



projects. The compartmentalization of the synagogue and its personnel threatens the collegiality of its workers and the organicity of the synagogue's aspiration. To segregate those who serve the *kehilla kedosha* is to distort the uniqueness of its sacred teleology.

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Rabbi as Vessel: Journeys of Holiness

Richard Hirsh

Two stories: (1) When my son was in 2nd grade at the local Schechter day school, I was invited to spend thirty minutes with the class describing what I do during the day while my son is in school. This seemed like an easy assignment. After all, how hard can it be to explain to a Jewish day school class what a rabbi does? A rabbi studies Torah ("so do we!"); a rabbi prays ("we do too!"); a rabbi performs acts of *tzedakah* and *gemilut hasadim* ("just like us!"). A rabbi visits the sick, cares for the bereaved, shares simchas and tzuris ("we did that once!"). Fortunately the half-hour came to a close before a precocious proto-rabbi could ask "you mean you get paid to do this stuff?"

(2) Several years ago as the rabbi of a large congregation, I met with an enthusiastic bar mitzvah parent. During our initial meeting, he presented me with a service outline and a list of English readings and readers, syrupy Broadway show tunes, and cantorial selections for the service. I was tempted to ask if I needed to show up; before I could, he informed me that my "part" was to call people up for the *aliyot*.

Somewhere in the lexicon of Judaism, the term *klei kodesh*, holy vessels, was coined to describe those who professionally serve the Jewish religious tradition. The Hebrew root for "holy" (k-d-sh) connotes "separate" with an implicitly positive spin. By extension, rabbis, who are (or at least used to be) seen as one example of *klei kodesh*, are/were supposed to be, in Rabbi Jack Bloom's felicitous phrase, "the set-apart people."

My encounter in the classroom reminds me that in America, what often separates rabbis from other Jews is perhaps only a question of degree, and not of kind. Ideally, rabbis only engage in an amplified, extended, and public way the mitzvot that all Jews are, in fact, called to fulfill. After all, as those sec-

ond-graders intuited, what makes rabbis different is that they are just like us, only more so.

What sets us apart is not so much who we are, but who we are perceived to be. My determined bar mitzvah parent reminded me that in the North American synagogue of the 21st century, the rabbi as *klei kodesh* can carry a distinctly negative spin. As Steven Cohen and Arnold Eisen have so clearly described in their book *The Jew Within*, this generation of Jews is mistrustful if not disdainful of rabbis and the authority they presumably represent. There is a profound ambivalence about needing and wanting rabbinic presence, especially at life cycle moments. Paradoxically, the very rabbis whose advice, positions, and opinions are often routinely disregarded (if invited at all — witness my bar mitzvah parent) are the same rabbis without whose presence an event, ceremony, or ritual is somehow incomplete or inauthentic — one might even say, lacking in "holiness."

Rabbis sit at the intersection of the horizontal ("just like us") and the vertical ("above/below") planes for relationship. We increasingly want to shed "aura" in favor of "approachability." And we readily relinquish the rabbinic robes of prior generations. Yet we remain different: from within, as a consequence of learning and leadership, and from without, as the reluctant, willing, or ambivalent beneficiaries of bestowed authority and expectations.

What are we to make of all this? Perhaps the problem is not in the Hebrew but in the English. A "vessel" conjures two images. One is of containment. Viewed from this angle, rabbi as *klei kodesh* becomes rabbi as embodiment; the one whose very presence reflects and refracts every spoken and unspoken, conscious and unconscious emotion and attitude Jews have about their Jewishness and their Judaism. As Rabbi Richard Israel (z"l) once wrote, when a

rabbi walks into a room, there is immediately a group of people who loves him and another group who hates her; and this before the rabbi says even one word.

But a vessel can also be that in which we journey, something that transports us from one place to another, that provides security and stability as we move through time and space. Perhaps the challenge to rabbis in our time is to become this type of vessel. Judaism offers a challenge to rise above and

beyond daily duties to embrace the opportunity for sanctification, to imbue life with aura, to live in consciousness of the presence of God and the commitment to community. Being a *klei kodesh* may depend less on who we are than it does on where we want to take the Jewish people. Rabbis must be willing to invite Jews on a journey to holiness.

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Lead and They Will Follow

Marcel Lindenbaum

The job description of a congregational rabbi has gone through many permutations in the past 200 years. Jewish communities and their constituencies have changed radically. This has fostered a need for rabbis to relate to new realities. The traditional emphasis on learning and education gave way to an emphasis on communicating — giving effective sermons and honing sociopsychological skills. Despite the new look, the overall goal was to remain constant — only the tools and the methodology were to be updated. As Rabbi Richard Hirsh states, “Judaism offers a challenge ... to live in consciousness of the presence of God and the commitment to community.”

Rabbi Hirsh’s essay, “Rabbi As Vessel: Journeys of Holiness,” suggests that in adapting to the new methodology, many rabbis have minimized the fundamental goals of Judaism. In an attempt to remain relevant, many rabbis feel compelled to accept less and less from their congregants. Unfortunately, by demanding less, rabbis further weaken the connecting link between congregants, the community, and “the consciousness of the presence of God.” This process also negatively impacts the rabbi’s standing within the community.

We read in the Torah about the twelve scouts sent to report on the “lay of the land.” They reported seeing giants who made them feel as if they were grasshoppers. The commentators suggest that if one feels or sees oneself as a grasshopper — if one has no sense of self — one is doomed to failure.

The community is in need of strong rabbinic leadership. In lieu of demanding less, rabbis are well advised to challenge their communities to learn more, incorporating more mitzvot and Jewish customs into their lives. It is important that rabbis speak the language of their community in order to achieve their goal. Nevertheless, they should never perceive themselves as, or permit themselves to be, just a degree different from the congregant. To navigate the “*klei*” or vessel described by Rabbi Hirsh will take a captain with wisdom, learning, and training. By leading and teaching, by increasing the community’s “consciousness of the presence of God,” the rabbi as navigator will achieve his goal and earn the respect of his congregation.

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