

On Being a Rabbi at the Margins

BY REBECCA T. ALPERT

Most rabbis are known by some defining characteristic. For some, it's as simple as geography, as in the Lubavitcher Rebbe. Others come to be known by some dimension of their personality, not unlike the seven dwarfs—the grumpy rabbi, etc. For some, it's a physical characteristic—the large rabbi, the short rabbi. Still for others, it's an identity they have—women rabbis, lesbian rabbis, black rabbis come under this rubric. For many, their defining characteristic is their passion for something—the dancing rabbi, the meditation rabbi, the social justice rabbi. At this time in my life, my rabbinate is characterized not so much by who or what I am, but by where I am: I see myself, and I think others see me as well, as a rabbi at the margins. What I want to suggest in this article is that the margin is a fine place from which to be a part of, as well as apart from, the Jewish people.

Looking at the World from Different Perspectives

I have been aware for a long time of the significance of perspective. When I was in high school, reading the works of Martin Buber completely changed my life. Buber's psychological recasting of Ḥasidic tales is crucial to my understanding of how important perspective is, and of how each of us sees the world from a different one. Buber tells the story of the Ḥasid who searches around the world for buried treasure, only to discover it in his own home. The story can be mined for many lessons, but Buber calls it "The Place Where One Stands." This was my first realization of how an individual's perspective determines her or his worldview. Things look different depending on where you are.

This insight came to me in a more complex way in my adulthood through the teachings of feminism. Feminists focus on the politics of per-

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spective. Where you stand determines both how you see things and how you are seen by others. Women, the feminists suggest, have a particular “standpoint.” Kept outside the circles of patriarchal power, women have a different view of the world, a view from the margins. This view gives them a particular way of seeing reality, but the reality they see is often ignored. Women of color, lesbians, Jewish and Muslim women, women with disabilities, and working class women nuanced the argument suggesting that there were multiple ways in which people stood at the margins, and therefore multiple vantage points from which to view the world, and multiple ways in which their insights were not taken seriously by those at the center. One of the goals of the feminist and other liberation movements of the seventies and eighties was to shift the balance so that marginal perspectives would at least receive public attention, and more significantly, the center itself would change and incorporate their vision as well.

In many ways, those liberation movements succeeded. Women’s viewpoints are now taken seriously, and women’s voices have been included at the centers of power. This has certainly proven true in the Jewish community. Although the situation is far from perfect (women really don’t hold significant positions of power in Jewish circles, issues like domestic violence and reproductive freedom are not at the top of the Jewish agenda), it certainly can no longer be said that women hold the same marginal place in Jewish life that they did two de-

acades ago when I entered the rabbinate. Why, then, do I find myself at the margins today?

The World from the Center

In truth, I did not always see myself as a rabbi on the margins. My perspective was that of Buber’s Ḥasid after his return from the journey: I stood at the center of my world. Raised in Brooklyn, N.Y. I grew up with the view that Jews were everywhere. I never imagined that we comprised under three percent of the population of the United States—Jewish institutions, people, and products were wherever I looked. Public schools closed on Sukkot and Simḥat Torah. Local politicians were Jews, and so was Sandy Koufax of my beloved Brooklyn Dodgers. It was not until I went to college that I discovered people who had never met a Jew or who harbored any sort of anti-Semitic feelings. I came from a perspective where Jewish life was clearly at the center. So it made sense to me that, when I decided to enter the rabbinate, my perspective would be that of the center.

Of course, there was much evidence to the contrary in my life. I went to graduate school at the same time as I was attending rabbinical school, and noticed for the first time how rarely Jewish topics came up in the course of secular study. I was among the first six women in Jewish history to attend rabbinical school, and certainly noticed that I was not in the majority in any of my classes, which after having attended a woman’s college was a bit of a shock. And

I chose to attend the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College (RRC), which was small and new and was considered marginal by the majority of the Jewish community. Yet I never defined myself as marginal in those days. If anything, I viewed those in the Jewish community who opposed the Reconstructionist movement or women rabbis as peripheral to the future of the Jewish people as I understood it. I was convinced that Jewish feminists would succeed in making women's issues and perspectives part of the center of Jewish life. And I was sure that Jewish history would also become less marginal to the broader educational framework in American schools.

After I graduated from rabbinical school and completed my doctorate, I became the Dean of Students and taught at RRC. During those years, I also functioned as a spokesperson to new congregations, wrote articles, and co-authored a book about Reconstructionism. I saw myself as central to this movement that nourished me. I lived at the center of a self-contained universe, feeling very much part of an important enterprise in Jewish life. That was the place where I stood.

Moving Towards the Margins

What changed all that was coming to terms with the fact that I had been living with a lie. As I saw it, my status at the center of Reconstructionist Jewish life was predicated on my being married to a man. It is certainly the case that had I announced in my 1971 application to rabbinical school that I was more attracted sexually to women than to men, I would not have been

accepted. In fact, I was the one dissenting voice in the faculty decision not to admit an openly gay man to rabbinical school in 1979. And in 1984, I was also a part of the courageous decision by the rabbinical school faculty to begin admitting openly gay students. At that point, my world began to unravel. I saw others identifying as gay and lesbian Jews, forming what were then secret organizations, finding ways to be public. And I knew I was one of them. Leaving my marriage and beginning the process of coming out, of identifying as a lesbian, were crucial to my sense of self and my well being. But this process changed my perception of where I stood in the Jewish world, and even in the world of Reconstructionism.

Because I was in such a visible and important role, the College's leadership at the time was concerned that my coming out could have made the movement vulnerable to attack. There was already an openly gay faculty member. RRC was the only place openly gay and lesbian students could apply at that time. (Although HUC, the Reform rabbinical school, had many closeted gay and lesbian students and would change their policy within a few years.) While today being gay or lesbian would be considered unremarkable either as a student, staff, or faculty member at RRC, in the early years of the open admissions policy the implications for inclusivity had not been fully worked out. The senior leadership at that time at RRC made it clear that I could not come out publicly either in writing or to the

Reconstructionist community. It became increasingly obvious that I could no longer serve effectively as the Dean of Students. It was time for me to move from the center and to reinvent myself as a rabbi on the margins.

It is reasonable to wonder why if being a Jew, a woman, and a Reconstructionist did not deter me from seeing my rabbinic role as central, why being a lesbian was different. Some of it was in my upbringing as a liberal Jew in Brooklyn in the fifties and sixties, and the feminist revolution in the seventies that made being a Reconstructionist rabbi a valued role for a woman. Related to that was my own homophobia—being openly gay might be courageous, it might be important for me psychologically and morally, but it would diminish my ability to serve. I did not want my defining characteristic to be “lesbian,” which at the time was inevitable. I worked too hard as a feminist, a Reconstructionist, and as a progressive committed to social justice to be perceived in that way. But on the more positive side, I discovered that the view from the margins suited me fine. I found a place from which to say things I never could have said as a spokesperson for the center. And I had a chance to work with people who wanted to connect to being Jewish, but who also saw themselves as marginal to the Jewish community.

Working As a Rabbi on the Margins

After I left my position at RRC, I chose not to look for work in the Jew-

ish community. In the mid eighties there was no place as welcoming as the Reconstructionist movement. I would have been typecast there, but elsewhere it could only have been worse. But I welcomed the opportunity to try out a new perspective. I redefined my rabbinate as moving from center to margin and not working professionally in the Jewish community. In this move, I experienced a strong sense of freedom from the constraints of working in the Jewish world. But I never saw myself as an outsider, only as someone who had changed her perspective.

Let me explain the difference. I would compare Jewish life to a page of Talmud. In the center, we find the text of *mishnah* and *gemara*. But in the margins we find the commentary of later thinkers and scholars. The commentary explains the text, and in the process gives new perspective to the meaning. It stands apart from the text, but it is a part of what is going on there, contributing to the overall meaning. That is how I see my role as a marginal rabbi. I am no longer in the center, but I am still on the page, and can provide a valuable perspective from which to view what is going on.

Over the next years I defined my new role. I helped to found a congregation that, although comprised of mostly heterosexuals, was truly welcoming to gay men and lesbians. I began to write about Jewish lesbian issues: dealing with difficult biblical texts, creating ceremonies for coming out, thinking through gay marriage and inventing gay awareness week. My freedom as a lesbian also made me

free in other ways. I felt more courage to criticize Israeli policies and to work for peace with the Palestinians. I began to get involved in causes that were not of great concern to the Jewish community, but in which it mattered to other religious leaders to have a Jewish presence. I worked with interfaith groups supporting an end to the conflicts in Central America and democracy in Haiti; I spoke out publicly against the death penalty, and in favor of abortion rights. I did all of this as a rabbi. There is no doubt in my mind that I was invited to speak at rallies, visit elected officials, and publish articles as much because of my status as a rabbi as on my personal abilities.

Working with the “Unaffiliated”

I also began to serve a population that the organized Jewish community likes to call “the unaffiliated.” These are people who may identify strongly as Jews, contribute to Jewish causes, observe at least some Jewish holidays, but do not belong officially to the Jewish community by virtue of synagogue membership. This group accounts for about half of the Jews in the United States today.

While their needs for a rabbi are sporadic, like other Jews they want a rabbi to participate in their life-cycle events: weddings, commitment ceremonies, baby namings, funerals, and occasional beney mitzvah ceremonies, conversions, and divorces. I never advertised my services to this popula-

tion—there are unscrupulous rabbis who make nice livings doing that sort of thing—but they find me nonetheless. I hear from them through friends, through work, through networks of gay and lesbian Jews. They come to me because they are not religious or spiritual, or they are not interested in communal involvement and don’t want to join synagogues or *havurot*. They come because they are gay, or one of them is not Jewish, or they have disabilities or, for whatever reason, they think that they will not be welcome in the organized Jewish community. They are comfortable with me because I stand on the margins, as they do themselves. It is a perspective to which they can relate. In this my identity as a lesbian rabbi has been extraordinarily helpful.

Working with this population has been deeply rewarding for me. I have had the great rabbinic privilege of seeing some of them through multiple events and across generations. Sometimes they go on to greater contact in the Jewish community, sometimes they do not. I do make them aware that at least, in a Reconstructionist setting, they may find a community that welcomes them. But my goal has not been to convert them; I don’t do outreach. If I worked for the Jewish community I would experience pressure to bring them in. I want the people I work with to be able to choose how much contact they want to have with Judaism beyond their connection to me. I understand and respect their perspective on the margins, their lack of interest in belonging to a group as an expression of being

Jewish. Synagogue life is not for everyone. This freedom is another advantage of my position.

Although coming out as a lesbian was the point of departure for my new rabbinic role, I have both incorporated my lesbian identity into my rabbinate, and have also gone beyond it to a new location as a rabbi on the margins. Many lesbians have had the

opportunity in recent years to choose a different path, to become central to the larger Jewish enterprise. Their lesbianism for them is much like what my Reconstructionist and feminist identities have been for me. So it is not the lesbian identity itself, but the perspective it brought to me that made the difference in bringing me to where I stand today.