

A Great Job for a Nice Jewish Kid; An Indispensable Job for the Jewish People

Parashat Be'haalotecha

June 10, 2023; 21 Sivan 5783

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The story goes that there were three kids on the playground arguing about whose father was the greatest. It could be whose mother is the greatest too, but this is just how I heard it...

The first kid said, "My Dad is the greatest because he started his own hedge fund, and he's the richest guy around."

The second kid said, "That's nothing. My Dad is a politician, and he says he's the most powerful man in town."

The third one, I think his name was Moishele, said, "That's nothing, my Dad is a rabbi, and he owns hell!"

"Wait, wait, wait, 'the other two say.' What does that mean? How can you own hell?"

"Well," Moishele explains, "my Dad the rabbi came home from the shul board meeting last night and told my Mom that they just gave it to him!"

I'll never forget when I was living in New York City and I got into an elevator and an older woman looked up at me and saw my yarmulke. A warm smile came across her face and she asked me "What do you do dear?" I said, "I'm in rabbinical school." She turned to the other person on the elevator with her and said, "Did you hear that, he's in medical school." I said, "No, no I'm in rabbinical school. I'm studying to be a rabbi, not a doctor." "Oh," she said, her excitement morphing into something more like sympathy than admiration.

A passing detail in the parasha got me thinking about all this memory. In Numbers 8:6 God instructs Moses: *Kach et ha'leviim mitoch b'nai Yisrael...* Moses is told to "Take the Levites; to separate the tribe of Levi from the rest of the tribes of Israel," and to initiate them into the special service they will offer for the Jewish people. The tribe of Levi, which actually includes both Kohanim and Levi'im are really the original Jewish clergy. They are "ordained" so to speak to be the guardians and stewards of the religious life of the Jewish people. They care for the sacred spaces and holy implements, they oversee the sacrificial offerings and rituals, they sing and teach and officiate, and we learned last week that they also pronounce blessings over the entire Jewish people. But Rashi inserts a comment to this seemingly benign verse about separating the Levites and says: *Kacheim bid'varim*, Rashi says, persuade them, encourage them, win them over with words. And these are the words: *Ashreichem she'tizku lihiyot shamashim la'Makom*, How fortunate you are to have the privilege of being servants of God. What is Rashi suggesting? That Moses give the new Levite recruits a pep talk! You're so lucky to have been chosen! You're so fortunate to have been selected for this special service!

The curious thing about this encouragement is that the Levites actually don't have a choice about their vocation. You were a Levite if your father was a Levite. And Levites knew from childhood that they would grow up and assume this vocation that was reserved exclusively for them. Why did they need to be "won over?" Why did they need this "pep talk?" Moreover, the job came a fancy wardrobe that included a nice linen tunic and turban, trousers, a beautiful sash. The Levites had unparalleled access to the Mishkan, and later the Temple itself, and with it a certain prestige within the community. But we also know that because the Levites were *shamashim la'Makom*, servants of the Holy One, they were excluded from land ownership or farming or any other means of supporting themselves that might distract them from that holy service. Rather they relied by the tithes and gifts of the Jewish people. Levites couldn't live wherever they wanted; they had to settle in specific towns designated for them. And they are often mentioned in the Torah in the same breath as the foreigner, the orphan, the widow...people in the community who were disadvantaged, who relied on others, or the community for support. It seems that being a Levite in the service of God was a mixed bag: On the one hand they were engaged in the most holy work in the community; they were literally the protectors of our most sacred places, the preservers of the community's most hallowed traditions. But on the other hand they also had to make certain sacrifices that affected their lifestyle, their personal choices, and at times even made them vulnerable to the whims of the very community they served.

I wonder if Rashi was thinking about the role of the shul rabbi when he commented that the Levites needed an extra bit of encouragement. Rashi, who himself was the rabbi of a community of 100 or so Jewish families in northern France in the 11th Century. This was before the time when rabbis got paid a salary, so Rashi made his living by selling wine grapes from his family vineyard. In this short, but stirring biography of Rashi by Elie Wiesel,¹ he mentions a letter written by Rashi where the great sage lamented not having enough bread or clothing to support his wife and three daughters, not to mention the students who stayed in his home and ate at his table. Rashi's life was far from easy, as he balanced leading a community with making a living, caring for his family, and composing his legendary commentaries.

I think that some people imagine that rabbis in certain respects still live the way Rashi did 900 years ago. That to be a rabbi is to choose a life of meagerness and hardship. That less than a *kavod*, a badge of honor, to be a rabbi is to be at the beckon call of the very people whose dues and donations determine whether you can feed your family or put a roof over your head. I have had many people ask about the fishbowl...that being a rabbi must feel like being constantly watched and judged by congregants; that the rabbi's spouse and kids are subject to extra scrutiny. That we are shackled by Shabbat and Kashrut when many of our congregants have different priorities. Look, some of that is true. But I believe that whenever someone chooses a life of service to the greater good, to a community, to a value system or even to a higher power, that there are times when there are feelings of loneliness or detachment or despair. It's hard to be a leader of anyone or anything. It can feel sort of hopeless at times when you are so passionate, so

¹ Wiesel, Eli. *Rashi*, Jewish Encounter Series, Schocken, 2009.

on fire, so in love with something that other people don't necessarily feel the same way about. And to tell you the truth, for some rabbis, some clergy in all feels occasionally feel overwhelmed and defeated by those feelings.

Now I must admit to you, I am usually a very happy rabbi. I have been blessed as a rabbi in this congregation and the previous two that I have served; where I have felt supported, encouraged, and appreciated. This shul, unlike so many others, is actually growing! It's a wonderful feeling to be a part of such a vibrant community, where I also feel that I am able to live like a mensch, and provide for my family more than adequately. My job is not without its challenges, and there are certainly times when I day-dream about what other paths I might have or might yet take in life, times when I have felt disillusioned and alone, but much more often than not I feel so blessed, to use Rashi's words, to be a *shamash la'Makom*, to be a servant of the Holy One, and to be in the business of promoting and perpetuating Jewish tradition. Just this past Sunday, I was standing under the chuppah at a beautiful outdoor wedding near St. Michael's, out by the Chesapeake, and as the wedding procession began I closed my eyes for a moment and whispered a spontaneous prayer of thanksgiving to God that I have the unique privilege of facilitating people's most sacred and memorable moments in life. I consider the rabbinate to be a great gift and an incredible source of joy and satisfaction. I hope you feel that from me, that you hear that in my words, see that in my gestures, discern that from my teachings, and my leadership.

I have to tell you though, the Jewish community is facing an existential crisis that we don't talk about enough. After all there's antisemitism and Israel and the unaffiliated and intermarriage and the high price of being Jewish...and so many other things. But here's one that you might not know about, but you should! There is an acute shortage of rabbis in the North American Jewish community. When we began the search process that led us to engaging Rabbi Simmons last year, we received an ominous letter from United Synagogue, as did all other Conservative synagogues searching for rabbis, informing us that it was very likely that we would not be able to find a rabbi due to the many jobs but very few candidates searching for them. And I don't have to tell you, we got luck...really, really lucky! But a lot of other shuls were not. Many congregations right now are without sufficient spiritual leadership.

When I became a rabbi in 2002, my seminary class had 25 graduating students. This year the Jewish Theological Seminary ordained only 12. Rabbi Simmons' alma mater the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies in Los Angeles ordained 9 rabbis this year and has an entering class of only 6. Other denominations are also facing critical shortages of students, and for those who are entering rabbinical schools, many are graduating and choosing not to work in synagogues, again because of the perception that the lifestyle is oppressive and overbearing.

But the Jewish community, and our synagogues in particular, will be in big trouble if the 'pipeline crisis' as it has come to be called is not reversed. Synagogues can not go year after year without rabbis or without enough clergy to support their needs. And it's not just about

staffing. In a landmark study² of the impact of relationships of Jews ages 18-44 with rabbis, the data revealed that:

91% said that having a positive relationship with a rabbi made them feel more positive about being Jewish;

90% said a positive relationship with a rabbi helped them feel more spiritually connected, and 88% said it helped them feel more confident and comfortable being Jewish.

74% of self-described Conservative Jews said that having a relationship with a rabbi is important to them.

Friends, a robust rabbinate is critical to the vitality of the Jewish people. So here is what I am proposing:

-Let's advocate for people who display an interest in Jewish life, who are compassionate and bright to consider becoming rabbis. Unlike the many negative stereotypes, this is actually a great job for a Jewish boy or a Jewish girl! To be a rabbi is to dedicate your life to nurturing Jewish minds and Jewish souls; to teaching and learning, to listening and guiding, to being a cheerleader, a promoter, a Pied piper of all things Jewish; to being a defender of Jewish peoplehood and the timeless values of our Torah. Every single day is different as we accompany so many people on the sacred journeys of their lives. I am both humbled and inspired on a regular basis.

-Speak kindly and respectfully about rabbis, not just us, but rabbis in general. What our kids hear at home about rabbis and Jewish professionals will shape their impressions of them. As my colleague Rabbi Elliot Cosgrove says, 'If we show rabbis and Jewish professionals respect, then the next generation will consider these jobs to be respectable.' Of course, it is also our duty to earn your respect, and we strive for that every single day.

-When you give tzedakah and make decisions about your own charitable giving, please consider supporting seminaries. The Torah Fund program makes this very accessible here at Har Shalom. The money raised helps make rabbinic education less costly and more accessible to our future leaders. New rabbis should not begin their careers tens of thousands of dollars in debt. The Jewish community as a whole must invest in lowering the financial barriers of full-time rabbinic education if we want more rabbis to enter the field.

-Finally, just as Moses counseled the Levites *bid'varim*, with encouraging words, we need your encouragement too. We aren't asking for gratuitous compliments or flattery. We are asking for *derech eretz* and *menschlichkeit*. We won't always agree on everything. You may not always like our sermons, or the positions we take, or the teachings we share. But that's okay. I don't know a

² https://researchandlearning.jimjosephfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/FullReport_TheRabbiEffect_ThePerceptionandImpactofRabbisAmongAmericanJews18-44.pdf

single rabbi would ever intentionally hurt or slight another Jew. Give us that benefit of the doubt. We went into this business because we love Jews, because we love the Jewish people! I have to believe that if rabbis feel appreciated and cared for, then the profession will be elevated and made more attractive for others.

Let's demonstrate that service to God and the Jewish people is a calling that people should answer rather than ignore. Please pray for us as we pray for you. May a new generation see the incredible meaning and joy that comes with being a rabbi, a cantor, a Jewish educator, or professional, and may we, the community genuinely say to them: *Ashreichem she'tizku lihiyot shamashim la'Makom*. How fortunate you are to be holy servants of God, and of the people of Israel.