

Non-Frum Rabbis??!! Blog by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

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The Jewish Press newspaper recently printed an article: “Can Shuls be Forced to Hire a Non-Frum Rabbi?” The author discussed the legal boundaries of religious institutions when they engage staff. Must the candidate live according to the religious rules of the employer? Or is an applicant protected by civil rights legislation, so that no one can be discriminated against based on their levels of religious observance? This is a serious issue with far-reaching ramifications, and legal clarity will ultimately come through decisions of the courts.

The article triggered in my mind another question: “Should Shuls Have Non-Frum Rabbis?” The question seems impertinent since it would seem obvious that rabbis are, by definition, living as frum, religiously observant Jews. And if a rabbi should be found to be engaging in egregiously non-halakhic behavior, I hope we would all agree that the rabbi should not be hired or maintained. After all, if the “religious leader” isn’t himself “religious”, how can he be a role model and teacher of religion to his community?

Yet, the question hinges on how we define “frum” and “non-frum.” Often, being frum is identified with being scrupulous in observing ritual laws—Shabbat, kashruth, taharat hamishpaha etc. But is a rabbi to be considered frum if guilty of rude behavior, publically embarrassing others, speaking lashon hara? Is a rabbi to be considered frum if he regularly skips daily minyan, or if he chats and jokes during prayer services, or if he seems rarely to be available to congregants—unless they are rich or influential in the congregation? Is a rabbi frum if he takes a full salary from the congregation but doesn’t work to his full capacity?

I like to believe that most rabbis are indeed frum in the full sense of the term. But there are, unfortunately, some rabbis who are non-frum when it comes to proper interpersonal relationships, when it comes to reverence during prayer, when it comes to genuine commitment to serve the congregation with full energy and full commitment.

Should Shuls have non-frum Rabbis? No, they shouldn’t. Should non-frum people be serving as rabbis? No, they shouldn’t.

As a general rule, congregations have the rabbis they deserve. If they hire and maintain proper rabbinic leadership, that is to their credit. If they hire and maintain “non-frum”

rabbis, this reflects poorly on their own religiosity and communal responsibility.

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