Reflections on a Changing Rabbinate

View PDF

Rabbi Dr. Reuven P. Bulka, C.M., Rabbi Emeritus at Congregation Machzikei Hadas in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, is the author of many books and articles, has made 345 blood/platelet donations, is Chair of the Trillium Gift of Life Network (the Ontario governmental agency in the Ministry of Health and Long Term Care responsible for Organ and Tissue Donation and Transplantation), as well as being the founder and CEO of Kind Canada Généreux. He was appointed a member of the Order of Canada on June 28, 2013. He is married to Leah Kalish-Rosenbloom, and together they share many generations of offspring. This article appears in issue 25 of Conversations, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

Rabbi Dr Reuven P Bulka CM Rabbi Emeritus at Congregation Machzikei Hadas in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, is the author of many books and articles, has made 345 blood/platelet donations, is Chair of the Trillium Gift of Life Network (the Ontario governmental agency in the Ministry of Health and Long Term Care responsible for Organ and Tissue Donation and Transplantation), as well as being the founder and CEO of Kind Canada Généreux. He was appointed a member of the Order of Canada on June 28, 2013. He is married to Leah Kalish-Rosenbloom, and together they share many generations of offspring. This article appears in issue 25 of Conversations, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

Opening Reflection

The rabbinate is not a cookie-cutter vocation. Every shul is different, at the same time that every shul is similar to its counterparts.

Shuls in larger cities such as New York City, Los Angeles, Miami, Toronto, etc., are more likely to be homogeneous. In smaller cities, such as Dallas, Little Rock, Seattle, Ottawa, etc., Orthodox synagogues are likely to have a mixed population, including many members who do not identify as Orthodox. In the shul in Ottawa I

have been privileged to serve, I reckon that maybe one-quarter of the membership identify as Orthodox.

Then why belong to an Orthodox shul? There are many possible reasons, including that it is where the parents belonged, or that they like the other rabbi less, among others.
This mixed multitude keeps a rabbi on the alert. Sensitivity to every congregant demands a more inclusive way of thinking. It is in congregations such as these that rabbis are most needed, and also most challenged.

Rabbinic authority can often be a casualty of these types of rabbinate. "What the rabbi says is the law" is not automatically true. Rabbis who think they have unlimited influence are quickly humbled when they try to stop a Kiddush Club that goes on in the middle of Shabbat and Yom Tov services. This can be true even in larger cities with more homogeneous memberships.

Of course, there are other issues, many of which are discussed herein. Rabbis do have influence, but they are best advised to use that influence judiciously, and not as an authoritarian hammer. That is a most crucial point that those entering the rabbinate need absorb, among other important points.

Much of what I share with you in this essay reflects the thinking of a rabbi who has held a pulpit in a small city environment. I have chosen to highlight several issues wherein the rabbinate has changed, but there is more that could and should be written on this. What is presented here is descriptive without being judgmental.

A New World

The famous witticism—Had I known I would live this long, I would have taken better care of myself—resonates with me as I begin this presentation. Had I known that I would spend over 50 years in the rabbinate, and had I further known that I would be asked to “pen” a retrospective on the rabbinate, I would have taken more notice of the changes.
The first thought that comes to mind is the pen. I am not penning anything these days. I am computering this piece. Pens are obsolete, as are typewriters, newspapers (soon), checks, land line telephones, and so forth. So much change has occurred outside the rabbinate, with implications for the rabbinate itself. What is not clear is whether it is for better or for worse, or both.

Time has always been a challenge for rabbis, i.e., how to fit so many obligations into a day. The computer came with a promise of so much time-saving—but not

for me, or many of my colleagues. In the past decade, I average at least two hours a day on the computer, just responding to emails. Emails and other linking ways do connect us more easily, but that will never be a substitute for real, face-to-face interaction,

For rabbis, the universe has expanded. And the rabbi, like it or not, dare not detach from that universe.

One relatively trivial example: In the past, when reciting the Mi sheBerakh for those who needed a refuah shelemah (full recovery), we included congregational members, their families, and upon request, other people in the city. Now, thanks to e-communication, the list is international. That is good. But try telling that to congregants who think that having so many names to mention takes too much time.
Access to information means that the congregation knows whatever the rabbi knows—and probably sooner. The days when news commentary formed a significant part of the rabbi's Shabbat morning address are just about over. Some would argue that it is a good thing, that rabbis should deliver only divrei Torah. I am not so sure.

On balance, the key to good rabbinic sermons is that they be insightful, relevant to living a meaningful life, related when possible to the goings on in the world, and inspirational. In that regard at least, not much has changed.

A Major Change

Arguably the major change in today's rabbinate comes from other rabbis. Without entering into the debate as to whether or not it is a good thing, most congregational rabbis are almost instantaneously thrown into a competition with other community rabbis representing other, non-congregational institutions, for the souls of the community members.

Membership in storefront shuls, or less imposing and thus less financially draining structures, is usually much lower in cost, and the experience more leisurely, and more gastronomically enticing. The service is less formal, and therefore usually more user friendly. There is the added bonus of knowing that every year, honey, Hanukkah essentials, matzah, and other celebratory necessities will be provided, free of charge. Most congregational rabbis cannot compete with this, try as they may. It is time consuming, to say the least, among other challenges to keep up. Yet keep up they must, with at the very least other services that are deemed important by the would-be beneficiaries.

Whereas it was always desirable that rabbis be nice people, today this truism has been escalated a notch. Rabbis must be people pleasers—hosting, engaging, entertaining; whatever it takes to attract and maintain a healthy membership. Consider this not-unusual scenario: A member of a congregation is approached and cultivated by another, non-congregational rabbi. That rabbi would love the new recruit as a regular member in his institution, but the recruit feels a loyalty to the long-time rabbi at his regular shul. Then, for whatever reason, the congregational rabbi leaves the shul. A new rabbi is hired, who obviously has little connection with the members, including the fellow, or fellows, being recruited from the outside. But now, the outsider rabbi has the inside track, because he knows the recruit better than the new congregational rabbi. What happens, not infrequently, is that the newly hired rabbi has to deal with a mini-crisis of people leaving his new shul through no fault of his own.

This scenario can of course play out in circumstances not involving a second rabbi, such as people leaving because they are angry at the departure of the incumbent rabbi, who they think was nudged out, or ushered out. Whatever the case, rabbis not respecting the territorial integrity of other congregations because of the need to build up their own entity, and therefore having no hesitation to "raid," is a phenomenon with which today's congregational rabbis must deal. The best way to deal with it is by respectfully conversing with the particular rabbi and set up workable protocols for a viable modus operandi.

There is more. Rabbis today have another source of competition that rabbis of yesteryear did not have. It is what may be called the cyberization of the rabbinate. By mid-week, and at least a few days before any Yom Tov, everyone has access to wonderful thoughts and insights of great rabbinic thinkers. Sermonic volumes were certainly available 50 years ago, but mainly to a handful. The RCA Sermon Manual, for example, was for sale, but mainly rabbis bought it. If they "borrowed" an idea from there, hardly anyone knew. Today, this type of material is free, and readily accessible. Surely rabbis can use this material, but congregants will want more from their rabbi than the reiteration of what already appeared on the internet.

One can hardly criticize this easy availability. Torah ideas are being regularly shared, and that is a good thing. It just adds some extra pressure for today's rabbi to produce original material.

On the other hand, the internet is a most helpful tool for rabbis, who can track down the most obscure sources and information in developing thoughts and themes. But as some have argued, rabbis need be wary that too heavy a reliance

on the internet has a dulling impact on the thinking process. The internet, one way or another, poses challenges for today's rabbi.

Many congregational rabbis being produced today are truly outstanding, and they can easily handle these and other challenges. But as with all professions, there are outstanding rabbis, ordinary rabbis, and sometimes less-than-ordinary ones.

Conversions

One of the major changes I have lived through is the conversion matter. When I started life as a full-time rabbi, getting involved in conversion was not on my to-do list. But in a small (relative to New York, Toronto, etc.) city like Ottawa, Canada's capital, with its high assimilation rate, the only way not to get involved in conversion matters is by looking the other way, effectively not acting responsibly. In those days, rabbis prided themselves that they did not touch conversion.

Who aside from rabbis should handle this? And what right would we have to complain about non-halakhic conversions if those who would do conversions only according to halakha refuse to touch it? Because I could not fathom ignoring the issue, and the families affected, I decided to become involved, by teaching candidates in Ottawa and sending the candidates to a Bet Din in Montreal for finalization of the process. After a number of years, the Montreal Bet Din with which we coordinated giyyur ceased to function, so the entire giyyur became a "made in Ottawa" endeavor. That too stopped when the giyyur issue exploded a number of years ago, and the question of whose conversion was bona fide and could be recognized underwent a wholesale review.
It was clear that different Orthodox rabbis had different requirements for conversion.

For various reasons—not the least of which was that Rabbinical Council of America endorsed conversions be accepted by the Israeli Chief Rabbinate—a more streamlined approach to conversion was introduced, with regional rabbinic courts established under the auspices of the RCA. Independent Orthodox rabbinic courts now operate with no guarantee that their conversions will be "recognized" by the Israeli Chief Rabbinate, which is the apparent gold standard for conversion. The merits and demerits of this new approach have been debated quite vociferously. I do understand that standards are necessary, and that there is benefit in the new approach. But I yearn for the time when rabbis trusted each other to the point that colleagues accepted each other's conversions even if the standards differed.

Abuse

We grew up thinking that paradise on earth was living in a Jewish home. That is where tranquility abides, where peace and harmony prevail, where children flourish. I remember the shock I experienced when I learned about the high incidence of abuse in the Jewish home, reaching 25 percent of the Jewish population. I was skeptical almost to the point of denial, but it has become abundantly clear that if anything, it is worse. We are talking of all sorts of abuse—verbal assault, including insult, threat, vulgarity; physical assault and sexual attack.

There is no immunity in the more religious community. Actually, the more fundamentalist one's faith, the worse is the danger of abuse. This is a harsh, painful, but true reality. Most of us have stories of this, either of the first- or second-hand variety. We can hide behind the convenient curtain of "I refuse to hear ill of others." But closing ourselves from listening has no currency when lives are at stake. Thankfully, rabbis are listening more these days, but not always. Friendships get in the way, as well as other considerations, including fear of losing one's job. But does anyone deserve a job such as being a rabbi when rabbis are obliged even more than others to preserve and protect the community?

This reality, with all its devastating implications, is another example of rabbinic agenda items of which we were not forewarned before we entered the rabbinate. But that was then. Now, rabbis need to know that it is unlikely they will go through a rabbinic career without encountering abuse in the home, and in the community, including Jewish schools, and sometimes involving respected members of the community.

The most fundamental rule for rabbis is this: If someone comes crying for help, take it seriously. If you hear of abuse situations, do not wash your hands from doing what you can.

Intermarriage

I have purposefully placed the matter of intermarriage right after the issue of abuse. The two may seem unrelated, but they are connected. I have no statistics to back me up, nor is what I am herein suggesting necessarily reflective of any intermarriage of which I am directly aware. But I have a sense that many intermarriages are the result of abuse. Children who grow up in abusive homes have no reason to want to emulate that upbringing. Quite the contrary, they want to run as far away as they can. Intermarriage is the easiest way to do this,

especially when they know that the parents do not want that to happen.

The late great sage, Reb Moshe Feinstein, zt”l, is reputed to have given a most insightful explanation as to why many children of Sabbath-observant families coming from Europe in the twentieth century left the religious fold. He suggested that many of these Sabbath observers would lose their jobs on Friday, when they told their bosses that they would not be in tomorrow because of the Sabbath. They were told, “In that case, do not bother coming in on Monday. You are fired.” Many Sabbath-observant homes then became repositories of melancholy, as Friday night was spent lamenting the loss of the job, and the difficulty in facing a jobless future. Instead of Friday night being a joyous coming together, it became a dour, bleak, depressing event. Who would want to perpetuate the dour Sabbath in their own lives? This is the paraphrase of Reb Moshe’s observation.

With the incidence of abuse in Jewish homes hovering around one-third of Jewish homes being affected, I strongly suspect that the same question is being asked by today’s generation who grew up in such homes. Their response, in many instances, is to say, “Goodbye, Judaism, and good riddance.” Although this observation may seem startling, it should not be. The logic is simple. If we begin with the premise that many intermarriages are the result of being turned off by Judaism, and if we further factor in the high rate of abuse, not to say unhappiness, in the Jewish home, why would we not think that the being turned off is as a result of the abuse, the unhappiness, and the silence of those who should be screaming from the rafters.

In general, when the connection to Jewishness is tenuous, and when the availability of potential Jewish partners is quite low, as is the case in smaller communities, you have the further makings of a perfect storm to generate a very imperfect situation. In smaller cities, the intermarriage rate, even if it may not be much more pronounced than in larger communities, is more heavily felt. In larger cities, the homogeneous make-up of the typical Orthodox shul is reflected in the lower intermarriage rate within the congregation. After all, the intermarriage rate among the Orthodox is significantly lower, as per the by now famous Pew report. In smaller cities, with a high percentage of the members of an Orthodox congregation being non-Orthodox, there is likely to be more intermarriage within the congregation.

What is a rabbi to do? Obviously, the rabbi cannot endorse, support, or even tacitly approve of intermarriage. At the same time, condemning the intermarriage poses great risk of alienating the family. Today’s families have essentially moved far away from rejecting their intermarrying children. No matter how distant they

may be from these children (in most instances, they are not at all alienated), they make the conscious decision that they do not want to “lose” their children.

No rabbi would dare suggest that the parents renounce their children. The counselling conversation in this setting focuses on what can be done to make the best of the situation.

Divorce

It is difficult to gauge the divorce rate in the Jewish community. In the greater community, most statistics point to a rate approaching 50 percent. This means that almost one out of two marriages ends in divorce.

Recent findings suggesting that the rate has spiked, and that matters are improving, offer little comfort. The reason for the comfort being small is that part of the reason for the “improvement” is because people are delaying marriage, so that fewer years are spent in marriage, thereby lowering the possibility of divorce.

Within the Jewish community, the rate may be a tad lower, but only a tad, if that. It is generally assumed that the rate of divorce among the more religious is lower, but this does not mean that the marriages are happier. There is hardly a rabbi who is so fortunate as to have no divorced members in the congregation.

Most rabbis must deal with divorce, and it is not an easy matter. Battle lines are drawn, accusations and recriminations abound, and the warring parties seek out allies to support them. Often, the rabbi is dragged in to the mess. As much as rabbis are advised to stay out of the fray, it is not always that easy. Whatever side the rabbi takes is guaranteed to create friends and enemies, not a good scenario for congregational harmony. Having the skill, based on good training, to handle these situations well, is another newer reality rabbis confront.

An added complication is what I have termed get abuse. This is when one of the parties, usually but not always the husband, refuses to grant or cooperate in the get process, thereby standing in the way of the spouse remarrying. Ironically, this is more likely to happen in more religious circles than in secular Jewish circles. When it does happen, it can be terribly painful and frustrating. Welcome to the rabbinate.

Another new issue in the matter of divorce is the rabbi’s own marriage. The pressures of the rabbinate today create sometimes inordinate demands on the rabbi’s time and emotions. These can drain the rabbi, leaving little left for the family. The resultant tensions can literally be devastating. Many rabbis have built-

in protection against this potential intrusion, including having a day off every week for home matters only. The six-day-a-week rabbi is for many a necessary invention. It is part of a concerted effort to assure a good quality of life for the rabbinic family.

Israel

What a blessing it is to have a vibrant State of Israel. The re-establishment of the State of Israel has been a game changer for the Jewish community. Who can forget the life-saving reality of Israel welcoming the Jews of what was then the Soviet Union? What would have happened to them had they not come to Israel?

Israel has come with many challenges, but all these challenges are worth it if we contemplate the alternatives. Israel is the country of refuge that my grandparents never had—nor did the six million. We are living the miracle. Nothing that I can think of regarding Israel as a true blessing matches the enormity of this life-saving that defines Israel.

But there is more, much more. We are all connected to Israel. We have family and friends in Israel. We are inspired by Israel, by its extraordinary achievements even at the same time as it is under constant attack and threat. We, like the rest of the world, benefit from Israel's technology and medical prowess. Indeed, we are proud.

But Israel also places upon us a heavy responsibility. As much as Israel guards over us, we must stand guard for Israel. No rabbi can function legitimately as a congregational and communal leader without having concern for Israel as a major priority. In Israel, its citizens are under constant assault. Outside Israel, this tiny speck on the globe is under constant verbal assault, alas sometimes even from within Jewish ranks.

BDS is too often promoted, even led, by Jews. Rabbis must be involved in this ongoing battle that immorally attempts to de-legitimize Israel, be it from BDS, distorted reporting, false accusations, and so forth. The reality of Israel as part of our lives is a welcome addition that we embrace. We must embrace the challenge to this reality with equal vigor.

Orthodoxy's Success

When I entered the rabbinate 50 years ago, I, along with many other colleagues, was under the impression that we were fighting a losing battle. Orthodoxy, compared with the other trends within Judaism, comprised a miniscule part of the

population. Our days were numbered. After all, how could Look Magazine be wrong?

Here we are, 50 years later, with Orthodoxy thriving, and the other trends struggling to know what is the secret to its success. Look who is wrong!
I firmly believe that there is no secret and no shortcut. The Orthodox, to a greater or lesser extent, all made living Jewishly the central motif of their lives. They did so not as a technique; they did so because that was the right way to live. The rest is history.

There is no city in North America with more than 5,000 Jews that has no Day School. Freedom of religion has almost totally eliminated any possibility that observing the Sabbath will impact on one's employment. Visibly identifying as Jewish rather than hiding it became the in thing, media-wise and otherwise. Jews counted, and Jewishness mattered.

Tens of thousands of food products are today certified as kosher, and not only for the Jewish market. Jews make up only one-quarter of the kosher consuming market. Even for millions of non-Jews, kosher matters; Jewish values matter.

We dare not be triumphalist, not as rabbis, not as human beings. We cannot gloat at the failures, or lack of success, of others. They are our brothers and sisters, part of the larger Jewish community. We are responsible for everyone, however distant.

A key arena wherein this plays out is in the home. Many Jews are returning to their roots. I hesitate to refer to them as ba'alei teshuvah, since that literally means "masters of return, of repentance." No one is such a master. Repentance is a never-ending process. These returners often face a problem—can they return to their homes? After all, the parents do not observe the Sabbath, but they do. The parents do not abide by the kosher regulations, but they do. And on it goes. Often it is the rabbi who serves as the go-between. This is a new reality, and a challenging one. Getting the older generation to bend a little, and accommodate, and at the same time making sure that the returners are respectful of their elders, is not an easy task. But it is a necessary task, sometimes involving delicate negotiations, hand holding, reassurance, and respectfulness for people whose lifestyle one disagrees with on principle. But whoever said being a rabbi is easy?

Influence of the Outside World

When we were young, the question of who was welcome in the congregation was an issue. Should we allow people with beatnik hairstyles into the congregation?! That was the question, at least as far as I can remember. But the concern, in retrospect, seems petty.

Today, alternate lifestyles of all varieties give rise to a similar question, and even more so in smaller cities. What are rabbis to do? Personally, I find it hard to justify barring anyone from entry into a synagogue. Which Jew is so perfect as to be able to say that the not as perfect are not welcome? And what values do we make mandatory for entry?
Truthfully, if we made Sabbath observance, for example, a requisite, many shuls in smaller cities would be empty. Does that mean that we endorse the desecration of the Sabbath? The question itself is absurd to the point of not deserving a response. The world around us is changing, and concomitantly, its values are changing. The challenge of addressing this changing reality sensitively and effectively is daunting, but it cannot be avoided.

The allure of the outside world, previously not easily accessible to Jews but now so readily available, has contributed to the alarming rate of attrition within Jewish ranks. Massive efforts to head this off, to bring Jews back, particularly the younger generation, have been launched, most notably Birthright. As of now, we cannot tell how successful all these efforts will be. But the laudable move to save our posterity has created an interesting phenomenon; that is, Jews who are being paid, or subsidized, to stay Jewish.

Will this translate into a generation that will not want to pay dues to join a shul, or send their children to Jewish schools or camps? There are signs this might be happening. Rabbis are well served to be alert to this. It may be that the old model of how shuls worked needs adjustment at least, and possibly even more dramatic change. Another change for rabbis to contemplate.

But with all the changes and challenges, the rabbinate remains a calling that is full of promise, and a way of life that is so meaningfully rewarding.

A Final Thought

Today's challenges are somewhat different, as is the idiom of the time. Joining a shul is no longer a given. Many in this generation think they can manage without shul. Rabbis today face the newer challenge of convincing a sceptical sector of the community that shul is important, even necessary.

What has not changed is that each generation has its unique challenges, including ours. Consider, for example, that because of influences outside the immediate community, sacred values such as burial and shiv'ah are no longer slam dunks. Some Jews are opting for cremation, and a truncated shiv'ah, what I call a sheloshah, if not less. Rabbis can ill afford not to be prepared for the reality that what they may take for granted, congregational members seriously question, if not reject outright.

Like all previous generations, rabbis are well served to meet and address these challenges by understanding them, and by having the skill and the wisdom to best overcome them. In all matters, there is no better base from which rabbis should begin, and within which to operate, than by being sensitive, caring, dedicated, and kind. That will never change.