationships.* Religious leaders know and care about the people in their community and share in their trials, their tragedies, their triumphs. Religious leaders do not lead from “on high,” but are down in the trenches with the members of their community, talking with them, arguing with them, celebrating with them and suffering with them. Because they are there with them, religious leaders are there for them as well. Strong communities depend on strong connections between members and between members and leaders. Religious leaders embrace these connections and are embraced by their communities in turn.

As part of my ongoing research into what makes for successful contemporary religious leadership, I invite readers to submit their own observations.