



## Sigi Ziering Ethics

This year our Sigi Ziering column will focus on the ethics of leadership. Each month an esteemed guest columnist will wrestle with questions concerning communal leadership and its abuses. The column is cosponsored by Bruce Whizin and Marilyn Ziering in honor of Marilyn's husband Sigi Ziering, of blessed memory. Visit [www.shma.com](http://www.shma.com) to view the series of columns, with responses.

*Jeannie Appleman directs the "Rabbinical Leadership for Public Life" project at the Jewish Funds for Justice with Meir Lakein as co-trainer. She works with the IAF to provide training and internships to rabbinical students from four seminaries. The project was conceived two years ago with Rabbi Stephanie Kolin and Noah Farkas.*

# Developing Rabbinical Leadership: New Ways to Measure Success

*Jeannie Appleman*

My seven-year-old daughter came home from yeshiva today and announced proudly that she had been unanimously elected to represent her second-grade class on student council. Her view of what it means to be a leader (handing out candy to her classmates) indicates that she knows the desires and interests of her constituency — always the starting place of an effective leader. As she grows, I wonder what message about leadership she will glean.

In every generation, we desire and feel obliged to hand down the traditions and values we care deeply about to our children and grandchildren. This *Sh'ma* series of columns addresses the ethics of leadership, and here we face specifically the legacy of leadership: What message about leadership do we want to pass on to the next generation? Do current approaches relay that message? How and by whom is rabbinical leadership defined, developed, and rewarded in our community? Are the operative rabbinical leadership approaches in our community successfully transforming synagogues and engaging our communities in the public arena to make social change? If not, which approach would?

Some leaders in our community feel that they must feed people charisma to win — and keep — their loyalty. We measure their effectiveness by the rousing speeches they deliver at cause-driven protests. But have we challenged them to listen to the stories and struggles of their congregants and develop the capacity of these members to negotiate on their own interests with public officials?

Similarly, we reward legacy-building among our leaders. We measure effectiveness

by the size of the membership, staff, budget, and number of programs. Why do we not hold our rabbinical leaders and ourselves accountable for building the capacity of lay leaders to build covenantal relationships across ethnicity and faith tradition? Our community is not well served by pretending that we are immune to skyrocketing healthcare and housing costs or shabby treatment in senior citizens' homes and unemployment.

If effective rabbinical leadership has nothing to do with charisma or legacy-building, then what does it entail? This is the question that a growing circle of rabbis, rabbinical school students, and administrators are exploring through broad-based (or congregation-based) organizing, invented by the Industrial Areas Foundation. The basics of this approach to leadership are simple to list, harder to practice:

- Leaders must have followers, so the relationship between leader and followers is central.
- A relational leadership culture focuses on the process of identifying, engaging, and developing people, engaging them around their own drives, interests, and gifts, rather than prepackaged issues or causes.
- Covenantal relationships start with the one-to-one meeting of two individuals, build on an exchange of stories, and grow much deeper than transactional relationships.
- This relational work must be tested in the wider public arena, in the dynamic of action and reaction and new action.

I recently asked a rabbi in a Los Angeles suburb to describe the impact on his rabbinate of broad-based organizing. He

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Kabbalat Shabbat service, I urged my fellow congregants to take a step forward to support one of our campaigns. While the issue could have been about a woman's right to choose, fair trade coffee, healthcare access, or literacy issues, the context was more important: I was mobilizing other Jews to act powerfully and publicly from our faith values, to do justice in partnership with others.

Now, I lead the CBCO work of the Jewish Funds for Justice, supporting the synagogue organizing field since 2002, through leadership development, small grants and direct partnership with denominations, organizing groups and synagogues, and convening national gatherings. I regularly hear stories from synagogue leaders that this type of organizing draws people closer to Judaism — and it happens in relationship with leaders in other faith traditions.

Rabbi Janet Marder, whose California synagogue has been organizing for six years, explains that this model is “not based on disinterested philanthropy, in which affluent folks reach out to give to those less fortunate. Rather, it teaches people to build bridges across culture and race, connecting with others as equals, uniting with them in significant action to improve the quality of life within the community we share.”

The foundational work of synagogue organizing is hundreds of one-to-one conversations where congregants connect, stories emerge, and leaders are identified. People talk about what keeps them up at night and why tzedek, justice, is important. Probing questions sift through commonalities of concern within the congregation, becoming the basis for action. And through action, leaders learn how to be powerful in the public arena, in their synagogue, and in their own lives.

These relationships dramatically enhance my davening. When I arrive on Shabbat, instead of a sea of faces I see a sea of stories. This person's mother survived the Holocaust, that person was active in civil rights struggles and then became a corporate lawyer, another person responded to the religious right's attacks on pro-choice leaders by taking three months leave to work for voter turnout.

Over the past year, I have crisscrossed the country hearing stories of lay leaders — even teens — moving closer to Torah and God through organizing, and strengthening their capacity to be Jewish leaders. Synagogue organizing allows us to be real partners with other communities and real partners with Judaism; nourishing our souls and nourishing our communities. 



*K'hilot K'doshot:*

Holy Congregations, Just Communities, JFSJ's national gathering of synagogues involved in CBCO, will take place February 11 through February 13, 2007. Go to [jewishjustice.org](http://jewishjustice.org) for more information.



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shared a story of how a bar mitzvah meeting had been transformed from task-oriented to conversational. Rather than asking his student, “How well do you know the *parsha*?” he asks, “What about this *parsha* moves you, and why?” Similarly, the decision about who will be honored with an *aliyah* becomes an opportunity to probe the role the child's family and friends have played in the student's life. This is how rabbis can create covenantal and transformative relationships, as opposed to relationships that are merely transactional. By employing relational power, we build community one person and institution at a time. Weaving together our shared stories and mutual interests, we provide opportunities for our generation to model the values we cherish, create the communities our families deserve, and work to create a just world. 

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