Ten Commandments for Being a Successful Rabbi

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1. Always Be Prepared to Help Resolve Conflicts.

A. There are always going to be conflicts among members over different details of simchas or other issues. Many times, they will turn to the rabbi for a resolution of these problems. Never turn them down. It is important to know that the rabbi cares. For example, they may have a dispute with the dues evaluation committee or with the Sisterhood or with another member. As long as you lend a sympathetic ear and try to settle the problem, even though your efforts may be futile, the member will know that you tried and his anger will be assuaged.

B. Make sure when it comes to policy matters that you clear everything with the board and president. For example, I wanted to start a nursery school when I first came to my synagogue. This was a policy matter, not a halakhic matter, and I was able to get it through by promising to be financially responsible for the teachers, equipment, and so forth. Of course, when it became a big success, the shul absorbed the school 100 percent. The point here is, do not try to implement policy matters before you consult with the president and board.

C. If you want to make any halakhic changes, please consult with the ritual committee and the president of the board, but the decision is yours. You are in complete charge of kashruth, Shabbat, personal status, and so forth, as well as who speaks from your pulpit. Do not let them take the power away from you, but do it in a nice way. However, if it is only an optional halakhic matter, then do not try to make a change without a consensus. For example, some women wanted to carry the Torah through the women's section. Today, we walk the Torah through the women's section. You could argue that it is more halakhically correct for the women to carry the Torah, and not for the men to walk it through the women's section. You can also argue the opposite. By the women carrying the Torah, they are actively participating, while when the Torah is walked through the women's section, the women only kiss the Torah but are not actively holding it. Since there was lots of opposition, I did not allow the women to take the Torah and walk it through the women's section, but I did allow the men to walk it through. This seemed to satisfy everyone, but it was my decision.

2. Listen to Everybody Politely When They Give You Advice, But Then Do What You Think Is Best.

There are people in our congregation who always come up with halakhically neutral suggestions on davening. Most of them are not particularly good ideas. Occasionally, they will come up with a good suggestion, which you should then implement. However, most of the time, you should not outright reject the suggestion, but say you will consider it and will talk to people about it. If they then persist, say it is not practical to implement it at this time, but you will keep it in mind. There are some nudniks, though, who are constantly pestering you. Just let what they say go in one ear and out the other. They can always bring halakhically neutral suggestions to the ritual committee, and when the ritual committee comes to you, you can veto them if they are not suitable.

3. Do Not Always Believe People.

Many times, people tell the rabbi what they think the rabbi wants to hear. Also, they may tell the rabbi what they think the congregation needs, although they themselves will not participate in it. For example, many times people have asked me to hold classes on the laws of Shabbat and kashruth, etc., and then never show up themselves. Also, they will say my sermons should deal with the minutiae of keeping Shabbat, when they are not really interested in it. This, of course, is not the purpose of a sermon. The purpose of a sermon is to elevate people, to make them learn something about themselves and their tradition, to make them feel good about the future, to give them hope. Also, when people make you personal promises, do not believe them. For example, if they say, "Oh, I have a condo. Call me and use it any time." Never call them. Wait until they call you and invite you for a specific date. People make all sorts of promises they cannot keep or will not keep because it was a spur of the moment thing. Never hold people to these kinds of promises. So many people have told me, "Rabbi, when my grandson gets married, or my daughter graduates from college, you are going to be there." They never send me a ticket, and I never go. Of course, many times people have asked me to do their wedding out of town, and they do send me tickets.

4. Make People Feel Good.

A. People, after talking to you, should feel good, even if you have to tell them no, even people who have double-crossed you. One of the hardest jobs of being a rabbi is that at a meeting one night the person who told you to push through a certain agenda cuts you off at the knees and leaves you dangling. He completely double-crosses you. The very next day, he will ask you for a favor, and you have to do it. If you cannot do it, if you bear a grudge, you will have a tough time being a rabbi.

B. When people come to you with their problems, make sure they leave feeling better than when they came, even if you cannot solve their problems. The very act of talking to you sometimes helps them. People who come to you with all sorts of health problems, such as advanced cancer, try to give them some sort of hope, not fake hope. People who come to you with problems with children, etc., even if you have to tell them they are wrong, do it in such a way that they know that you understand that they are trying, even though they made bad decisions.

C. The rabbi should never take credit for anything, but he should give it to those who helped him.

5. Always Encourage Women to Participate in the Synagogue.

A. Encourage women to serve on the board, not just the Sisterhood, but throughout the congregation. Encourage their comments. They are almost all college graduates with professions.

B. Never discourage a women's tefilla group, especially for bat mitzvahs. In our constitution, it says that women are entitled to have a women's tefilla group except for Shabbat mornings and holiday mornings, with Simhat Torah being the exception.

C. When women come to you for counseling, be very careful. Many times, they are very hurt and want to be held. Never do it. Keep two feet on the floor and two hands on the desk. Make sure that you never counsel a woman when you are alone in the shul. Also, try whenever possible to keep the door open at least a crack, even when your secretary is next door.

6. Be Friendly with Everyone in the Shul and the Community.

Be friendly with everyone in the shul, even those who disagree with you politically and even halakhically. Just because they disagree with you does not mean that they cannot be your friend. Many people will disagree with you on some issues, but still have confidence in you to come to you with their problems and have you officiate at their special occasions. Just because they may disagree with you is no reason for not making them feel that they are part of the shul. Make sure that you send letters to everyone in the congregation and your friends in the community if they or their family have a new baby, bar mitzvah, bat mitzvah, wedding, wedding anniversary, graduation, etc. Of course, make sure you send consolation letters on the loss of a loved one. Make sure you go to shiva minyans, and are available to help with tombstones, etc., as well as to be available for grief counseling. Also, make sure you write thank you notes to everyone who has done something for you or the shul.

7. Let Everyone in the Shul Who Wants to Do a Project Do It.

A rabbi does not have to be involved in everything. Let anyone start a class teaching Torah in the shul, assuming he or she has proper knowledge to do so. The more classes, the better. Let anybody who wants to be involved in different tzedakah programs, like visiting the sick, collecting food for the poor, helping with elderly. As long as it is halakhic and moral, let the people use their talents and release their energy to enhance the programming of the shul.

8. Do Not Become Associated with One Group in the Shul.

People should not feel that you are only the rabbi of this or that particular group. When you come to kiddush, speak to everyone. Make sure especially that you talk to the older people who many times feel shunned because they are no longer in control. Make a big thing of everyone's children. Ask about everyone's family and health, etc. Do not let anyone in the shul think that you only care about a few families or one segment of the shul. Greet everyone in shul with genuine warmth. Try to connect with everyone. I always shook the hand of everyone who came to the morning and evening minyans before the services started.

9. Always Try to Help People Solve Their Problems as Long as the Solution Is Halakhically Possible.

A. Many times people will come to you with halakhic problems. If there is a way to solve these problems halakhically; definitely do it. However, if there is no way to solve these problems halakhically, do not be afraid to tell them so in a nice way. Many times these problems cannot be solved. Sometimes you have to tell them to throw away dishes and pots. Sometimes you have to tell them they cannot marry this individual because the halakha does not allow it. Do not be afraid to tell them that this problem is not solvable if it is not solvable. However, if halakhically it can be solved, make sure you let them know that the problem can be solved. You do not have to accept strict positions just to satisfy two or three people in the community. People should have confidence in your learning, and then they will go along with your decisions. However, do not, as I said earlier, effect halakhic changes in the shul without consultation. Do not spring anything on the shul unawares; and do not make your decisions retroactive. If things have already been promised and they are halakhically correct, they should be upheld.

B. Also, remember that you do not work from 9 to 5, and if people have problems, you have to take care of them, no matter what time it is or what day it is. They may even come knocking at your door on Shabbat.

10. Do Not Fraternize with the People in the Shul Too Much.

Do not be one of the boys. If you act like one of the boys, they will treat you like one of the boys. You should be friendly with everyone and invite them to your house and accept invitations, but do not play cards with them. Do not go on individual outings with them. Make sure they call you rabbi. You must protect the office, even though it is all right to be informal. I, personally, am very informal. However, everybody knows there is a line and nobody violates that line. It is like with your children. You are pals with your children, but at a certain point, you are not their pal but their authority figure. I, personally, never attended board meeting in the synagogue because I knew that I would be drawn into foolish

arguments, and I would be just one of the boys. A rabbi should not be involved in policy matters, like what color the kitchen should be painted, or what the dues structure should be. The rabbi should only be involved in dues when members approach him and tell him they lost their business or they are losing their house or getting a divorce. This is no longer a policy matter but a halakhic matter of human dignity. Members will call you about everything, and you should listen to them. If they have problems with policy, you should tell them to call the president or committee chairman, but you should also tell them that you will inform the president and the committee chairman that this person is unhappy. My guiding rule has always been: Help everyone but trust no one! Do not let them use their friendship with you to cause you to make unsound decisions; that’s why you have to maintain a distance. You are not their buddy; you are their rabbi. It does not mean you cannot enjoy their company but you have to maintain a distance.