
The Rabbi Crisis

Jack Wertheimer

IN *Bowling Alone*, his famous study of American society in the age of atomization, Robert Putnam writes that “communities in which people worship together are arguably the single most important repository of social capital in America.” Who would disagree? Not only do the tens of thousands of churches, synagogues, and other houses of worship dotting the landscape from coast to coast form the bedrock of American religion, but faith-based communities foster a spirit of altruism and civic engagement that disproportionately benefits society at large. It is therefore a matter of high concern that precisely when the role of churches and synagogues as “repositories of social capital” seems more important than ever, these institutions should find themselves unable to attract sufficient numbers of clergy to lead and inspire them.

The Jewish case is illustrative. Within the Jewish community, synagogues have fought for decades to win a measure of parity, in terms of both resources and respect, with the so-called secular agencies—federations of philanthropy, community centers, and community-relations organizations. For their part, these agencies have slowly come to acknowledge the critical role played by synagogues in imparting meaning to organized Jewish life in general, and in recruiting volunteers and donors for all other spheres of Jewish activity. In the language of a recent

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report, “the synagogue is the most prevalent and arguably the most important institution in American Jewish life.” And yet this institution is now undergoing a crisis of personnel that threatens it as never before.¹

A book published last year, Stephen Fried’s *The New Rabbi*,² usefully chronicles the tribulations of one particular congregation, an affluent and well-established Conservative synagogue in the suburbs of Philadelphia that was seeking to replace its retiring rabbi after 30 years of service. After a national search that lasted over a year and failed to accomplish its goal, the synagogue settled on the rabbi’s assistant, a man just a few years out of rabbinical school. As the book indirectly attests, what had stymied the congregation was not only a dearth of candidates but also its own uncertainty about what it was looking for. Some congregants, Fried reports, were enamored of the departing rabbi’s “muscular and musical [voice], with an accent that sounded vaguely British.” One was intent on finding a candidate who could match the powerful sermon given by the departing rabbi on the Sabbath after JFK’s assassination in November 1963. (Or so this congregant remembered; as Fried notes, the rabbi had not actu-

¹ In what follows, I shall be addressing myself primarily to the situation of Conservative and Reform synagogues, to which almost four-fifths of affiliated Jews belong; the Orthodox movement still forms something of an exception to the rule, but it is hardly unaffected by the forces under discussion.

² Bantam, 358 pp., \$25.95.

ally joined the congregation until 1969.) For still others, the search was for someone who would make the synagogue "great" for their children, or would meet their own needs in middle age and beyond.

In short, the congregation wanted a rabbi who had it all, and would do it all. And this is thoroughly typical. Fried cites a placement executive at a rabbinic organization:

Congregations all want . . . someone who attends every meeting and is at his desk working until midnight, someone who is twenty-eight years old but has preached for thirty years, someone who has a burning desire to work with teenagers but spends all his time with senior citizens, basically someone who does *everything* well and will stay with the congregation forever.

IT WAS not ever thus. During the middle decades of the 20th century—a time, like ours, of shortages in personnel—the rabbi's position was more sharply defined, and, not coincidentally, its prestige was much higher. In those years, the era of the great national baby boom, demand exceeded supply because of the rapid proliferation of new institutions serving the religious community. The 1950's were marked by the founding of hundreds of new synagogues *every year*; it was estimated at the time that 3,000 additional rabbis and teachers were needed to educate the burgeoning ranks of Jewish children and minister to their parents.

Not only was demand for rabbis high, but so, relatively speaking, was their status. This had something to do with the particular stage of acculturation that had been reached by most American Jews, now deep into their trajectory from the inner cities to the suburbs but as yet not fully comfortable in Gentile society. Daniel Jeremy Silver, a prominent Reform rabbi who entered the profession during this period, put it as follows:

As a clergyman, the rabbi was able to walk into a world most Jews hoped eventually to enter but as yet could not. His command of English and his university education made him a useful guide into the mysteries of the host culture. The rabbi was accorded status because he conferred status as the interpreter of the old faith to the new world and as the interpreter of the new world to a new generation of immigrants and their children.

Many American rabbis used their pulpits as platforms for engagement with national or international causes, and, in so doing, some were catapulted to prominence well beyond their congregations.

All this began to change in the mid-1970's, when the American rabbinate entered upon a period of self-doubt. Part of the gloom was occasioned by changing demographic patterns. Once the tail end of the baby-boom generation had made its way through the Jewish school system, the era of synagogue expansion came to an abrupt end and membership plummeted. Some congregations merged or folded; most remained stagnant.

As boards wrestled with the ensuing budget deficits, they began to devote far more attention to administration. Rabbis were pressed to "double up" by becoming managers of congregational affairs, engaging in fund-raising, and actively recruiting new members. These demands, in turn, forced rabbis to limit their involvement in larger communal matters, not to mention study and reflection. As the historian Michael Meyer has observed of Reform rabbis in this period, most found their "aspirations for prophetic roles . . . giving way before the performance of priestly and pastoral functions for individual congregants."

Several other developments contributed to the erosion of the rabbis' status. One was the society-wide assault on authority, of which many rabbis were simultaneously victims and initiators.³ Catering to the newly modish disdain for formality, rabbis refashioned themselves, trading in their suits for leisure wear, abandoning the title "Rabbi Cohen" for "Rabbi Bob," and dropping formal sermons in favor of free-flowing discussion that might include an exchange of views with congregants. More critically still, many relinquished their roles as authorities in matters of Jewish religious law; to quote Daniel Jeremy Silver again, by the mid-1980's, rabbis were making "a virtue of being nonjudgmental."

A blow from a different direction came with the growth of Jewish studies in colleges and universities around the country. In a matter of decades, a whole new cadre of professionals had begun to compete with congregational rabbis as certified interpreters of Jewish texts and culture. In this competition, the title of professor inevitably outranked that of rabbi. To add to the discomfort, younger Jews joining synagogues did not share their parents' and grandparents' awe of the rabbi's learning. Many of them boasted advanced degrees of their own, and felt no need for anyone to mediate between themselves and "the mysteries" of Western culture.

By the late 70's and 80's, a palpable mood of demoralization had set in. In one survey of Reform rabbis, only a bare majority affirmed that, if they had

³ See "Rabbis and Their Discontents" by Howard Singer in COMMENTARY, May 1985.

it to do all over again, they would make the same choice of career.

AND TODAY? From one perspective—the demand side—conditions would seem to have improved. Ever since the late 1980's, large numbers of Jewish baby-boomers have themselves become parents and joined synagogues, and this in itself has increased the need for rabbis. Larger congregations with 1,200 or more members now employ three or four rabbis, each with responsibility for a different sub-population. Even medium-sized congregations with 500 to 800 members have an assistant rabbi.

In keeping with the rising demand, compensation has also reached impressive levels. Recently ordained rabbis with a few years of experience can expect wage-and-housing packages in the vicinity of \$100,000. More experienced rabbis earn anywhere from 50- to 100-percent more, and senior rabbis in prosperous synagogues command up to \$300,000.

Finally, transformations within the rabbinate itself have seemed to win the appreciation of many congregants. Most notably, all rabbinical schools except those within the orbit of Orthodoxy now ordain women; while female rabbis still have trouble landing senior positions in some large congregations, they have been successfully integrated into most sectors of the American rabbinate. (In a small number of modern-Orthodox congregations, women are also now employed in para-rabbinic roles.) More generally, as congregational rabbis have worked at becoming more approachable, their popularity with their congregants has tended to grow.

Despite these developments, however, the supply side looks very poor. The pulpit is not attracting significantly more new recruits than it did a few decades ago. Furthermore, ever growing numbers of rabbis are leaving congregational life, a process that has been abetted by the rapid expansion of other job opportunities in Jewish institutions. Ex-pulpit rabbis now serve as teachers and administrators in Jewish day schools or in Jewish community centers and summer camps, professors of Jewish studies, directors of Jewish campus programs, hospital chaplains, and officials of Jewish organizations and family foundations. Although many of these positions offer lower remuneration than the pulpit rabbinate, they hold other attractions, including more reasonable job requirements, fewer "bosses," and a clearer chain of command. Finally, anywhere from a quarter to a half of students ordained during the 1990's have eschewed congregational work altogether.⁴ It is no wonder that recruitment has become a major priority at all seminaries.

The predicament is hardly unique to American

Jews. The Catholic population of the United States has increased by nearly a third in recent decades, but the numbers of priests and nuns have declined by some 40 percent, while the number of seminarians has dropped well below replacement level; Protestant denominations, both mainline and evangelical, report only slightly less drastic shortages. In the meantime, those who do attend seminaries are older than their predecessors a few decades ago, and hence will serve fewer years before retirement. There has also been a decline in *quality*: in recent decades, women entering Master of Divinity programs have scored just barely above the mean on the Graduate Record Exam, while men have scored below the mean. And, just as in the Jewish experience, recent seminary graduates increasingly shun congregational work: in 1999, barely half of male seminarians and even fewer female matriculants expected to be working in congregational ministries five years down the road.

Driving this exodus from Christian congregational life are—according to various studies—such factors as the grossly unreasonable expectations placed upon ministers, low levels of denominational support, poor financial compensation, inadequate opportunities for continuing religious study and spiritual growth, and the overall feeling that the work of a minister is ineffective.

On a number of these scales, as it happens, rabbis and prospective rabbis still fare considerably better than their Christian counterparts—a fact that has not escaped the notice of those trying to rebuild the Christian ministry. Thus, a report by Auburn Seminary states with open envy that "Though their course of study is longer and their debt load higher, rabbinical students, as a group, have most of the characteristics of 'quality' that other [Christian] groups say they want." Nevertheless, the parallels between the Jewish and the Christian situations are ominous. Not only have most rabbinical seminaries come to rely increasingly on second-career students to fill their classes, and not only are declining percentages of rabbis seeking pulpit positions, but the findings of a recent study on "The Spiritual Development Needs of Mid-Career Clergy" are no less true of serving rabbis than of the Christian ministers who speak despairingly in its pages of their "loneliness, frustration with the ambiguities and stresses of the ministerial role, and a sense of never having enough time to attend to themselves, their families, and their own spiritual lives."

⁴ These figures do not include graduates of Orthodox rabbinical schools, which ordain more rabbis than the rest of the Jewish community combined. Since, however, study in these schools is regarded as academic rather than professional in nature, an even lower percentage of ordained Orthodox rabbis enter the pulpit rabbinate.

IF SECTORS of the rabbinate are demoralized, recent efforts to “improve” the American synagogue, by exacerbating the trends of 30 years ago, have made matters still worse.

Increasingly, congregational boards are drawing upon business models to rationalize the work of their institutions. As the vocabulary and expectations of corporate life come to dominate, they inevitably shape the treatment of synagogue employees as well. A few years ago, the president of a prominent Reform temple sent out an eighteen-page letter explaining why the rabbi had been let go: the letter referred to the synagogue’s loss of “market share,” its “spiraling deficits,” and the failure of its highest paid employee to maintain his “star attraction.” With the rabbi relegated to the role of manager, and success increasingly measured in quantitative terms, the deeper, religious purposes of the synagogue tend to fall by the wayside. In ignoring what rabbis themselves most value—serving as teachers of the religious tradition—and valuing what they least wish to do, the reward system virtually guarantees low rates of job satisfaction and retention.

But there is more to it than that. The decades-long erosion of authority, and of authority figures, in American culture at large has translated into an all-out assault upon “hierarchy” within the synagogue. As I noted earlier, the assault has been led partly from within. Thus, David Teutsch, the former president of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, warned his colleagues several years ago to avoid “maximiz[ing] the more dramatic, awe-inspiring aspect of their role . . . rather than the more consultative, personal aspect.”

Feminists have fueled this deprecation of “hierarchical” models of leadership, in some cases seeking to substitute a new and distinctly “female” approach to the rabbinate. “Women’s center of focus is on people rather than principles,” writes one female Reconstructionist rabbi approvingly; their goal is not “to move up, to be alone at the top, but rather . . . to connect with others, to be together at the center.” Others are less sure about this—“some of us [women] are nurturing, others are not,” as one puts it—but quite a few seem to agree that the very exercise of religious authority borders on the psychopathological. Here is the feminist critic Rachel Adler:

The congregation agrees to invest the rabbi with unqualified, unique power and knowledge. The rabbi agrees to impersonate the ideal parent of childhood fantasy, who nurtures selflessly and magically ensures safety and well-being. The pact offers the rabbi a

grandiose and inflated self-image. It gives the congregation an amulet to ward off personal and communal evil.

And so forth. The same anti-clerical spirit, informed by the same vastly inflated estimate of the rabbi’s “unqualified, unique power,” inhabits other sectors of the Jewish world as well. One journalist, for instance, and has asserted that today’s rabbis are at “war” with the Jews they serve and has issued a call to arms under the title, “Taking on Our Rabbis.” The past president of the World Jewish Congress, Edgar Bronfman, has urged any congregation dissatisfied with its rabbi’s teachings to rise up and “fire the rabbi and get one who will do its bidding.” One would hardly know from any of this that the days of the rabbi as orator and high priest are long gone, or that, when it comes to congregants’ religious practice, most rabbis are, if anything, accommodating to a fault.

The truth is rather different. Thanks to the campaign against “hierarchy,” rabbis have been stripped, or have stripped themselves, of their traditional prerogatives in the very area—religious principle—where those prerogatives matter most. Within many congregations, rabbis are now asked to “negotiate” over ritual matters with their own lay ritual committees, and are often overruled. It is an open secret that Reform rabbis interviewed for pulpit positions are routinely asked about their willingness to officiate at interfaith wedding ceremonies, and that an interview is likely to end abruptly should they state their opposition. The analogous situation for Conservative pulpit rabbis occurs when they are asked to officiate at celebrations—a bar or bat mitzvah or wedding—where food will be served that does not conform to Jewish dietary laws. Often it comes down to a choice between toeing the line, by compromising their convictions, and losing their job.

WHAT, THEN, is a rabbi to do? Within the profession, some have embraced or otherwise attempted to accommodate the current mood by rethinking the entire rabbinic enterprise. As one rabbi has written, a little ecstatically:

My job is not to teach Torah. I leave that to the college professor and the Orthodox rabbi. It is my job to break heads, to smash idols, to tear down Isms that we might glimpse what Is. My job is to point the Way—the Way toward Wonder, toward Meaning, toward Meeting, toward Love. I look and share and struggle alongside those who take up the Way with me.

One might call this the rabbi as Eastern guru—less a leader in possession of a body of knowledge to be trans-

mitted to a community of the faithful than a personal trainer in the private art of spiritual contemplation.

If that is one model, a second is the rabbi as a facilitator of change. According to this view, the radically "new era" in which American Jews find themselves requires "a pluralist and democratic environment of experimentation." Rather than trying to shape this process of experimentation, let alone bring it into conformity with traditional understandings, rabbis need to be its shepherds.

There are variations on these two notions, but underlying all of them is the same emphasis on the personal. The new Judaism revolves around the lives of individuals and families rather than around the concerns of a people: its holy days, its liturgy, its sacred texts, its collective memories. In this new Judaism, the role of the rabbi is to be a "care-giver," a hand-holder, a counselor. The relevant question becomes not how much the rabbi knows about Judaism and how effectively he instills it but how the rabbi treated me and my family at our "life-cycle" event, whether the rabbi's sermons during the High Holy Days "spoke" to me, and whether, at our last encounter, the rabbi uttered the words I needed to hear. It is a telling symptom of this privatized form of Judaism that bar-mitzvah and bat-mitzvah "services" are increasingly being held in catering halls or, if in the synagogue, at a time when only the "guests" are present, thus divorcing these occasions still further from any public or communal context.

Quite apart from the issue of what this development means for the future of Jewish religious life, one might plausibly ask whether it is working—either for congregants or for rabbis. The evidence, so far largely anecdotal, is decidedly mixed. For all the talk of "empowerment," there is clearly much dissatisfaction being expressed these days with the failure of rabbis to exercise authority. "Why haven't the rabbis stopped this?" is the all too typical complaint voiced by one father who took to a newspaper's op-ed page to express his outrage at the widespread tendency to overspend lavishly on bar-mitzvahs. His answer: for fear of offending potential donors and influential congregants, too many rabbis "leave the values issues, which is [*sic*] their domain, solely up to the families." Variants of this complaint can be heard at parent-teacher meetings in schools of every kind across the United States these days, and the syndrome they reveal is becoming a staple of social-science literature; it is hardly a surprise that they should have made their way into the world of the synagogue as well.

As for most rabbis, if the dismal recruitment and retention figures do not speak for themselves, the recent experience of the Reconstructionist movement may

suggest the limits of the new spirit of democracy and egalitarianism even for its most enthusiastic proponents. Over the past few decades, the rabbis of this small but influential movement, situated on the left end of the ideological and religious spectrum, have prided themselves on their embrace of democratic norms in synagogue life. The regnant idea was of a lay-rabbinic partnership in which the rabbi would have but a single vote, like everybody else, serving the congregation as a facilitator but not as an authority or, heaven forbid, a decision-maker. Last year, however, a study commission expressed second thoughts. "When democracy is incorrectly invoked," its report concluded, "it is often experienced as disempowering and delegitimizing of [rabbinic] leadership, expertise, learning, and experience." Noting that this has "been the source of much misery to the rabbi," the executive director of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association predicted that "authority is going to flow back to rabbis."

IT COULD happen, although it is unlikely to happen very soon. If they were truly to reassert their authoritative role, rabbis would have to adopt a much more proactive posture. Rejecting defeatist advice from among their own colleagues, they would need to gird themselves to combat the present solipsistic moment in American Judaism, reeducating their congregants to think beyond their immediate personal needs, their inchoate yearnings for "spirituality," and their consumerist notion of religious life. They would need to insist on synagogue rituals focused on communal rather than privatized concerns, and they would need to reorient the synagogue itself as an institution focused on the transcendent needs of the Jewish people. Above all, they would need to take their own role seriously, accepting the burden and the challenge of their calling as individuals who speak with authority not only for themselves but for the Jewish tradition, the Jewish people, and God.

The rewards of such an initiative would be very great. By spearheading it, rabbis would not only help to reverse some of the most debilitating recent trends within the Jewish community—trends that are sapping *every* institution of adequate support and strong leadership—but, along with clergy of other faiths, aid in reasserting the power of communities of faith to reclaim American public life in general from the deprivations chronicled in *Bowling Alone* and evident all around us. Awakening an answering echo among their lay leaders and many of their congregants, they might even, in time, find their own ranks swelling. To repeat: it cannot happen overnight, but, despite the formidable obstacles, it could happen; there is everything to be gained if it does.