

# Rabbis & Their Discontents

*Howard Singer*

AT ITS 1984 annual convention, the Rabbinical Assembly, the professional association of Conservative rabbis, listened to a paper by Leslie R. Freedman, a clinical psychologist who had recently completed a nationwide study of Conservative and Reform rabbis. Basing himself on interviews as well as on answers he had received from 1,342 rabbis to a questionnaire containing over 220 items, Dr. Freed-

---

HOWARD SINGER served for many years as a Conservative rabbi. He is now in public relations and communications in New York.

man concluded that rabbis suffer from unusually high levels of stress. Whereas, for example, men living within a twenty-mile radius of Three Mile Island during the month following the accident at the nuclear reactor there scored an anxiety level of 0.983, and the general male population at the time scored 0.915, rabbis scored 1.104. What was more, they seemed to score that level of stress continuously (the level at Three Mile Island dropped off shortly to that of the general population). What was still more, Dr. Freedman revealed in a minor but significant finding,

30 percent of the rabbis he studied felt that their wives would prefer them to be in another profession.

So, apparently, would many rabbis themselves. Thus the 1984 convention also featured a session entitled "Do I Want Out? Examining Career Opportunities Within and Outside of the Rabbinate." The representative of the career-management agency who addressed the session had a crowded schedule of private interviews.

Of the 1,118 names on the 1982 membership list of the Rabbinical Assembly, almost 500 do not offer synagogue addresses. To be sure,

many in that group are retired, but their numbers may be balanced by those who do list synagogue addresses where they are serving not as rabbis but as religious-school officials. Rabbi Wolfe Kelman, executive director of the Rabbinical Assembly, puts the proportion of Conservative rabbis now engaged in non-pulpit work at 20 percent; others put it as high as 40 percent, or higher. The comparable figure for the 1,200 members of the Reform movement's Central Conference of American Rabbis is, again, about 40 percent in non-pulpit positions. Orthodox rabbis present a special case, because in Orthodoxy the tradition of religious learning for its own sake is strong, and serving as a rabbi is only one of several possible means to that end. In any event, the overwhelming majority of Orthodox rabbis ordained in any year go into secular pursuits; another 20 percent take positions in Jewish education, and only 15 or 16 percent seek pulpits.

It is true that while many leave the pulpit, comparatively few move out of the Jewish orbit entirely. An ex-rabbi teaching biblical literature to college students, or working in a Jewish charitable organization, as many now do, should perhaps be differentiated from one who leaves a congregation to take a job as a personnel director, or to take over a family business after his father dies. But all are signaling some degree of distress with the institution. Every rabbi knows ex-colleagues who, if not now serving as campus chaplains or instructors, or as executives in Jewish organizations, are in law, real estate, insurance, Wall Street, psychology, marital counseling, advertising, even medicine. Many smaller pulpits are simply not covered at all. And among those who remain, there seems to be far more querulousness and discontent than ever before.

One possible reason for rabbinic stress and flight has been put forward by Samuel Klagsbrun, who teaches psychiatry at Columbia Medical School and is a visiting professor at the Jewish Theological Seminary, where Conservative rabbis receive their training. In a talk at the 1984 convention, Dr. Klagsbrun located the source of unhappi-

ness in the "ambivalent" and "disrespectful" feelings toward rabbis on the part of their own communities, feelings which have been internalized to a dangerous degree by the rabbis themselves: "The problem is that [rabbis] have gone too damn often to their *baaley batim* [congregants] . . . asking for favors instead of pounding on the table and saying: 'This is our right. We are to be respected. . . .'"

WHATEVER one may make of Dr. Klagsbrun's prescription for winning respect, his diagnosis seems accurate. What he and others perceive as a loss of respect coincides, moreover, with a sociological fact: the coming to power and influence of a generation affected by the anti-intellectual and anti-authority mood of the late 60's. One way to convey what has happened is to contrast the older generation of synagogue "builders" with the younger generation of synagogue "inheritors."

The 1970's marked the end of two decades of widespread synagogue construction in the United States. Most of the "builders," the post-World War II generation of Jewish suburbanites, were motivated in their community activities less by religious feeling than by the desire to establish a discreet presence in what was then a totally non-Jewish environment. By the time the synagogues were standing and the religious schools were in session, suburbia itself had changed. Come December one could see not just Christmas lights but plenty of Hanukkah candles in neighborhood windows—a reassuring sign of the success of the builders' intentions.

For their new synagogues these suburban Jewish pioneers of the 40's and 50's wanted youngish rabbis who would fit into the local scene, get along with local ministers—the interfaith movement was just getting under way—and endear themselves to parents by "relating" well to their children. At the same time, however, traditional attitudes had not been completely cast off. Whatever flaws congregants might have discerned in the rabbi they chose, they considered the office, and the person holding it,

deserving of respect, as the repository of a precious even if no longer fully relevant tradition.

By the late 1970's, this generation was already getting on, surfeited with membership drives, worn out by fund-raising appeals, ready to sell the house and move to Florida. It was now the turn of their children, who had attended Hebrew and Sunday schools in those synagogues, and had had their Bar Mitzvah parties there, to take over. But the younger people proved unwilling. Most had less of an emotional stake in the Jewish community than did the parent generation. During their college years they had acquired the familiar obligatory contempt for the institutions in which they had been nurtured. Above all, they had absorbed many of the attitudes popular at the time, attitudes that stood in diametric opposition to the traditional, duty-oriented Jewish outlook with its insistence that life be lived with reverence—for God, for one's parents and elders, for teachers.

MOST young Jews emerged as secularists from the great tidal wave of defiance of the 1960's. That did not keep them out of synagogues forever, for they were not principled secularists but rather secularists by cultural default and a kind of instinctive distaste for "organized religion." By the time they were in their early thirties, however, and their toddlers were ready for nursery school, they, like their parents before them, found they required some of the things religious institutions could provide. They may have resented being told that they actually had to join the synagogue before their child could be admitted to the nursery school, but once having joined, they found themselves gently pulled into the synagogue's orbit. The young lawyer, accountant, radiologist, corporate manager, even if he still avoided the religious services, soon became active on one or another of the two dozen committees through which synagogue boards must function.

Not all those influenced by the 60's were secularists. The decade had also generated a vague, East-

ern-flavored, often drug-assisted mystical fervor. This predisposed a few young Jews to become more receptive as they matured to the appeal of Jewish religious institutions. But it also impeded their capacity to respond to them in a Jewish way. For these few souls among the synagogue "inheritors" who would have described themselves as religious were neither soldiers of faith nor nostalgic for a traditional past; they were more like consumers, customers picking and choosing. They approached Judaism not on its own terms but as they approached everything else, wanting to "savor the experience."

Thus, if a woman gave birth to a daughter, and it was discovered that the ancient ceremony of the redemption of the first-born applied only to males, the mother might decide to write her own ceremony for little girls and expect her rabbi to come and participate. Most Conservative and Reform rabbis, and many Orthodox, might at first have been charmed, and encouraging. Yet soon enough such private standards were being applied to the synagogue as a whole. Changes were introduced that reflected not any efforts at creative adaptation but the choice of convenience over religious practice, as when Bar Mitzvah ceremonies were scheduled for the brief afternoon service instead of the formal morning service because the family's guests could then arrive late and go directly from the service to the evening reception.

The spirit of lay assertiveness has had an effect everywhere in contemporary life, even in areas, such as medicine, where one can demonstrate the value of expertise objectively. Where one cannot, as in religion, the professional rapidly becomes helpless. In the synagogue, the notion that religion is a radically private concern, and that no one has the right to tell the individual believer what to believe or how to practice his belief, was stretched to the point where it challenged the stability of the tradition's public dimension. If no one has the right to tell you what to believe, why should anyone have the right to tell you what portion of the Torah should be read on the Sabbath, what ceremonies or pray-

ers are appropriate for a holy day, or what the tradition itself is all about? The tradition had been turned into a gigantic menu from which each might choose *à la carte*, and any dish might be substituted for any other.

It was natural for rabbis to be unhappy with such developments, and many could not help revealing what they felt. This in turn generated the resentment of laymen, who after all were paying the rabbi's salary. Rabbis soon found that younger members, whether secularist or religious-in-the-new-style, could make implacable antagonists.

THE general political and social ferment in the country added to the rabbis' vulnerability. No matter what they did or said about the Vietnam war or a dozen other issues, they were sure to alienate substantial numbers of their congregants. Rabbis who thought of the synagogue as a convoy in perilous waters whose members had somehow to stay together, were denounced for their reticence as unworthy of communal leadership. Rabbinical families came under severe strain, and the incidence of divorce among rabbis rose precipitously.

As a group, the generation of synagogue builders had at least been prepared to admit, on any specifically religious issue, that they were the amateurs and the rabbi was the "pro." Not so the inheritors, who had the self-confidence to do unto their rabbis what they proudly proclaimed they would never do (for instance) unto their adulterous friends: namely, be "judgmental." And once Jewish learning was declared irrelevant to the rabbi's qualifications to serve, and his status as a teacher of the tradition was perceived to confer a merely arbitrary authority, he became nothing more than an employee—one whose job specifications were alarmingly vague and were in addition subject to periodic reevaluation by his employers.

A rabbi entering his congregational office one day would find a secretary sending out a mailing to the entire membership, signed by the synagogue president and reminding the congregation that the rabbi's

contract was coming up for renewal. The mailing would be a survey, designed to find out whether and how well the rabbi was "meeting your needs." The member-consumers might rate the rabbi for pulpit ability, community involvement, hospital visitations, ability to relate to children, and so forth. This was participatory democracy extended to the synagogue.

Few lay objections were raised to the ratings system. There was certainly no widespread, instinctive revulsion against it. Why should the rabbi not be rated? Everything else was, from the President to television programs. If the rabbi found it hard to preach sermons when the people in front of him had been transformed from congregants and friends into judges, then perhaps (the reasoning went) he should have chosen another line of work.

If the rabbi were in fact voted out, another questionnaire would soon be distributed to uncover what the community wanted in its new rabbi. One questionnaire I saw had the box for "pulpit ability" subdivided in two: Judaic Emphasis and Socio-Political Emphasis. Age was important. Did the respondent want a rabbi under thirty-five, between thirty-five and forty-five (the most popular model), or forty-five and older?

OLDER rabbis were especially vulnerable to mistreatment. They had entered the rabbinate at a time when the synagogue builders were in control and the atmosphere was friendly, and often they had no formal contracts. In those years the pattern was to write a simple letter of agreement the first year or so, but after that, rabbis who felt secure in their standing rarely bothered with legal formalities. They were accustomed to relying upon the good faith of synagogue officers, and after five or ten years thought of themselves as members of the community. Now they suddenly found themselves being eased out of pulpits they had occupied for twenty or more years, and, what was almost worse, perceived as outsiders. In a week or two even their supporters would shrug their shoulders and tell themselves that rabbis come and rabbis go, but they had

to continue moving in their accustomed circles and could not prolong controversy. (One undeniable sign of the change in atmosphere is that today the Rabbinical Assembly provides rabbis with legal counsel during formal contract negotiations.)

Among rabbis who survived the ordeal of periodic reevaluation, and were retained in their posts, feelings of isolation and loneliness grew, and could not even be relieved by talking about the problem with colleagues. To admit that things were not going well was to confess professional incompetence. The more conscientious the individual rabbi, the more he would tend to blame himself for the level of Jewish education in his synagogue, the declining membership, the flight of the youth, or his own inability to win over some implacable neurotic. Intellectually he might have understood that such problems were far beyond his control, but viscerally he could not help feeling it was somehow his fault. Failure was built into the job, along with humiliation and heart-break; to these were now being added the outright opposition or coldness of the "consumers."

Wherefore, yearning to live normal lives, many who could leave the pulpit did so. Others, with wives, children, mortgages, and no time to acquire new skills, anesthetized themselves with alcohol or drugs; many went in for therapy. For still others, by far the majority, the solution was denial—and ever higher levels of what Dr. Freedman calls "stress."

ONE will always find rabbis to testify that they are contented; I hardly mean to deny the possibility. One can also find rabbis who

neither resisted the spirit of the age nor were victimized by it but, quite simply, joined it; I hardly mean to deny that possibility either. What seems to me unarguable, however, is that, at least outside the Orthodox community (and sometimes inside as well), the accustomed attitudes toward rabbis simply no longer obtain. They have been replaced by a new form of anti-clericalism which, in contrast to the old, ideological kind, has moved inside the synagogue itself. By way of illustration let me conclude with a revealing incident.

In a New England town some years ago a worker in the local office of the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies phoned a rabbi to ask for help. It was about the time young Soviet Jews had taken to expressing their Jewish identity by dancing in the streets outside the Moscow synagogue on Simhat Torah, the festival of the Rejoicing of the Law. On this holiday, the scrolls of the Torah, always treated with great reverence, are removed from the ark and carried about the synagogue; the more exuberant congregants dance with them. In Moscow, the police, claiming that the young people were obstructing traffic, had dispersed the crowd.

The Federation worker had convinced the local TV station to broadcast pictures of American Jews celebrating the holiday; a narrator would then contrast the freedom of Jews here with conditions in the Soviet Union. But there were problems in scheduling. The station could not air the program at six o'clock on the night of the holiday unless it were filmed earlier. This meant it would have to be staged. The Federation man wanted the rabbi to get teenagers to come to the synagogue the week before

and dance about with the Torah scrolls.

The rabbi explained that the scrolls may only be removed from the ark for a religious ceremony and suggested several other ways to make the same point; the Federation worker rejected them. The rabbi argued that using Torah scrolls as props, to photograph a phony celebration, would not really help Soviet Jews, and would send the wrong message to the synagogue's young people, reinforcing their belief, already too strong, that TV was more powerful than anything else, including the ancient proprieties of the synagogue.

The next day an officer of the congregation came to call on the rabbi. He explained that the program would be good exposure for the synagogue as well as for the Federation. On his own responsibility he had obtained a list of young people from the school principal and given it to the Federation staff. They would do the telephoning; all the rabbi had to do was to be there on the designated evening. The synagogue members who were active in Federation would be upset if he failed to show up, or if it became known that he would not cooperate in community projects.

The rabbi showed up, and performed on cue for the camera, capering about with a Torah scroll on the wrong night of the week. Several days later, on the real night of the holiday, he looked in vain around the synagogue for the young people; they were at home, waiting to catch a glimpse of themselves in five seconds of film on the local news.

I offer this incident as a perfect metaphor for the current relationship between all too many American rabbis and their congregants.