

LAST SPRING, I was invited to speak to a private retreat — okay, a brunch — of the board of one of the country’s largest Jewish newspapers. I really wasn’t there to rehash the controversies surrounding my book, *The New Rabbi*. Instead, the editor of the paper wanted me to lead a discussion about how more ambitious, passionate, and in-depth journalism about our synagogues, federations, and JCCs might actually be “good for the Jews.”

When the conversation began, several people expressed concern about the detailed reporting in the book (which dramatically recreates the behind-the-scenes life of an American synagogue while also exploring my own experience of re-embracing Jewish practice after my father’s death). They worried about washing a community’s “dirty laundry.” I pointed out that there was really very little in the book that qualified as even lightly soiled laundry and, more important, that the main characters who had cooperated fully with the project over several years of reporting were satisfied with both its journalistic and Jewish integrity. I shied away from addressing the quarrels some rabbis have with the book because I think those rabbis and I should discuss their concerns privately first — and still hope one day we will.

Jewish newspapers should have much different concerns. In many ways, they aren’t controversial *enough*. They often miss the opportunity to make their local Jewish communities seem as fascinating as they really are.

I asked the board members to consider what has happened to coverage of their own professions in the media they read so voraciously: how the *The American Lawyer* revolutionized the coverage of law, and the *Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, and several magazines helped fostered similar revolutions in the coverage of business, politics, medicine, sports, the high and low arts, bringing a depth of understanding we now just take for granted. Before these revolutions, almost all media was dominated by the kind of party-line, press-release coverage that many in our clergy and lay leadership still expect from Jewish media and still want from secular media covering Jews. And leaders in all these fields were initially outraged that the press would treat them as public figures — which they saw

as “disrespect.”

It isn’t disrespect. It can and should be the highest form of respect — for open communication in our cherished religious institutions. It is also, in America, the law.

Anyone employed in religious institutional life, including the clergy and elected or appointed lay leaders, is a public figure — primarily because the organizations they run or work for enjoy nonprofit status. Reporting on those organizations is how journalists help protect the public trust. And the sooner Jewish leaders understand this, and cooperate with journalists so that they can write better, fairer, more relevant stories, the sooner people will truly appreciate how hard it is to keep a house of worship open, or to fund and run a social service agency, or to support Israel, or to choose a new leader.

The problem, by the way, is much bigger than just press relations. The way many Jewish leaders address the media is a microcosm of how they approach communications inside their institutions. Journalists tend to want to know the same things as congregants, constituents, and employees. Bad communication and lack of transparency in process can lead to something far worse than substandard media coverage; they can block the flow of information and insight that is the lifeblood of any organization, making real problems worse and creating new ones.

That is *exactly* how a book about the seemingly benign process of a replacing a beloved rabbi at a large, stable congregation became a “controversial” piece of Jewish journalism. None of the people involved with the book set out to create controversy, and I greatly admired the way that all the clergy and lay leaders continued speaking openly to me after the situation became more volatile. In fact, the synagogue eventually did the same thing with its congregants; it undertook a remarkable internal inquiry over what had gone wrong (which was started months before my book came out). The leaders then read the entire frank, fascinating report at a public meeting.

The local Jewish newspaper was afraid to cover it. It is my prayer, as a journalist and a Jew, that the next time they won’t be afraid.

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