



Developing Rabbinical Leadership: New Ways to Measure Success

Jeannie Appleman

My seven-year-old daughter came home from yeshiva today and announced proudly that she had been unanimously elected to represent her second-grade class on student council. Her view of what it means to be a leader (handing out candy to her classmates) indicates that she knows the desires and interests of her constituency — always the starting place of an effective leader. As she grows, I wonder what message about leadership she will glean.

In every generation, we desire and feel obliged to hand down the traditions and values we care deeply about to our children and grandchildren. This *Sh'ma* series of columns addresses the ethics of leadership, and here we face specifically the legacy of leadership: What message about leadership do we want to pass on to the next generation? Do current approaches relay that message? How and by whom is rabbinical leadership defined, developed, and rewarded in our community? Are the operative rabbinical leadership approaches in our community successfully transforming synagogues and engaging our communities in the public arena to make social change? If not, which approach would?

Some leaders in our community feel that they must feed people charisma to win — and keep — their loyalty. We measure their effectiveness by the rousing speeches they deliver at cause-driven protests. But have we challenged them to listen to the stories and struggles of their congregants and develop the capacity of these members to negotiate on their own interests with public officials?

Similarly, we reward legacy-building among our leaders. We measure effectiveness by the size of the membership, staff, budget, and number of programs. Why do we not hold our rabbinical leaders and ourselves accountable for building the capacity of lay leaders to build covenantal relationships across ethnicity and faith tradition? Our community is not well served by pretending that we are immune to skyrocketing healthcare and housing costs or shabby treatment in senior citizens' homes and unemployment.

If effective rabbinical leadership has nothing to do with charisma or legacy-building, then what does it entail? This is the question that a growing circle of rabbis, rabbinical school students, and administrators are exploring through broad-based (or congregation-based) organizing, invented by the Industrial Areas Foundation. The basics of this approach to leadership are simple to list, harder to practice:

- Leaders must have followers, so the relationship between leader and followers is central.

- A relational leadership culture focuses on the process of identifying, engaging, and developing people, engaging them around their own drives, interests, and gifts, rather than prepackaged issues or causes.
- Covenantal relationships start with the one-to-one meeting of two individuals, build on an exchange of stories, and grow much deeper than transactional relationships.
- This relational work must be tested in the wider public arena, in the dynamic of action and reaction and new action.

I recently asked a rabbi in a Los Angeles suburb to describe the impact on his rabbinate of broad-based organizing. He shared a story of how a bar mitzvah meeting had been transformed from task-oriented to conversational. Rather than asking his student, “How well do you know the parsha?” he asks, “What about this parsha moves you, and why?” Similarly, the decision about who will be honored with an aliyah becomes an opportunity to probe the role the child's family and friends have played in the student's life. This is how rabbis can create covenantal and transformative relationships, as opposed to relationships that are merely transactional. By employing relational power, we build community one person and institution at a time. Weaving together our shared stories and mutual interests, we provide opportunities for our generation to model the values we cherish, create the communities our families deserve, and work to create a just world.

Jeannie Appleman directs the “Rabbinical Leadership for Public Life” project at the Jewish Funds for Justice with Meir Lakein as co-trainer. She works with the IAF to provide training and internships to rabbinical students from four seminaries. The project was conceived two years ago with Rabbi Stephanie Kolin and Noah Farkas.
