

Whither the Jewish Community? Implications for Rabbinic Education

David A. Teutsch

Like the rest of the industrialized world, the American Jewish community is evolving at an ever-increasing pace. One aspect of that evolution is a steadily growing gap between the traditional Orthodox and the rest of the Jewish community. The analysis below does not cover the sociology or institutions of the traditional Orthodox, which are a world unto themselves.¹

The turbulence affecting the Jewish community has resulted in a need for rabbis to be much more entrepreneurial in their approaches to existing institutions and programs, as well as more entrepreneurial in the creation of new organizations and paradigms. The demand for high-quality programs and marketing, coupled with increased professionalization, constantly increases the demand for rabbis to have significant management abilities. Diversification of rabbinic roles, increasing specialization, and more certifications have all made the environment for training rabbis more complex. As Jewish ethnicity, communal solidarity, and average adult Jewish literacy lessen, the importance of spiritual and pastoral work increases for rabbis, balanced by obligations to pursue social justice and defend against anti-Semitism. To understand the present and future rabbinate in contemporary America, it must be put into historical context.

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MAKING IT IN AMERICA

There have been several waves of Jewish migration to America. By far the largest of these occurred between 1880 and 1920, when East European Jews were the overwhelming majority of immigrants. In the period that followed, they worked hard at fitting into America, mastering English, finding work, and pushing their children to succeed in school and master a profession. They sent their children to public schools and universities, and the next generation left their ethnic neighborhoods and headed for the suburbs. The assimilation process was aided by the large number of Jews who served in the U.S. Army during World War II. While there has been subsequent immigration, most recently from Russia and Israel, most American Jews are primarily the fourth to sixth generation in the United States. They have by now fully assimilated. In the course of that process, they have lost much of the Jewish practice and knowledge that was in the past informally transmitted through family and friends. For the current generation of Jews who want to be involved in Jewish living, assimilation to America has been so successful that the challenge now is how to acculturate them to Judaism. This challenge is not the one that American Jewish institutions such as seminaries, which developed to serve an earlier generation, were designed to meet.

Of all ethnic and religious groups in the United States, Jews are the most highly educated; the highest percentage of them goes to college, and the highest percentage pursues advanced degrees. Universities have long been bastions of secularization in the United States. While campuses with significant Jewish populations have Hillels (centers for Jewish life funded by the Jewish community), only a modest percentage of Jews on most campuses participate in them. An even lower number participate at Habad houses, which are run by rabbi/outreach workers who are Lubavitcher Hasidim. The advanced secular educations found in much of the Jewish community have contributed to increased professional opportunities. The Jewish community has one of the highest average per capita incomes in the United States.² This should not be surprising since there is a strong correlation between education and income. Increased education and career opportunities have resulted in increased geographic mobility. Most Jews no longer live in tight-knit Jewish neighborhoods, a trend that has steadily gained momentum since the move toward suburbs began shortly after World War II. Jews are both a religious and ethnic group. The gradual disappearance of

highly concentrated Jewish neighborhoods (with the exception of Orthodox ones) has accelerated the assimilatory trend.

One other aspect of affluence in the Jewish community is that expectations of the sophistication of congregations and other Jewish organizations have risen. No more smudgy synagogue bulletins reproduced on mimeograph machines. No more worn-out cushions on synagogue pews. Expectations of quality in everything from websites to program details have driven up the cost of running all these institutions.

For most of Jewish history, it was taken for granted that Jews would marry other Jews. This reflected not only religious convictions but intra-Jewish social pressure and the barriers between Jews and non-Jews that existed in most times and places. With the gradual disappearance of both social pressure and external barriers, intermarriage in the United States has reached the highest level in recorded history. The current intermarriage rate outside of Orthodoxy is about 70 percent. This change has sped up the decline of ethnicity in the Jewish community. That trend is reinforced by a steady flow of conversions into and out of Judaism. In addition to formal conversions, many people drift into Jewish communities, and yet more drift out, so that less than half of Jewish households are formally affiliated with a synagogue. This statistic, however, should be viewed against a background in which it is possible to have a strong Jewish identity expressed through other activities and organizational structures in the Jewish community besides the synagogue.

THE POWER OF MARKETING AND MASS COMMUNICATION

Prior to the advent of modernity, Jews lived in self-governing communities (*kehilot*) that were sources of income for the Christian or Muslim rulers, who therefore provided protection for each *kehila*. Within each *kehila*, taxes were collected, and the needs of the Jewish community were provided for through use of the funds collected; social pressure dictated that Jews act as responsible citizens within their Jewish communities. With the coming of modernity, Jews became secular citizens, and the *kehilot* ceased to have governing authority, but Jews brought their sense of community obligation with them when they came to America. While it carried over somewhat to the boom in building suburban synagogues in the mid-twentieth century, Jewish life was soon affected by one of the great shifts in American history—

the emergence of marketing as a discipline that, coupled with mass media, moved Americans from an emphasis on citizen obligation to seeing themselves as consumers, with every person following their own path. For Jews, whose inherited sense of themselves came in no small measure from *kehila* citizenship, the prevalence of consumer ideology meant that Jews became consumers of Jewish programs rather than citizens of Jewish community. Congregations and Jewish community centers needed to market programs, and many Jews made decisions about affiliation based on the consumer calculus of whether the personal benefit was worth the cost. Historically, Jewish life had taken place in the context of community, which requires people to function as citizens. The shift to 'Jew as consumer' resulted in fundamental redesigns of Jewish programs and institutions.

The percentage of American Jews who are members of congregations, however, continues to fall. One of the consequences of that shift is that more Jews are seeking out individual rabbinic entrepreneurs to perform life cycle events, and there is more demand for hospital and hospice chaplains as fewer Jews receive pastoral services from congregational rabbis. One of the major questions facing new efforts at community organizing is whether they can stimulate the desire for community connection and the concomitant revival of Jewish citizenship, which would manifest in increased volunteerism and financial support.

The internet and the worldwide web are powerful vehicles of mass communication. Computers and cell phones have created interpersonal networks that are instantaneous and nonhierarchical. Large congregations and other organizations have relatively slow decision-making processes and long lead times for designing and executing programs. The generations that have grown up with cellphones and the internet resist hierarchy and planning far in advance. They can network quickly, making social arrangements on short notice and with little interpersonal constraint. Congregations and organizations that wish to interact with these tech-savvy Jews must become more nimble, more flexible about time frames, and more willing for programs and priorities to be shaped by their participants. Rabbis and other professional staff members operating in this environment need to be far more entrepreneurial and flexible than were their predecessors.

JEW OF MANY HUES AND ORIENTATIONS

One of the consequences of adoption, intermarriage, and conversion is that the American Jewish community, which was once overwhelmingly white, today is much more diverse. It includes Hispanics, African Americans, East Asians, and South Asians. This diversity is expanded further by diversity in sexual orientation and gender identity. This diversity opens new opportunities and brings new challenges. The American Jewish community is in the midst of adjusting to these large demographic changes while also dealing with a low birthrate, which has fallen below zero population growth. Jews are marrying and having children later in their lives. The increasing percentage of retirees and elders has also changed the makeup of the Jewish community. All these changes require ideological and programmatic adjustments. Much effort has gone into these adjustments, but there is much more to do, such as providing better programming for retirees, suitable support for elders, and expanded educational efforts to encourage the embracing of diversity. Rabbis need training to support these changes.

THE CHALLENGE OF EDUCATION

In an earlier time, when Jewish children were acculturated to Jewish practice by family and community, the task of Hebrew school was to provide formal learning in Hebrew, Jewish texts, and history, usually in four to eight hours per week. That acculturation has mostly ceased working because of the decreasing intensity of community, the shift for most from extended family to nuclear family, and the drop in religious observance and in retention of Jewish customs. In short, assimilation to America has meant that young Jews lack intensive Jewish experience in their homes. Without that experience, the old Hebrew school curriculum simply does not work. There have been three fundamental responses to this:

1. Jewish day school education has become more common, but it is so expensive and intensive that only a small minority of families opt for it.
2. Many families choose not to provide a Jewish education for their children because it is seen as unpleasant and/or ineffective.
3. Religious schools are redesigning their curricula to increase experiential education, but at its best such an education cannot replace substantial familial and communal Jewish experience. Because of this situation, Jewish

summer camp has become the most important acculturating experience for children and teens.

College and adult learning have become highly important for Jewish literacy and engagement. This has increased the role of Jewish studies and Hillel offerings on college campuses and of adult study courses and lectures in congregational, Jewish community center, and other communal settings, as well as expanded retreat offerings and other short-term intensives. Rabbis teach and oversee a high percentage of these offerings. Together, they play a significant role in Jewish acculturation for adults, which is critical to a vital Jewish future. Most knowledgeable non-Orthodox adults learn most of what they know about Judaism as adults. This expansion of adult Jewish learning by spiritual seekers requires rabbis to shift away from a more academic style to one more suited to these seekers.

THE ROLE OF ZIONISM

After the Holocaust, the birth of the State of Israel was critical to rebuilding the shattered self-confidence of the Jewish community. The startling success of the fledgling state against all odds was inspiring, and it stimulated a great deal of commitment in the American Jewish community. Some have posited that this is related to the Jungian archetype of death and rebirth. Regardless, the victory of the little kibbutznik, greatly outnumbered and surrounded by enemies, made a powerful impression on American Jews. That continued through the 1973 Yom Kippur War. More recently, the growing military and technological power of Israel and its role as an occupier have shifted how many American Jews see Israel. It now plays a much smaller role in Jewish identity, particularly among younger Jews. Many American Jews struggle with some policy decisions of the Israeli government even as the vast majority of American Jews continue to share a commitment to the survival of the State of Israel as a democratic Jewish country.

Although a significant part of Jewish identity was interwoven with Zionism, understood as the movement for the thriving of the Jewish people, that is no longer the case in many congregations, where discussions about Israel can be a third rail due to the deep divisions within the Jewish community regarding Israeli policy and the policy decisions regarding Israel made by the American government. This is an increasingly challenging aspect of

American Jewish life. It shows no sign of resolution, and Jewish communal leaders must continue to grapple with the moral and political issues that it raises.

SOCIAL JUSTICE

Jews have long been concerned with the widow, orphan, stranger, and all others who might be oppressed. That grows out of a self-understanding that dates to the formative myth that the Israelites were enslaved in Egypt. In America, which has served as a safe haven for Jews, Jews have overwhelmingly identified as liberals concerned for the welfare of immigrants; ethnic, religious, and racial minorities; and human rights in all its forms. Because Jews have had so much success in America, they have been able to support liberal causes financially and as volunteers and often as professionals as well. In recent years, a startling number of new social justice organizations has emerged in the Jewish community, and some long-standing ones have become newly invigorated. Some of the professional leaders and many volunteers in this segment of Jewish communal activity are rabbis, who need both community-organizing and administrative skills.

One major aspect of social justice work is the creation and maintenance of interreligious coalitions. Work on a woman's right to choose brings together liberal Protestants, Jews, and civil liberties groups. Gun control and immigration rights, for example, bring in Catholics as well. Fighting discrimination brings in Muslims and African American ministers. Building and maintaining coalitions has become an increasingly important part of rabbinic work.

ANTI-SEMITISM AND INTERSECTIONALISM

For much of American history, Jews were viewed as nonwhite. In part because of greater contact between Jewish and non-Jewish soldiers during World War II, Jews gradually came to be seen as white. In the latter part of the twentieth century, anti-Semitism reached a historic low. In recent years, anti-Semitism in the United States and elsewhere has increased at an alarming rate. Some of it comes from white, patriarchal ultranationalists on the right. These extremists have been responsible for the overwhelming majority of the violence against the American Jewish community, including fatal

shootings and bombings. The ultranationalist Right asserts that Jews are part of the brown conspiracy to take over America.

But anti-Semitism in America is not limited to the Right. The emergent theory and political strategy of intersectionality on the Left frequently identifies all Jews with Zionism and Zionism with settler colonialism, casting Jews as villains in a white plot against the oppressed people of the world. Of course, there is room for serious criticism of Israeli governmental policy and concern for the plight of Palestinians. But when that criticism and concern spill over into identifying all Jews as the enemy or repeating anti-Semitic calumnies, it moves from legitimate criticism to evil thinking that can lead to heinous actions.

At this moment in history, Jewish communal leaders have a heavy set of burdens. They must provide pastoral comfort to their communities. They need to increase the security of Jewish institutions. They need to continue to band together with minority communities to resist the white triumphalism on the Right. And they need to increase dialogue with those on the Left in an effort to continue a progressive alliance for the betterment of America.

TRENDS IN RABBINIC EMPLOYMENT

For most of American Jewish history, a significant number of the rabbis in the United States were Europeans ordained before they came to America. That population is almost entirely gone. While many small-town congregations have closed, the need for rabbis has remained largely stable, with most serving congregations but others in education, academia, Jewish organizations, and hospital, hospice, military, and prison chaplaincy. As the subfields have professionalized, the demand for rabbis with specialized training has gradually increased. And congregational rabbis, the last of the generalists, are expected to have more advanced skills than ever before.

One of the major changes in rabbinic employment stems from a proliferation of Jewish seminaries. For much of the twentieth century, most rabbis were trained by movement seminaries—Yeshiva University (Orthodox), Jewish Theological Seminary (Conservative), Reconstructionist Rabbinical College (Reconstructionist), and Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion (Reform)—and placed in movement congregations. Today there are several major seminaries that are not directly movement-affiliated, including Hebrew College, Academy for Jewish Religion, Hadar, Yeshivat Maha-

rat, and Yeshivat Chovevei Torah. This has disrupted placement systems and increased the number of rabbis looking for positions outside movement congregational networks. Despite the larger number of seminaries, the total number of rabbis being trained in the United States has not risen in the last 20 years, meaning that the number of students in each school, on average, has declined, driving up the cost of training each rabbi. There is no unified system for rabbinic placement.

Another trend in rabbinic employment lies in the increased desire among rabbis for a rabbinate that is not 24/7. While this has partly been dealt with by giving congregational rabbis more time off, many younger rabbis wish to avoid the wear-and-tear of the congregational rabbinate, which has increased the number of rabbis seeking positions in chaplaincy.

THE EDUCATION OF RABBIS

Rabbinic training in the United States, usually about five years of graduate-level education, has traditionally focused on the mastery of biblical, rabbinic, and modern texts as well as theology and history. That focus has gradually broadened to include courses in homiletics, public speaking, pastoral counseling, education, and, more recently, administration. This shift has been a response to the growing demand for the professionalization of the rabbinate and accounts for up to 20 percent of coursework. As important as these practical skills are, they have become insufficient. As the rate of political, economic, social, and techno-scientific change continues to accelerate, rabbis are called upon to be highly entrepreneurial. Some rabbis will use this skill set to shape careers outside institutions or to build new kinds of congregations and organizations. Others will use it to engage in ongoing organizational redesign. New courses in entrepreneurship are becoming common in rabbinical schools.

Rabbis are often the chief professional officers of large congregations and other institutions. As these organizations have become increasingly professionalized, rabbis need additional training in management, finance, fundraising, community relations, community organizing, marketing, and fundraising. Some seminaries have expanded their coursework in these areas, but providing a sufficient level of training in all these practical areas is difficult without expanding the length of time spent in rabbinical seminary.

More seminaries are now requiring at least one unit in clinical pastoral education (CPE) as well.

Even if there were adequate time to achieve mastery over such a broad curriculum, that would not necessarily provide the levels of hands-on skills now expected of many rabbis. This issue has led to increasingly sophisticated supervision of internships and other work experiences. Work has become increasingly important for another reason as well. The cost of a rabbinic education, like that of most advanced degrees, has risen rapidly, and many students reach ordination with considerable student debt. Paid internships help students to slow the rise in their debt.

Because hands-on training has come to be seen as more important not only through the example of CPE but also through the power of rabbinic internships and mentorship, this aspect of training is receiving increasing attention. In the new curriculum of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, for example, such internships will play a central role in the last three years of study.

In the current world, with its high rate of change, providing moral leadership is central to rabbinic leadership. Studying codes of professional rabbinic ethics plays a part in training rabbis to be moral exemplars. However, rabbis are expected to provide moral guidance on such topics as bioethics, sexuality, the behavior of elected officials, societal obligations, and so on. Coursework in this area is an essential part of rabbinic training, but course offerings on ethics are not consistently offered, and they are not required often enough.

Even if rabbis achieve a reasonably high level of understanding of Jewish ethics, that understanding does not guarantee that they will lead sufficiently ethical lives. It is difficult to inculcate virtue and even more difficult to ascertain the strength of moral character of an individual. Perhaps more challenging is that while certain rabbinic virtues remain constant over time—for example, empathy, authenticity, courage, wisdom, and humility—others change over time. Entrepreneurship requires the willingness to take risks and the capacity to endure failure. Professional management requires the patience to deal with hierarchy and sometimes bureaucracy. The not-for-profit environment necessitates a capacity for compromise and the endurance for prolonged processes. Some of these virtues can be developed through supervised work experiences.

One of the challenges facing rabbinic seminaries is that students now come from very different backgrounds. Some have had minimal earlier Jewish education, and often students' previous experiences of Judaism are uneven. Some are converts to Judaism as well. Thus, the task facing seminaries is not only that of providing a classical rabbinic education and a professional skill set. At its best, the seminary also provides an immersion in Jewish living, and it models Jewish community, ritual, and interpersonal engagement.

One of the things many people seek in religious leaders is charisma. While there is no clear agreement about what precisely rabbinic charisma is, it does not seem to be something that can be taught. What can be taught are the knowledge and skills that are keys to effective leadership. When that knowledge and skill are wedded to moral commitment and spiritual depth, rabbis can serve ably.

In the volatile world that rabbinic seminaries inhabit, they can be expected to continue to evolve along with the rest of the Jewish community. While some predict a decrease in the demand for rabbis, I believe that continued interest in spirituality, community, social justice, and finding one's roots will sustain the demand for rabbis even as their roles undergo unpredictable change.

NOTES

- 1 The traditional Orthodox community includes both Hasidim and those non-Hasidic Orthodox Jews for whom Orthodox *yeshivot* (schools for children and adults devoted to traditional study of biblical and rabbinic texts) are central to their lives. Some Jews call this segment the ultra-Orthodox, a label to which the traditional Orthodox object; they refer to themselves as fervent Orthodox, but this is a misleading term since they do not have a monopoly on fervency. The traditional Orthodox community represents significantly less than one-tenth of the total Jewish community, and its profile is very different from the rest. Its average age is far younger, its birth rate is far higher, its rate of poverty is high, and its average level of secular education is far lower.
- 2 Of course, not all Jews are wealthy. Immigrants, the elderly, the traditional Orthodox, and those with health constraints constitute the largest pockets of Jewish poverty.