

# Rethinking Rabbinic Leadership

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In 1974, Sh'ma founding editor Rabbi Eugene Borowitz published an essay entitled "Tzimtzum: A Mystic Model for Contemporary Leadership."<sup>\*</sup> The essay was an impassioned critique of the modern coveting of power and the subsequent abuse of that power by those in positions of leadership. More specifically, Borowitz argued that leaders (including clergy) were too focused on "the accomplishment of plans" when they should be equally concerned with "the humanizing effect on the people being led." More dramatically, Borowitz stated that leaders needed to recognize "that people are always as important, if not more important, than the current undertaking."

Anticipating by some two decades our contemporary fascination with kabbalistic paradigms, Borowitz proposed that (religious) leaders exercise *tzimtzum* (contraction). Taken from the kabbalistic myths of Isaac Luria, *tzimtzum* is the assertion that in order to "make space" for creation to emerge, God, voluntarily "contracted," as it were. While touching on the other two core components of Luria's system — *shevirah* and *tikkun*, the shattering of the vessels of divinity and the consequent human task of cosmic repair through restoring the divine sparks embedded in creation — Borowitz' main argument in terms of leadership centers on the need for leaders to exercise restraint of power in order to "make space" for people to emerge in their full humanity.

Often misunderstood as calling for an abdication of leadership, Borowitz in fact argued for "a continuing alternation of the application of our power. Now we hold back; now we act." This would help "ethicize the leader's role" and presumably avoid the abuse of power that Borowitz targeted.

In the generations of rabbinic leaders since 1974, Borowitz's model of *tzimtzum* was frequently referenced (often inaccurately), as an attack on leaders and as advocacy for "the people." Changes in the rabbinate and synagogue life reflect many of the ways in which the model of "contraction" was applied.

Ritual decisions that were once the province of the rabbi were now turned over to "ritual committees" (an accurate, although no doubt unintentional double entendre). "High Holiday Committees" that once handled logistics now assumed control of the services themselves. My generation of (Reconstructionist) rabbis (I was ordained at the RRC in 1981) was taught to think of ourselves as "facilitators" or "resource people." Our professional goal was "to make ourselves unnecessary" as we first taught and then transferred responsibility for Jewish religious life to "the community," which would participate in "democratic decision making." Many of my Reform and Conservative colleagues of that generation confirm that they were encouraged to pull back in a similar fashion.

If I had to borrow a paradigm from Lurianic Kabbalah as a model for the contemporary rabbinate, I would choose *shevirah*, shattering. The Lurianic myth asserts that the (divine sparks of) power unleashed when God contracted was so intense that the vessels in which it was contained shattered and, as a result, an inadvertent cosmic catastrophe occurred.

Rabbi Hayim Herring has pointed out that we live in an era when all forms of leadership — political, educational, medical, and so forth — are suspect. Clergy are no exception. There is an upside in not deferring automatically to authority (seeking a second medical opinion, challenging a child's teacher). But in terms of rabbis and synagogues, the contraction of rabbinic leadership happened to coincide with the rise of a new generation of lay leaders, many of whom saw power as a limited commodity. For them to have power, it had to be taken away from the rabbi. What began as contraction often ended up as diminishment. Perhaps the best evidence of this is the catalogue of horror stories of "rabbinic evaluations."

Put in Lurianic terms, the voluntary contraction of rabbinic leadership created a vacuum in which power often went out of control, resulting in the shattering of many synagogue communities

and many rabbi-congregation relationships. The populist elitism of the havurah movement (“every teacher a student, every student a teacher”) played a significant role in the diminishment of rabbinic leadership, notwithstanding the often abysmal ignorance displayed by the neophyte student presuming to teach some aspect of Judaism with accuracy and understanding.

So where does this leave us? The remaining Lurianic paradigm is tikkun, or repair. (But please, not the omnipresent, overworked, and tired trope of tikkun olam!) Perhaps now, with the leadership pendulum having swung from one extreme to the other, we are at a stage where sharing the center is the appropriate alignment of rabbis and lay leaders. Rabbinic expertise and ability remain indispensable. (How many people really want to be their own doctors, lawyers, or dentists?) Lay ownership of and responsibility for the healthy functioning of communal life remains indispensable. (How many rabbis really want passive participants in public pageantry?)

And so, we return to Borowitz’s suggestion about leadership: “a continuing alternation of the application of our power. Now we hold back; now we act.” Insofar as we now more often view synagogues from an organic systems perspective rather than a static and binary one, leadership is an activity of the system, not a limited commodity held by one party at the expense of another. Partnership and participation can become the guiding principles of successful Jewish spiritual life.

It has been 36 years since Rabbi Borowitz first challenged us to rethink the ways in which power was held and used. That’s enough time for us to have grown up. Having passed the stage of adolescent rebellion, we are ready to settle down to the mature and demanding work of shaping Jewish life with the guidance of the specialists (rabbis) and the governance of the communities exercising leadership together.

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\* “Tzimtzum: A Mystic Model for Contemporary Leadership,” Eugene Borowitz, in *Religious Education* 69(6) November-December, 1974.