



The Changing Face of the Orthodox Rabbinate

The American Orthodox Rabbinate is changing. I have been part of the rabbinic clergy team at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale–The Bayit, since 2003, and even in the past almost 20 years, I have watched the job of the rabbi subtly change as the needs of the community in which we serve evolve. As we emerge from the harrowing experience of a global pandemic, the rabbinate is transforming yet again. In order to understand its current trajectory, we must first reflect on where it has been.

The Posek Rav

The rabbinate has been adapting to its constituents for centuries. Consider the image of a turn-of-the-century rabbi. He is accented, deeply learned in tradition and texts, and spends his day studying and teaching in a beit midrash setting. I call him the “Posek Rav,” as his job was mainly interpreting and translating the *halakhot*, the law of tradition, to a less knowledgeable Jewry. Orthodox Jews who were adapting to modern life needed to understand how to navigate the narrow lines between becoming productive and successful American citizens while holding onto their religious selves. Rabbis had to help their congregants understand how to navigate keeping Shabbat if they were required to work, and with the advent of electricity, there were a whole host of new halakhic concerns.

The PhD Rabbi

As Modern Orthodox Jews became more comfortable in the secular world in the middle of the 20th century, they began to seek more from their rabbinic leaders. Now the image of an Orthodox Rabbi was clean-shaven or had a cropped beard. He dressed in a modern suit and strived to engage more fully in the modern world; secular education became a necessity. This is the “PhD Rabbi.” American Jews saw themselves as intellectuals, placing emphasis on higher education. The rabbis, as well as their training grounds, put a premium on academic pursuits.

The CEO Rabbi

With the increased trend towards a more educated laity at the conclusion of the century, where Orthodox congregants could access translations of *gemara*, the role of the rabbi shifted once again. Now the rabbi had to build on his Jewish knowledge as a posek and his secular education to become the “CEO Rabbi”: the rabbi multitasker. Adam Ferziger explains: “Some rabbis could even be termed titular CEOs, not only supervising the religious and cultural content of the synagogue-center but also taking responsibility for producing the income and providing the financial management that enabled all of the activities and infrastructure to function.” To bring a vision for the Jewish community to fruition, a rabbi must be skilled in the management and building of a major organization.

The Pastoral Rabbi

We are now at another inflection point, where the changing needs of the community are demanding that the rabbinate adapt once again. Rabbis must build on their skills as *poskim* and authorities of *halakha*, on their worldly knowledge, and on their ability to be stellar managers and visionaries, but now the focus has shifted to the “Pastoral Rabbi.” The 21st-century community is looking for rabbinic leaders who understand their individual needs and

¹ I have been influenced by Bar Ilan professor Adam S. Ferziger whose research focuses on Jewish religious movements. See “Between Outreach and Inreach: Redrawing the Lines of the American Orthodox Rabbinate,” *Modern Judaism* 25:3 (October 2005): 237-263 and “Sanctuary for the Specialist: Gender and the Reconceptualization of the American Orthodox Rabbinate,” *Jewish Social Studies*, vol. 23, no. 3 (Spring-Summer 2018): 1-37



meet them where they are, even if it's outside of the synagogue building. They are looking for a leader who has adapted to the needs of a community that has journeyed through a global pandemic. This community is seeking intellectual and spiritual meaning and is driven by justice and commitment to halakha. The Pastoral Rabbi is someone who can see into the hearts and souls of people and understand the anxiety, pain, and fear facing the Jewish community.

This rabbi sits in the pews with their congregants and meets them at coffee shops or on a walk. Rabbis can be seen with their children on the bimah or pushing a stroller on the way to the park. And, most significantly, the Pastoral Rabbi is also beginning to assert their own boundaries, protecting their own time. Congregants are beginning to see their rabbis in the context of their own pain and traumas and lived lives. It is in this context, as the rabbinate is transitioning to a more human-centered position.

The Human-Centered Rabbinate

A pulpit rabbi is expected to open up the synagogue at 6 am and close it at 10 pm, and when they go home, they remain on call – they are subject to the high and low whims of the lifecycle. This kind of rabbinate is not sustainable for anyone of any gender. To sustain the profession of the rabbinate, the job description must shift to one which allows rabbis to maintain their personal obligations and needs alongside the professional. I am not advocating for spiritual leaders to avoid hard work or to waiver in their commitment to community. Rather, the community must change its expectations of what is possible to achieve in a single day, positively impacting the job for all genders. Maharat is training Orthodox women to be their authentic selves and embrace their unique skill sets. We recognize that women have tremendous talents and the abilities and drive to serve the community, with a commitment to their private lives as well.

A New Pulpit Rabbi

The changing needs of the community also demand that we expand the definition of the pulpit, ushering a new era of the "Pulpit Rabbi." This past year, Maharat graduated nine women, only two of whom were interested in serving an Orthodox synagogue in a year with six new synagogue openings. There are many reasons why our students didn't pursue synagogue work, but lack of positions is not among them. In fact, there has never been more enthusiasm and financial support directed toward women in synagogue pulpits. Maharat is eternally grateful to Zelda R. Stern whose vision to seed pulpit positions has helped us succeed in filling assistant pulpits.

That said, synagogue work can be draining and difficult, and we encourage our graduates to seek all kinds of rabbinic work across the Jewish communal, educational, and chaplaincy fields. For this reason, Maharat has expanded the way we interpret the word pulpit. I am a shul rabbi and treasure the privilege and responsibility of serving a synagogue community. I greatly value the role of the synagogue pulpit. However, Maharat does not measure its success by how many women we place in Orthodox synagogues, but we do measure it in pulpits. A pulpit is defined as "an elevated platform or high reading desk used in preaching or conducting a worship service," implying that a pulpit is a place from which a person can deliver scholarship and spiritual nourishment as well as model a vibrant Jewish life. By this definition, a woman can use the beit midrash or classroom as her pulpit, from where she can build community,



teach, and impact others. Women leaders can be looked up to from many places outside the bimah.

The rabbinate is an ever-evolving profession, and rabbinic training grounds have to be attuned to the changing demands of the rabbi. As one of the newest rabbinical training programs, Maharat had the ability to craft a program that met the needs of rabbis on the ground. We are deeply committed to the ethics of the Posek Rabbi, and most of the student's day is committed to the traditional texts of halakha and gemara. We also support the PhD Rabbi and emphasize academic rigor as well as exposing our students to the big ideas that may be on the minds of the people they serve. We know that our students must be prepared to be the CEO Rabbi, so we provide leadership training, including how to succeed as a manager, fundraiser, and visionary. And, we are a training ground for the Pastoral Rabbi who will serve a pulpit but may not preside at a synagogue. We teach students to understand the emotional well-being of others and utilize the language of our Torah to help uplift the spirits of those we serve. While we are not yet sure which rabbi will meet the needs of the next generation of the Jewish people, we will continue to use flexibility and innovation to ensure the relevance of the rabbinate.