

Reflections on Twenty Years as a Rabbi

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There is a message that has come across most rabbis' desks and social media feeds. It is called, "The Perfect Rabbi." Note I have changed the pronoun.

The URJ recently sent out a survey on what makes the perfect rabbi – some of you may have responded. Here is what the results show:

They indicate the perfect Rabbi preaches exactly twelve minutes. She condemns sins but never upsets anyone. She works from 8:00 am until midnight and is also a janitor. She wears good clothes, buys good books, drives a good car, and gives about \$50 weekly to the poor.

She is 28 years old and has preached 30 years. She has a burning desire to work with teenagers and spends most of her time with senior citizens.

The perfect Rabbi smiles all the time with a straight face because she has a sense of humor that keeps her seriously dedicated to his work.

She makes 15 calls daily on congregation families, shut-ins and the hospitalized, and is always in her office when needed.

If your Rabbi does not measure up, simply send this letter to six other synagogues that are tired of their Rabbi, too. Then bundle up your Rabbi and send her to the synagogue on the top of the list. In one week, you will receive 1,643 Rabbis and one of them will be perfect. Have faith in this procedure. One congregation broke the chain and got its old Rabbi back in less than three weeks. (modeled on "The Perfect Pastor," author unknown)

We laugh because this speaks some truth. I have certainly learned over 20 years of being a congregational rabbi that humor is important. Expectations of rabbis to be all and do all run high among congregants, and often among rabbis ourselves. I don't fully recall what I expected when I made the decision to apply to rabbinical school, or when I was ordained 20 years ago in May of 2003 at the Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion in Los Angeles. I believed in the power of Jewish community, in learning and teaching, and was generally good at listening and helping others. I valued Jewish history and continuity, and thought I could help add to our people's story and strengthen the bonds of Jewish community. I still believe these things. I did not know about the unrealistic demands of time on the congregational rabbi, that I would be a janitor at times, or how much time I would spend responding to emails. There is a lot I have learned since I was ordained at the age of 29. I would like to thank my family – Micah, Yonah and Itai, for all of their incredible support and for doing without me a lot. Thank you, Rabbi Zoob, for being the most supportive rabbi emeritus a rabbi could ask for.

Looking back, I can now reflect on different chapters in my rabbinate – serving as assistant than associate rabbi, rabbi/educator, senior rabbi, co-rabbi, and solo rabbi. There are the chapters of before kids and then being full time rabbi and full time parent. And there are the chapters of serving congregations in the California Bay Area, Tulsa, Oklahoma, and now Westwood, Mass.

Through all these changes, a few common themes have emerged. I will narrow it down to four. One, that I and my family have always been warmly embraced by Jewish community as we are leading it. This can be a challenge at times. It has meant being fellow parents alongside congregants as well as rabbis. My stance as rabbi has always been to be part of the community I am serving; not above it or separate from it. If I am not personally living my Judaism, then I don't know how I can lead others to do so. The synagogues I serve are home for me, just as I want them to be home for you. This is the case at Beth David.

There is the constant of gender. I am known as a female rabbi as much as rabbi. I did not know how hard it would be to enter a field and obtain a title that was only held by men for thousands of years. It is remarkable that we just celebrated the 50th anniversary of the ordination of female rabbis. And yet, that is a such a small window of time in the broad history and patriarchy of the Jewish people. I had no female role models and only one female mentor. I have been the first female rabbi in most communities I've served, including here at Beth David. For years, I endured comments that are commonplace for female rabbis – “You don't look like a rabbi; You don't sound like a rabbi.” Or, “If my rabbi looked like you, I would attend synagogue more often.” I'll spare you the comments from the pre, during, and post pregnancy years. There is a new video by the CCAR called “The Clergy Monologues,” which details this experience. While we have made significant progress, the glass ceiling or *bima* has not been broken yet. This is especially true for LGBTQ+ rabbis.

Another common thread for me has been a bit of a Moses syndrome. It is sometimes daunting to feel that I have something relevant and meaningful to say each week. “Who am I to speak and to lead this people?” asked Moses (Exodus). While this sense of humility is a Jewish value, and one that I think makes me a good rabbi, I struggle with this aspect. Rabbis often talk about “rabbinic voice,” and I am still figuring out what that means. Perhaps I'll report back in another 20 years. I have more recently used my voice in the community as a leader of the Westwood Interfaith Clergy group, and sadly, as we have seen an increase in antisemitic acts, with local town officials and school committees. Here at Beth David, I have used my voice to guide building a playground and a preschool, to grow our community and welcome people of all ages, stages, and backgrounds. I believe in a vibrant vision of Jewish life, opening our doors wider, continually adapting and evolving, affirming discussion and debate, thought and play. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel's observation about the prophetic mission speaks to me; that religious leaders should “comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.” I have figured out over the years that I feel most authentic in my rabbinic voice when I am empowering others to find their Jewish voice and identity. I will say more about this in a moment.

You have probably noticed a trend in synagogue life to professionalize management and administration. I am thrilled to be part of Beth David's expanding staff, and that I get to partner with other Jewish professionals every day. I hope with my 20 years of synagogue experience that I am able to offer this congregation strong, visionary leadership.

This being said, I don't believe in professionalizing Jewish life. I think sometimes people come to temple expecting that clergy will wow them with a sermon, move them to tears with a beautiful melody, or do Jewish for them. While this may occasionally happen, I want to empower you to find your own voice within Jewish tradition, add your interpretation and your questions, add your voice in prayer and song, do Jewish when you are at home and when you are on the way; in the synagogue and throughout your lives. I try to take this stance when I am working with kids, teens, and adults. Our lives are busy. Synagogue membership is most meaningful when we use it, invest in it, experience it, and give back. I try to use my voice to help you connect - in small groups, through study, doing mitzvot together, dinners, retreats, trips, and uplifting prayer and music. Look at the nine adults who will become b'nai mitzvah next Shabbat, who have committed to finding their Jewish voices, learning Hebrew, reading and teaching Torah, being fully counted in Jewish community. I take pride in my rabbinic voice empowering them to do this.

I recognize that my rabbinic voice is stronger when I am also caring for myself. This is sometimes hard for rabbis, as we take seriously our care for you. It has taken me some time to learn this lesson. I am glad to share that I have started working with a rabbinic coach, I have been taking some guitar lessons, I have been trying to come in later to offset some of the late nights, and I recognize that I need to replenish my own well in order to shape meaningful messages for you each week. There is no perfect rabbi.

Lastly, there is the consistent theme of lifecycle, of the profound and deep responsibility that rabbis have for being there for your most joyful and saddest moments of life. It is hard to put into words how humbling and powerful this role is. Most of you here don't know that I was faced with some very, very hard funerals early on in my career. The first funeral I officiated at was later determined to be a murder of a man by his wife (the senior rabbi was out of town). In my most challenging moments as a rabbi, there was a sudden death of a toddler in my children's daycare class at temple, a young adult who tragically died in an avalanche, and a young mother of twins who died from cancer on my first day in Tulsa. On the other side of the lifespan, there are children I named in California whose parents still send me pictures of their kids each year. I share this with you because I have stayed in touch with these families across space and time. This speaks to the sacred bonds that rabbis are privileged to form with people. I thank you, the members of Temple Beth David, for letting me into your lives in these moments, and trusting me to guide you through. Your rabbi is prone to emotion, because I am present with you. Officiating at lifecycle has become even more meaningful as I have experienced the full spectrum of my own.

From baby namings to b'nai mitzvah to weddings, in addition to singing "Mazel Tov," I have the privilege of offering you the priestly blessing, the ancient words of our people that are

recited on Shabbat, holidays, and at the most significant, joyful times in our lives. One of the oldest prayers, this blessing comes from this week's Torah portion, Naso (Num. 22:24-26). I would like to leave you with some words of Torah, because after all, a rabbi is most importantly a teacher. And then I will ask Rabbi Batya and Rabbi Micah to offer these words, and you are welcome to join.

This three-fold blessing is a rising crescendo of 3, 5, and 7 words, respectively. The blessing is phrased in the personal/singular, although most often uttered in a communal setting. Jacob Milgrom in his commentary on the book of Numbers, highlights the word *panav* – God's face – in both the second and third parts of the blessing. In contrast to other biblical passages where God's face is hidden, here, the blessing illumines God's presence, ending with the final word *Shalom*, which the talmudic rabbis deem the greatest value or virtue in our lives.

Here is what these words of blessing mean to me when I say them:

Yevarechecha Adonai v'yishmerecha – May God bless you and keep you.

May we all find moments of blessing each day. The *keva* and *kavannah* of Jewish ritual offers us the fixed words of prayer and the opportunity to infuse our spirit and intention. Through doing these rituals, keeping Shabbat, saying blessings and being blessings, we are kept together in community and become closer to God.

Ya'eir Adonai panav eilecha vichunecha – May God's light shine upon you and be gracious to you.

May we reflect the light of justice, goodness, and compassion that is within us out into to God's broken world in the holy task of *tikkun olam*. When God's light shines through us, we give and receive grace.

Yisa Adonai panav eilecha, v'yasem l'cha shalom – May God's face be lifted toward yours, may the Divine presence be with you, and give you peace.

Holy One of Blessing, you accompany us on our journey and help us elevate our consciousness and our hearts. May we find holiness within and when we look into the face of the other. In our increasingly isolated and digitalized world, may we find ways to draw closer in connection and community. Holy One of Blessing, grant us each the greatest gift - Shalom - wholeness, fulfillment, and peace. *Amen*.