

Exploring Citizen Professional Practice:  
A Case Study of the Twin Cities Rabbinical Community  
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## SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION

Public policy leaders, in order to ensure sustainable, relevant policy in the twenty-first century, must design and discover new approaches to citizen participation and engagement, both of which have declined in recent decades. Scholars suggest that one of the reasons for this decline is a widening gap between professionals and the communities in which they work. If so, it follows that solutions lie in a renewed professional practice, which has been labeled democratic, public, or citizen professionalism. Such professionalism emphasizes the knowledge, responsibility, and capacity of the community, **together with** that of the professional, for success in work. This paper examines this possibility via a case study of the professional practices of congregational rabbis in St. Paul and Minneapolis in 2009.

### *1.1 The Decline of the Commons*

In recent decades, civic and political scholarship has documented the decline of the commons and of civic participation.<sup>1</sup> As individuals spend more time working, and retreat to their homes when not at work, public spaces – where diverse groups of citizens come together around a common purpose – have shrunk. Simultaneously, the lack of connection to one another has sharply eroded the notion of a common world created through the labors of citizens. Such a notion has been replaced by the imagery and identities of citizens as consumers or clients.<sup>2</sup> In the minds of most Americans, “they the government” long ago replaced “we the people;” today’s citizens are merely taxpayers, paying (often grudgingly) for a governmental system that provides public services in return.

A growing body of literature points to a concurrent loss of trust in one another and in the institutions of democracy. What results is political, civic, and social dysfunction. As Skocpol and Fiorina write, “everyday Americans are increasingly mere spectators of public affairs. Much of the time they are benignly disinterested observers; at other moments angry or cynical. Either way, ordinary citizens have less and less involvement in shaping our common affairs...”<sup>3</sup>

### *1.2 Professionals in American Life*

A number of diagnoses have been advanced to explain the problem of declining civic engagement in America, and to point toward solutions. One relatively under-developed but promising analysis highlights the roles of professions.

Historically, members of the professional strata in this country performed as “trustees of social knowledge;” as such, members of professions were both technically competent and morally motivated. William Sullivan describes this in the context of an early twentieth century

professional ideology in which professionals' social responsibilities featured prominently in a contract with the public.<sup>4</sup>

By the late twentieth century, according to Sullivan, a reformulation of professionalism as “trustees of expert knowledge” occurred, eclipsing the earlier civic orientation. Professional training programs prioritized highly specialized technical skill-building and application, emphasizing the expertise of the professional in comparison to those outside of the field. Professional leadership began to focus inward, “toward building its own organizations and prestige.”<sup>5</sup>

This emphasis on “technical”<sup>6</sup> or “technocratic”<sup>7</sup> expertise forced professionals to shed the social responsibility that previously accompanied their work. Steven Brint writes:

...today...professions rarely point to the social importance of their work as justification for social distinction...instead, they justify differences between themselves and other people by discussing the kinds of *skills* involved in their work. They almost uniformly describe their work as involving...complex forms of knowledge...in the background there is the triumph of expertise as a basis of distinction...<sup>8</sup>

Today's expert professionals tend to view their professional identities as “disciplinary,” rather than “civic,”<sup>9</sup> yielding a concentration of power within the professions and away from the communities within which professionals must work. Consider the relationships between clients and attorneys, doctors and patients, teachers and students; in all cases, community members have become merely consumers of specialized services. Knowledge is now only a one-way flow, from the expert to the consumer.

What effect has this shift in professional focus had on America's civic health? Harry Boyte argues: “the effects of technocracy are clear: people lose the confidence in their own insights and experiences.”<sup>10</sup> Without confidence in their own insights, even with regard to matters of their own health and learning, people thus retreat even further from civic life.

To address this civic decline, Boyte, William Doherty, Albert Dzur, and others have emphasized and encouraged a new kind of professionalism, one that highlights the importance of individual and community knowledge *in addition to* expert professional knowledge for the professional to practice his craft. Says Sullivan, “professional life can and needs to be restructured in ways that suffuse technical competence with civic awareness and purpose.”<sup>11</sup>

The paradigm articulated by these scholars and practitioners is known as democratic, public, or citizen professionalism. The emphasis is on professional practice that can only be

realized, and professionals who can find greater fulfillment in their work, when citizens are brought on board as collaborators and co-creators.

Within this framework, the “professional” and the “client” relate on a more equal plane. As an example, Judyth Sachs writes that “democratic professionalism [in education]...facilitates the participation in decision making by students, parents and others and seeks to develop a broader understanding in the community of education...”<sup>12</sup>

Dr. Bill Doherty, professor of family social science and partner in the Families and Democracy project at the University of Minnesota, traces the beginning of his own transformation to citizen professional practice when he recognized, and began to tap into, the community dimension of family therapy.<sup>13</sup> Rather than approaching their work as a series of unrelated one-on-one relationships between the therapist and the individual seeking treatment, Doherty and colleagues in the Families and Democracy project seek to “[push] the boundaries of the clinical office into the larger world.”<sup>14</sup> This work is based on a belief that “the greatest untapped resource for strengthening families is the knowledge, wisdom, and lived experience of families and their communities.”<sup>15</sup> In unleashing the power and knowledge of citizens, Doherty achieves mutual benefit; he is a better psychotherapist, and is more fulfilled, as a “citizen professional.” The citizens with whom he is working are themselves more confident, more active, and more energized within their own families, their communities, and the broader world.

### ***1.3 Citizen Professional Possibilities in Clergy Practice***

Doherty and his colleagues have uncovered the community dimension of therapy, which is more commonly considered privatized work. When the community dimension is already overtly acknowledged and in fact is critical to the professional practice, what opportunities exist to make the work more public?

Public work, as described by the Center for Democracy and Citizenship, is work of a public, a mix of people whose interests, backgrounds, and resources can be quite different. This requires political skills such as listening, bargaining, understanding diverse self-interests, and being able to map power relations... Public work develops our core identities as citizens who are broad producers, rather than simply consumers or clients or experts or any narrower role. It liberates our talents and capacities. What we build and create we can also recreate. Thus, public work also makes clear that the world is open and fluid, not static and fixed. It helps to regenerate hope in our time.<sup>16</sup>

Congregational clergy are important examples of professionals whose work is practiced in community, as both within and outside of congregations, "...clergy practice occurs in public, and clergy practice engages its participants in practices of public service....in the United States especially, clergy have also articulated visions of social good that have been catalysts to the organization of voluntary associations and the promotion of public policies directed to the betterment of society."<sup>17</sup>

Albert Dzur, in his work on democratic professionalism, identifies a realm that he calls "middle democracy," (that which is between institutions of the state and individual actions)<sup>18</sup> and argues that professions situated within this realm have a *responsibility* to operate in such a way as to "help mobilize citizen participation inside and outside their professional domains."<sup>19</sup> Following Dzur, clergy, who practice "at the intersections of personal and collective, religious and secular public experience,"<sup>20</sup> have both the opportunity and the responsibility to operate as citizen professionals.

Do they, in fact? Mary McClintock Fulkerson, professor at Duke Divinity School, highlights the failure of Christian seminaries to train future clergy for work in the world outside of the congregation. What are described as "practice" courses pertain only to matters internal to the life of congregations, like preaching, counseling, and the organizational life of the church.<sup>21</sup> Bill Doherty believes that schools that train professionals will only change as a response to the practices and needs of those in the field. It is unlikely that clergy are trained to function as citizen professionals.

Therefore, a richer line of questioning relates to what seasoned professionals are already doing, not how they are being trained. How are clergy in the field practicing their profession? How do congregants today relate to clergy members, and vice versa? What roles do clergy play in the places of worship within which they work? How might, or how do, clergy members impart civic skills in the everyday practice of their profession? How do they encourage congregational engagement in the wider world?

#### ***1.4 American Judaism***

Judaism proves to be a fertile religion within which to explore such questions. In The New Rabbi, Steven Fried points out: "Judaism is entirely democratic...On Shabbat, the paid clergy usually take the lead roles. But the whole point of the bar mitzvah is to remind people that

any Jew can do it.”<sup>22</sup> Arnold Eisen, currently Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, the Conservative Movement’s main rabbinical school, wrote the following:

I turn now to a...consideration essential to the “Jewishness” of modern Jewish practice: its democratic character... it seems fair to say that Jewish ritual figured densely and intensely in the lives of ordinary folk for most of the two millennia preceding the modern period. Most observances did not require the officiation of individuals who were either professionally trained or charismatically gifted...<sup>23</sup>

Similarly, in 1957, the Executive Vice President of the Rabbinical Assembly<sup>1</sup> asserted that

all of the things that the rabbi does today used to be done in the past, but by a number of people...[other than the rabbi] . The master of ceremonies at weddings was a *badkhan*; arrangements for funerals, for unveilings, and other duties relating to death, were attended to by the *chevreh kadisha*. Education was in the hands of the *melamed*, visiting the sick – *bikkur holim*...a *linat hazedek* stayed with the dying. There were *asarah batlanim* who made up the minyan, and the congregation did not have to depend on the rabbi for that.<sup>24</sup>

In addition to the very democratic nature of Jewish religious practice, synagogues in America evolved in the later twentieth century as sites for democratic practice and skill building. Young Jews are brought into the community of adults upon the occasion of the Bar or Bat Mitzvah, and many continue their involvement, via youth group or youth commission, into their teenage years. Youth commission participation, in addition to providing a social outlet and an opportunity to continue learning about Judaism, teaches teenagers how to contribute, how to make decisions, how to fundraise, how to plan events, and how to move from “showing up” to “leading” – all skills vital to fruitful civic participation as adults. Youth groups even provide opportunities for local, regional, and national leadership.

As microcosms of the broader world, synagogues can serve as places for adult congregants, as well, to learn how to operate as citizens. Though the community within a synagogue may not be as diverse as the world beyond, both Jewish upbringing and current-day practice and observance are likely to differ widely among congregants in any given synagogue. Within congregations one can also find variance in terms of occupation, political views, socio-economic status, city and country of origin, age, race/ethnicity, length of affiliation with the synagogue, marital status, and even religion. Explains one of the rabbis with whom I spoke:

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<sup>1</sup> The Rabbinical Assembly is the Conservative movement’s rabbinic union.

I actually think that politics reflects synagogue life, not the other way around. It's a coalition government. [This synagogue] is a conservative synagogue by membership, but it's a synagogue comprised of people who come from all different backgrounds and all walks of life, from the person who makes nine figures, to the person on welfare, to the person for whom Obama is a radical, to [the person who asks,] "how could you not have voted for Obama?"

Further, Judaic expertise is not the exclusive province of the rabbi, as any adult Jew is authorized to lead prayer services, rabbis are viewed as teachers and advisors, and the synagogue is seen as a place of community as well as a place of prayer and study. In Judaism, rabbis are not considered intermediaries between God and man, as individuals have their own relationships to God. The word "rabbi" means "teacher," and congregational rabbis today function less as authorities and more as a counselors, advisors, facilitators and teachers. Finally, Hebrew gives us three different terms for synagogue: "beit t'filah," or house of prayer; "beit midrash," or house of study; and "beit kneset," or house of assembly. It is this last term that is heard most frequently; therefore, the synagogue, the space in which a rabbi most commonly practices his or her profession, is recognized by the religion as a place of community.

Finally, Judaism in America, more so than in other countries, has evolved in a distinctly democratic and communitarian fashion, as "discrimination and persecution, the foremost challenges confronting most Diaspora Jews through the ages, have in America been less significant historical factors than have democracy, liberty...church-state separation, and voluntarism."<sup>25</sup> In a forward to the book Becoming a Congregation of Learners, Lawrence Hoffman writes: "Though synagogues [exist] world-wide, only here have they become such a fixture of civic life...it is impossible to imagine America without religion at its core, or American Judaism without the synagogue at its center."<sup>26</sup>

## **1.5 Methods**

Though my own Jewish identity and my family's affiliations span all of the major movements, when I began this research, my family had recently moved to the Twin Cities, and affiliated with a Conservative synagogue. As a member of the Jewish community as well as a student of public policy and citizen participation, my interest in the subject is both personal and academic.

I wondered how rabbis practice their profession in Minnesota, a state well-known for its high degree of civic and political participation and its populist traditions<sup>27</sup>, as well as its committed and engaged Jewish community. I sought to determine whether public professional practice is possible within the realm of the synagogue, via its most visible professional, the congregational rabbi – and if any Minnesota rabbis currently include citizen habits in their work.

I began by surveying literature in three broad categories: civic engagement, work and professional identity, and Judaism in America. Within the latter two categories, I explored writings on professional paradigms, clergy training, rabbinic identity, and the (expected and actual) roles played by American rabbis over the last century. Simultaneously, from February through October 2009, I had conversations with 20 rabbis, 19 of whom serve in congregations across the cities of St. Paul and Minneapolis and the surrounding suburbs.<sup>2</sup> These rabbis represent all four major movements within American Judaism,<sup>3</sup> work in congregations of varying sizes, were trained at six different seminaries, and at the time of the interviews had been in their current positions for periods ranging from seven months to twenty-five years. The conversations incorporated such topics as the individual's path to the rabbinate, the congregation's culture, the rabbi's community involvement beyond the synagogue, and opportunities for congregants to be involved in synagogue life. My conversations with the rabbis were supplemented by perusal of congregations' websites, synagogue newsletters, and rabbis' sermons when available.

I designed the study as a participatory research project, conducted in partnership with the rabbis themselves. I approached each interview as a conversation and a shared exploration of each rabbi's own professional habits and guiding principles. I immersed myself in these conversations and the ensuing correspondence, but also stepped back frequently to identify general patterns and broader frameworks.

## SECTION 2: THE RABBI AND THE CONGREGATION

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<sup>2</sup> The twentieth rabbi is Hayim Herring, who leads an organization focusing on synagogue transformation. Rabbi Herring previously served for 10 years in a Minneapolis-area Conservative congregation.

<sup>3</sup> Orthodox, Conservative, Reconstructionist, and Reform.

How do American rabbis operate in the twenty-first century? How do they describe the work that they do? What inspires them, and by what are they challenged? What characterizes the dynamic between the rabbi and the congregation?

## **2.1 *The Rabbi***

In 1975, Abraham Feldman listed “principal functions of the modern [American] rabbi”:

...the rabbi has to be first and foremost a preacher...he ought to be a scholar...[is] expected to be an educator...The rabbi of today is expected to be the pastor of his people...The rabbi is expected to be a leader in the social movements in the community, within Jewish life, and in the general life...The rabbi is expected to be an ambassador of the Jewish community, the interpreter of Jewish thought, ideals, and practices to the [non-Jewish] community. He represents his people in all kinds of public functions...<sup>28</sup>

Today, most congregational rabbis function simultaneously as ritual leaders, life-cycle conductors, teachers, managers, innovators, community leaders, organizers, motivators, nonprofit executives, outreach professionals, therapists, social workers, and counselors. As Rabbi Hayim Herring, a former congregational rabbi who currently serves as the director of a nonprofit organization focusing on synagogue transformation and renewal, writes, “...there are few professions in which one might be telling stories to preschool children one moment and counseling a family on whether to remove life-sustaining medical equipment from a loved one in the next.”<sup>29</sup>

Rabbis who go into congregational work thus operate as generalists, and most find their work rich and rewarding. They enjoy the day-to-day variety inherent in work with multi-generational, diverse congregational communities. One rabbi explains:

It’s never the same thing twice. You need to write, you need to speak, you need to engage one-on-one. You need to administrate, you need to move chairs, you need to both plan ahead and be able to change at the last minute.

While most consider the work to be positive, rabbis are also challenged by its all-encompassing nature. One explains, “We are one of the professions that blurs the line: it’s not that you bring work home, it’s that you are always in the role.” The “role” includes the rabbi’s public profile as the most visible and permanent representative of the synagogue, and the expectations and needs of the congregation and of congregants. Said another:

One thing about the rabbinate that is both alluring and terribly difficult is that it involves everything. There’s really nothing that isn’t pertinent to rabbinics. And so it’s good

because if you're into everything, you can address anything you want. You can talk about anything you want in a sermon. Psychology, sex, music. Anything. Yet the downside is you get hundreds of emails a day and you get letters asking for your attention to "this, this, or this," and if you [ignore something], you feel guilty.

One rabbi said, "Even when you're not in the role, it becomes a part of what people expect and how they interact with you. I'm taking a writing class, and [in that class,] I'm "the Rabbi." A second rabbi talked about being "tired of being in the limelight, sort of like a politician who is criticized by the opposition all the time...it can wear you down." Another said, "There is a degree to which you are always on, always watched, always noticed," which a fourth called "fishbowl living." A fifth stated, "Look, I love it and I wouldn't trade it for anything right now. But if someone has any reason for not going into the pulpit, it's probably a valid one. It's a stressful life."

A related concern is how the rabbi is addressed by congregants, and what impact that may have on the actual and perceived roles held by each. One senior rabbi emphasized the importance of separating the office of rabbi from the Rabbi him or herself:

One always has to be careful that one is not confusing the role for the person. When things happen around here that I'm not proud of or don't like, it's very important for me to be able to separate...there are limitations to what I can do because I don't own the place - I just serve as the rabbi.

I wondered whether a rabbi's insistence that congregants use the title might serve as a barrier to public professional work, in that it serves as a reminder of the specialized training through which a rabbi goes to become ordained, highlights the rabbi's expert knowledge, and thus reinforces an inevitable hierarchy of power between the rabbi and the congregants.

For a previous generation of rabbis and congregants, there was no question that the title must be used at all times. One rabbi remembers a visit to his rabbinical school class by a longtime senior rabbi from a major congregation in Los Angeles:

We asked him, should we use our names or should we [have congregants call us] "Rabbi," and he said, "When I play tennis with my congregant, I call him Sam and he calls me Rabbi. When I speak, 4,000 years of Jewish tradition ooze thru my fingertips." Fried, whose book relates a venerable East Coast synagogue's search for a new rabbi, and its transition from a long-time, much beloved, senior rabbi, relates an early lesson learned: "Once they call you by your first name...you're not a rabbi anymore."<sup>30</sup>

Today's rabbis, one and two generations removed from those described above, have differing preferences. Some rabbis introduce themselves as "Rabbi *first name*," while others, feeling this practice belittles the title, prefer instead "Rabbi *last name*." Some don't use the title at all with congregants, but do employ it in the world outside of the synagogue. One has five or six different email signatures depending on to whom the email will be going. Those who are comfortable with adult congregants calling them by their first name almost always use the title when working with teenagers or children. Some rabbis are on a first-name basis with congregants they see socially outside of the workplace, but when they step into the synagogue, they prefer that these same congregants use the title. Many ultimately make the choice based on the practice of previous rabbis from the same congregation, or the practice of the rabbi who was the senior when they first became associate rabbis.

Says an Associate Rabbi:

It's *kavod harav*, honoring the rabbi, recognizing that I have an expertise in a role that I'm in, but drop me in physics and I don't have that expertise anymore. So I think it's an honor thing, recognition of my role and the work that I've done to be in this place.

Some rabbis have explicitly negotiated use-of-title boundaries with congregants. One described the relationship with a physician:

"Actually, one of my doctors is a congregant and when we're at her office she's "Dr.," and I'm "first name," and when we're here [in the synagogue], she's "first name" and I'm "Rabbi," and we actually negotiated this. I was nervous about having a personal relationship with a congregant in that kind of a role and I also didn't want her, or her nurse, to walk out and shout across the waiting room, "Rabbi, we're ready," because that puts me in a public role in a private setting, so we negotiated, and it's never been an issue.

In many cases, the preferences over the use of the title come from congregants, not the rabbi. Pamela Nadell writes of the "growing penchant of younger congregants to address their rabbis on a first-name basis."<sup>31</sup> When I asked one of the rabbis how he knows when congregants are able to engage without being intimidated by his expertise, he answered: "it's happening for those people for whom their relationship with me has evolved from first calling me Rabbi to now calling me '*first name*' without them ever asking and without me ever telling."

### **2.1.1 Rabbi as Symbolic Exemplar**

For other congregants, the title holds deeper meaning than the acknowledgment of an advanced degree. One Senior Rabbi said that, sometimes, "people don't want you just to be your

friend. They expect, and they need, you to be their rabbi.” Another agreed, identifying on the part of some congregants a “deep emotional need” to use the title, related to a need to have an authority figure in their lives. He wondered whether this need is more prevalent among older generations. Says a Senior Rabbi:

I am very conscious of not wanting to lose that authority, being that for people, people need me to be more, that’s why I dress so [formally], I need to be so more formal than I would otherwise be, because that’s the role they need to see me in.

The same rabbi explains this phenomenon in the context of the concept of the Rabbi as Symbolic Exemplar,<sup>32</sup> which he describes as:

the modern rabbi as standing in symbolically for a bunch of people in congregants’ lives: parents, G-d, previous rabbis. You’re never viewed entirely as yourself, [but instead you’re] standing in for, symbolizing, something [/somebody] else. Usually that gives you a great deal of authority and power for good. The fact is, you or I could walk into a hospital room and do the exact same thing, but the fact that I have the title [of Rabbi] makes a huge difference to [the hospitalized individual].

Recounting his experience upon leaving a previous pulpit, one rabbi says: “I was 40, but I still felt like a kid, and old men came through the line crying, saying, ‘You’re not really leaving, are you?’ ... I realized they [see] you as a father, even if they’re *your* father’s age.” Another tells of a comment made by a long-time member, a woman in her 70’s, upon his return from a six-month sabbatical: “it was like the ‘father’ of the congregation was missing.”

The symbolic role, writes Dr. Neil Gillman in the forward to Rabbi Jack Bloom’s book on the subject,

is precisely the source of the rabbi’s authority and power. But it has its inevitable tradeoffs...in the process of seeing the rabbi as a symbol...the rabbi is no longer simply a person, a man or a woman, mother or father, with feelings, foibles, talents, idiosyncrasies, neuroses, character flaws, and the rest. He has become more than he is. The tension between rabbi as human being and symbolic exemplar accounts perfectly for the sense of set-apartedness, isolation, loneliness, and vulnerability that pervades the career of so many rabbis...But if the rabbi tries to give up that symbolic role, must he or she then surrender the authority so central to the institution?<sup>33</sup>

### **2.1.2 *Rabbi as Moreh Derech Chayim***

Rabbi Hayim Herring writes the following:

Our self understanding influences both the work that we do (and refrain from doing) and the manner in which we do it. The way in which we conceive of our work affects how we interact with people, the areas in which we invest our religious energies, our ability to infuse even more mundane aspects of our work with a sense of *kedusha*,<sup>4</sup> and our relationship with God.

Therefore, in answer to the oft-asked question, “rabbi, what exactly is it that you do?” Rabbi Herring has suggested Rabbis consider themselves as *Morei Derech Chayim*, or “Guides to a [Jewish] Way of Life.” Such a self-understanding, says Herring, provides an attempt to both honor tradition and to recognize the dynamic environment within which today’s congregational rabbis work. “[*Moreh*] *Derech Chayim*,” Herring writes, “positions us to be proactive in setting the tone of public moral discourse within our communities and enables us to be responsive to individuals when they call upon us.”<sup>34</sup>

In this vein, an Associate Rabbi, when asked what a congregational rabbi does, answered:

[The Rabbi] helps steer people towards seeing their lives from a more meaningful perspective. It amazes me the extent to which people can view their lives from a consumer, utilitarian, business, expediency perspective even as they have this great yearning for meaning. Providing people frames to prioritize that meaning-seeking is really an important role that no one else really plays, and if they do play it, it tends to come along with some product they’re selling. And we get to do it without having to make a profit doing it. One example of that is visiting people in the hospital. Doctors have an agenda. Nurses have an agenda. Family members who visit you are sometimes too emotionally connected to give you what you need. And a rabbi can just walk in there and just be there for the person. Just totally be there for them. And help construct a meaning framework. That’s just one example of how the job allows for something like that.

### 2.1.3 *Rabbi as Mara d’Atra*

Another professional model for rabbis is the Rabbi as *Mara d’atra*, “master of the house,” or local religious decisor. The goal of *mara d’atra* was “to allow for decision-making by the local rabbi who best understood the idiosyncrasies of his/her community. It precludes the imposition of mandatory *halachic* rulings<sup>5</sup> from a religious hierarchy, like a chief rabbinate, that is unaware or insensitive to the nuances created by local community.”<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> holiness

<sup>5</sup> Rulings on Jewish law

The various movements within American Judaism approach this model with differing degrees of emphasis. *Mara d'atra* is most emphasized in the Conservative movement, though its prevalence has declined over time. Says Jonathan Sarna, "Conservative Judaism...had once been governed from the top-down...as part of the battle over women's ordination, however, power became more diffused within the movement, and the authority of the seminary and its leadership declined."<sup>36</sup> The Reform movement, which does not recognize Jewish law as binding, highlights rabbinic roles other than the rabbi's role in making legal decisions for the community. As one Reform Rabbi explains, "If Conservative Jews and therefore Conservative Rabbis are really dictated by the letter of the law, Reform Jews are concerned more with the spirit of the law." The Reconstructionist movement trains rabbis as resource people, "teachers, not preachers;" one Reconstructionist rabbi said that the rabbi's role has "more to do with sociology than with *halachah*." Finally, in the Orthodox world, individual rabbis are often guided in their *halachic* decisions by the person they view to be the leading rabbi of their time, rather than by the movement's rabbinic union or synagogue membership body.

While it may have been established to empower local communities and local rabbis over the movement, an effect of *mara d'atra* may be to concentrate power in the rabbi, and away from congregants. Sarna continues by saying that "well respected rabbis continue to exercise substantial influence and authority within their own congregations..."<sup>37</sup> For example, if the rabbi has final word, what room is left for congregational challenges to religious decisions? How are congregants involved in the interpretation of *halachah*? Arguing for the continuation of *mara d'atra*, Gerald Zelizer says: "... the shifting of religious authority away from the rabbi to the layperson would result in *halachah* being based on whim and feelings rather than learning and knowledge of Torah."<sup>38</sup>

No matter the prevailing rabbinic self understanding, the fact that rabbis struggle to make meaning of their roles has bearing on the possibility of citizen practices within the rabbinate.

## **2.2 *The Congregation and its People***

Congregational rabbis have deep passion for the work that they do and with whom they do it: congregants. When asked what aspect of his work he enjoyed most, one said, simply, "I discovered while being in the pulpit that there's so many ways in which you're involved

meaningfully in people's lives." In response to the same question, another said, "[I most enjoy] being a part of [the] community...that sense of being in it together." Replied a third: "Being with people over time, as their lives change. I enjoy helping to create a place for them in the Jewish community. It feels like a great privilege to be invited into people's lives."

As one rabbi taught:

One of the commentators on the Torah mentions how there was a census taken...of the Jewish people, so that the leadership would know how many were lost in the plague that followed the worshipping of the golden calf. What's fascinating to me is that in order to know how many were lost, you'd have to know how many were there in the first place, and there was no previous census - so how would you know? ...the way you would know it is because you knew each one personally - so you would notice who wasn't there when you counted them.

He continued: "That's got to be the guiding light for the Rabbi: you've got to have a personal relationship with every member of your congregation."

Related another:

What is most fulfilling to me is seeing people take themselves as Jews seriously, and seeing Judaism as responding to their core identity and ultimately seeing that who we are, as Jews, matters in a world in which difference is increasingly talked about as not mattering...there are a lot of frustrating days, a lot of sad days, a lot of difficult days, and days you think to yourself that it would be better for everyone if somebody else was occupying the chair - and then you realize you've been given an unbelievable gift: you have the opportunity to know people at their most vulnerable...and in their most joyous [times].

Without the people, a congregational rabbi cannot function in his or her role.

Paradoxically, the service-based expectations of congregants can pose challenges to citizen rabbinic habits and overall practice. Cohen, Kress and Davidson, drawing from Jack Bloom and Joshua Hammerman, write,

"Congregants and their leaders may harbor exalted, competing, and divergent expectations of their spiritual leaders, potentially causing difficulties both for the congregants, as their unrealistic expectations are necessarily unmet, and for the rabbis, who must struggle with the symbolism of their role. Further, these expectations can create a perception that a rabbi, in the words of Joshua Hammerman, 'isn't so much a human being as a shredded fruit salad of contradictory skills and inflated expectations.'"<sup>39</sup>

For example, in some synagogues, there exists on the part of the congregational community an expectation that the religious functions of the synagogue be entirely

professionalized. Though “in Orthodox Judaism there is little gap between the paid professionals and the laity,”<sup>40</sup> Arnold Eisen writes:

... members of all other denominations have tended in increasing numbers to see themselves as audience to rather than actors in public ritual performances. These individuals sit as quietly in synagogues as they would in theaters or concert halls, listening to sermons or cantorial solos and singing only in unison... the change... comes along with a professionalization that, in this area as in others, has left its mark. Extensive or intensive ritual practice has increasingly been conceived as a specialized activity best left to those well-versed in the intricacies of observance. Most Jews are no longer interested in acquiring such knowledge...<sup>41</sup>

In addition to ritual life, the organizational life of the congregation, too, has become overly professionalized in some cases. Explains a rabbi at one of the larger synagogues:

[congregants] don't want to have to do all of the work. They want to know what the professional leadership is doing and to be able to trust that we're doing it in the best interest of the congregation.

In 1990, one rabbi tells me, he gave a sermon that emphasized that

the synagogue is not an LLC, but I think increasingly “what's in it for me” has [dominated the relationship between the congregants and the congregation]. I think people expect to pay for services as opposed to volunteering to do them...

One of the rabbis with whom I spoke summarized this phenomenon, only partly tongue-in-cheek: “I have two **clients**: the congregation, and G-d.”

This set of challenges is not, of course, unique to Judaism. In The Citizen Solution, Grant Stevenson, head of the Clergy and Religious Leaders Caucus of a faith-based organizing group in Minnesota, theorizes about the reluctance of ministers in his community to challenge the hypercompetitive nature of sports leagues for children:

It's not the sport directors they're afraid of. It's their own congregations. Ministers have got all these programs that they're running themselves... They're often relating to people in their congregations as a service provider. And that's what congregations want, or think they want. Ministers tell me, ‘Getting active in social change is not what pays my salary. It's not what my congregation is asking me to do' ...when you go to...[the church group that interviews prospective pastors] the members want to know what services you're going to provide, and what services you have experience providing.”<sup>42</sup>

The Reverend Peg Chamberlin, leader of the National Council of Churches and executive director of the Minnesota Council of Churches, has seen this dynamic in religious communities across the state. “Increasingly congregants think of themselves as consumers of church, not

producers of church, and congregations think of themselves as consumers of denominations, not producers of denominations,”<sup>43</sup>

A key element in the development of a citizen professional practice is to shift congregations away from such terminology and conceptualization: from congregants as clients and consumers, to congregants as partners, with rabbis and other staff, in the building, maintaining, and leading of all aspects of a synagogue community.

When synagogues are first founded, congregational involvement and citizen rabbinic habits are both necessary for success. A rabbi who began work with a synagogue in its early days described to me the outlook of the congregation:

They wanted it to be an open inclusive place that removed all obstacles to Jewish life, so what that meant was no tickets on the High Holidays - our doors would be open to everyone. There was a fair share dues policy and a robust fundraising program. If your kids were involved in the religious school, you as a parent would have to sign up too. There would be no “drive-by Judaism.” The kids would go off to class, the parents would study with me, and then we’d all participate in a service afterward.

When rabbis stay in one congregation for long periods of time, the possibility of a citizen rabbinic practice is also greater. Two local rabbis attended an Alban Institute-sponsored seminar called “Visions for a Long Pastorate:”

We discussed...the benefits of a long tenure: relationships, history, knowing the place, understanding how to get things done, how to be effective. They did a survey to see in what ways you are similar to, and in what ways are you apart from, your congregation. The best was when you are somewhere in the middle. If [the clergy member] is completely at odds with the congregation, it’s not going to be a healthy or successful relationship, but if [the clergy member] is completely aligned, it’s also not going to be successful. There’s got to be a tension between having enough of a relationship and appreciation for who the people are that you don’t become cynical or defeated, but not so much that you can’t challenge them and be challenged by them.

Longer tenures may be happening more frequently, according to Joel Meyers.

In the ‘50s and ‘60s, rabbinic success usually meant moving from a smaller to a larger pulpit in a major metropolitan area. Today, success may very well be measured by a rabbi feeling he or she is making an impact on the congregation and community, and choosing to remain in place rather than seeking to move to a larger congregation or a different community.<sup>44</sup>

### **SECTION 3: CITIZEN PROFESSIONALISM IN THE RABBINATE: THREE INTERSECTING DIMENSIONS**

### ***3.1 Identifying Citizen Professional Habits within the Rabbinate***

I initially began this study with what appeared to be a clear definition: citizen professionalism is how the professional (in this case, the rabbi) engages with participants in his or her work as equals, and how the professional develops others' (in this case, congregants') skills. Thus, as I approached the interviews, I wanted to explore the rabbi's role in carving out space within the congregation for leadership development. What are the ways in which congregants participate in synagogue life? Are they given opportunities to lead prayer services, committees, classes? Do they learn how to run meetings and events, and keep records? Do they share in decision-making about the synagogue as an institution and a community? Is there a clear leadership path open to anyone who expresses interest? Are there attempts to engage new participants, or is there a cadre dominating synagogue leadership opportunities?

An expansion of this dimension – which ultimately became the second dimension as explained below - relates to the community beyond the walls of the synagogue. Here, questions I sought to answer included: Does the rabbi see his or her primary focus as being within the congregation, or does he/she make time for, and value, external/community work as well? Are the congregants applying their synagogue leadership experiences to external community work? Do congregants know how to work with people who are different from them, and how to find common ground? Are they, as a group, engaged in the external community, the world around the synagogue, as Jews, as a community from that congregation? And, is the encouragement of the rabbis themselves integral to their engagement in the outside world.

As with any three-dimensional object, the height and length of which are readily apparent, while the depth can only be seen upon close examination, a third dimension of citizen professional practice surfaced only as I began to transcribe the interviews. This dimension relates to the democratization of knowledge, or, in this case, the specialized knowledge of Judaism, and focuses on the role of the clergy member (rabbi) within the realm of the congregation and in relation to his or her congregants. Within this dimension, the transfer and sharing of religious knowledge (Judaic knowledge), rather than the transfer and development of externally applicable civic skills, is important to examine. Who teaches classes? What does the rabbi learn from congregants? Is the clergy viewed as the expert on all religious matters, or is he or she open to

learning, even about the religion, from congregants? How are decisions related to religious law, liturgy, and practice made? Is the clergy member the final decision maker, or is there an advisory committee, on matters of religious law and practice?

American Judaism provides fertile research grounds for the exploration of this third dimension. Knowledge and learning, generally speaking, have always been valued within Judaism, but it is a religious obligation (*a mitzvah*) for all Jews to learn Torah – that is, knowledge that is distinctly Jewish.

### **3.2 *The First Dimension: Rabbi as Builder of Individual Agency***

In Building a Congregation of Learners, Isa Aron emphasizes the importance of congregant participation in synagogue life:

If a synagogue belongs to the community, and not just [to] the rabbi, as many members of the community as possible must have a stake in envisioning its future... anyone can be a leader... if [the rabbi] acts in the interest of the organization as a whole and inspires others to do the same... religious leadership will increasingly be seen as a joint responsibility.<sup>45</sup>

Churches, synagogues, and other places of worship, says Boyte, are “mediating institutions... midway between family life and large-scale macroinstitutions.”<sup>46</sup> As such, they fall within the realm of Dzur’s middle democracy, where “citizen competencies are honed in the everyday work of collective, local, ordinary, practical decision making.”<sup>47</sup>

In Minnesota synagogues, what are the opportunities for this sort of honing of citizen competencies? What factors – synagogue size, rabbinic training, congregational expectations, the synagogue’s founding mission – affect congregants’ opportunities to be involved? What skills are needed and valued, and how does the rabbi help to build them?

Unquestionably, smaller and less wealthy, and newer, synagogues must rely heavily on lay people for the synagogue to function organizationally, and the rabbis of these congregations emphasize their partnerships with congregants in running the synagogue. A rabbi who works part-time says, “I think there’s a certain amount I had to let go of in terms of my ability to expand the congregation, because I’m not here enough. The work around community building needs to come from the lay people.” Another rabbi, describing a previous pulpit, says the synagogue was characterized by an “...inclusive, dynamic, engaged [community]... people really

owned the synagogue and really were my partners in the work.” And a third, from a small congregation, is proud that twenty percent of the congregation sits on the board and therefore has a real role in day-to-day affairs.

In response to the question about ways that congregants are involved in the life of the synagogue, a rabbi at one of the smaller congregations in the Twin Cities said the following:

Everything you could think of. We have people leading services, reading torah, teaching if they want to teach, we have people volunteering in the office, we have retirees coming in once a week to answer phones and stuff envelopes, we have people that bake for different functions... We have a “fine arts committee” that deals with choices of carpeting and colors of the wall and they replaced the carpet shortly after I got here, and they had to go to committee for it, and I lived with carpet samples all over the floor until we chose which ones we wanted. Anything you could possibly imagine. We’re very hands-on, very participatory.

Describing the early days of his congregation, one rabbi says:

In [those years]...[the people who founded the congregation], their sense of what they could accomplish and what they could do seemed bright and unencumbered. It was a great opportunity and it was a time in American life when volunteerism was pretty evident and the culture of the *shul* was pretty [volunteer-based. In terms of staff], I was it, they had one other employee, an office person, and then we had 60 households and everyone took a risk...

Similarly, another rabbi says of his congregation’s early days:

We built together. There were 30 families, and they had an idea of what they wanted to be. When we entered into our partnership (I don’t like to think of the relationship of congregation and rabbi as a “hiring”), I had ideas of what we wanted to be, and we evolved...we influenced each other.

In larger synagogues, evidence of real congregational involvement opportunities is mixed. Writing in Faith in Action, Richard Wood describes the difficulty encountered by members of a Catholic congregation when attempting to exercise authority in the pastor’s absence, despite the pastor’s desire to engage lay leaders. Wood identifies this as a structural deficiency, rooted in the Catholic culture of authority.<sup>48</sup> Similarly, in larger synagogues, reliance on the rabbi may provide a stumbling block for congregant engagement. As one rabbi explained, the feeling prevails that congregational volunteers and members have “real lives and real jobs, and the professional leadership should be able to shoulder the burden.”

Still, larger congregations do find the ability and the need to offer multiple engagement and leadership opportunities for their many members. A senior Rabbi describes a dynamic in

which, though “there is great *kavod*<sup>6</sup> given to the rabbis” simultaneously “there exists a strong working relationship between rabbis and lay people.” At another of the larger synagogues, the senior Rabbi describes his relationship with the board as a “partnership model, without a doubt. There are clear moments of deference on my side to their expertise, or [on their side] to mine, but it’s really that we do things together. To be a leader [here] means being partners with the clergy and the other professional leaders.” University of Minnesota professor Riv-Ellen Prell, writing in Jews in the Center, describes Beth El Congregation, a large Conservative synagogue in St. Louis Park:

During 1995 and 1996, Beth El’s board president added a new vice president for membership, as well as reactivating and expanding a number of committees. Lay members also undertook to solve significant problems in management...the synagogue has many volunteers and an extraordinary roster of very active committees (thirty-seven in 1995) ranging from kashrut to investments to the problems of the intermarried...there are also numerous ad hoc committees at work...[the president], along with [the] Rabbi...worked hard to encourage members to volunteer and to seek out new opportunities for those who were interested...[A 1996 study survey] indicated that 89 percent of Beth El’s respondents had attended a...board meeting and 75 percent had attended a synagogue committee meeting...<sup>49</sup>

At a similarly sized synagogue, the Rabbi tells me that the congregation has just completed a strategic planning process, a result of which was to strengthen and restart the work of congregant-led committees. The congregation now has 28 committees, focusing on such matters as volunteers (“building participation”), membership and welcoming, the cemetery, the kitchen and event planning, programming, budget, financial oversight, human resources, prayer, study, tikkun olam, investments, music, and communications. Says the rabbi, “we’re focusing on really expanding what we do for programming and given that there’s only one rabbi...volunteers are really making this happen.”

### ***3.3 The Second Dimension: Rabbi as Bridge to the Non-Jewish Community***

What space is given to, or taken by, rabbis to engage externally? What role do rabbis play in encouraging congregants, as Jews and representatives of their congregation, to engage beyond the walls of the synagogue?

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<sup>6</sup> honor

Applying Dzur's argument, professionals at the helm of places of worship have an opportunity and an obligation to encourage citizen participation both *within* the congregation, as described above, and *outside* of it. Robert Wuthnow explains: "Active church members are likely to be exposed to religious teachings about loving their neighbors and being responsible citizens, they are more likely to have social capital in the form of ties to fellow congregants that can be used to mobilize energies, and they are more likely to be aware of needs and opportunities in their communities as a result of attending services in their congregations."<sup>50</sup> Rabbis, then, ought to be responsible not only as principal representatives of the Jewish community to the outside world, but also as mobilizers so that congregants become representatives themselves.

We find here, again, that the expectations of the congregation can hinder the ability of the rabbi to operate as a citizen professional. In some synagogues, rabbis are expected to concentrate on congregational life - to face inward. Stated one rabbi in answer to the question about his community involvement:

[Here, there is] less focus on the rabbi reaching outside the walls of the synagogue. Among our congregational families, there's a sense that [the rabbis] can barely keep up with what we need to do for our own members, so how can we have energy and resources to do more? We have committees that reach beyond the walls of the synagogue, and the rabbis and cantors have their personal interests, and they serve on committees within and outside of the Jewish community, but the weight of our time is spent dealing with internal issues.

Another Rabbi explained: "We're taught in school not to talk about communal service with regard to pulpits because *shuls*<sup>7</sup> want to hear that you will focus on them and them only."

Despite the inward rabbinic focus demanded by some congregations, many of Minnesota's rabbis are involved beyond their congregation. Most are involved *as Rabbis*; that is, they bring their faith expertise to boards of external organizations, most of which are either religiously motivated or otherwise value rabbinic input. Several organizations with which Twin Cities Rabbis are involved include MICAH, the Metropolitan Interfaith Council on Affordable Housing; MAZON, a national Jewish organization dedicated to eradicating hunger; the Joint Religious Legislative Coalition; Jewish Community Action; the Children's Hospital Ethics committee; the Jay Phillips Center for Jewish and Christian Learning and the St. Paul Interfaith

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<sup>7</sup> synagogues

Network. One of the rabbis views his job as part of the “public square,” and points out the “real power in the congregational rabbinate in affecting people, and bringing that power to really affect change in the wider society.” Another, in addition to her work with the synagogue, is also Executive Director of an interfaith coalition focusing on worker justice. Two of the rabbis serve as chaplains to the local police force, and one is an on-call chaplain for the State Department of Corrections. One of the rabbis had just come back from lobbying at the state legislature when he and I spoke. Many of the rabbis emphasize their synagogue’s work with other faiths, and their identity as an urban congregation. Indeed, Rabbi Marcia Zimmerman of Temple Israel in Minneapolis recently asserted in her synagogue’s newsletter: “Our front doors face Hennepin Avenue to make a statement of religious pluralism, our commitment to the city of Minneapolis and our belief in interfaith dialogue.”<sup>51</sup>

One rabbi says the following:

[There are] so many organizations that try to teach Christians about Jews, but we haven’t really historically expressed the same interest in them than they have in us. Now theologically there’s an explanation, Christianity grew out of Judaism...and Christians need Judaism, the biblical sources, in order to fully understand Christianity. Even though theologically we do not have that same need, we should express a curiosity about them because they are our neighbors, and there are a number of Jewish ethical commandments teaching us to interact in a positive way with our neighbors. By learning about the other we can also come to understand ourselves from a different perspective.

Beyond Minnesota, rabbis and Jewish institutions from all movements do think about the role of rabbis in the broader world. In a 2000 issue of the *Reconstructionist*, Rabbi Toba Spitzer asks “Can I reconcile the more ‘interior’ aspects of my role – nurturing the spirituality of individuals, caring for the Jewish community – with the ‘exterior’ calls of justice in the broader society?”

Certainly, a more liberal interpretation of theology helps to orient a rabbi or synagogue toward public action. The Reform movement, the most liberal in terms of interpretation of Jewish law and practice, may offer rabbis and congregants more leeway in applying a Jewish lens to activities that occur outside of the walls of the synagogue. Indeed, many Reform congregations have focused heavily on such activities. Says a Reform rabbi whose synagogue’s social action committee is the largest and most active of all of the congregation’s committees: “There is no movement more involved in social action and social justice.” Similarly, the Jewish

Reconstructionist Federation, the Reconstructionist movement's synagogue membership body, has established a fund to support innovative social action undertakings by Reconstructionist congregations across the country.

On the other end of the spectrum, writes Berenbaum of the Orthodox movement, "...[a] certitude of ideological conviction – rare in the contemporary world – comes at an enormous cost: the bifurcation of consciousness and a retreat from the larger world."<sup>52</sup> An Orthodox Rabbi disagrees:

You know, I think it's a myth that if a Jew is Orthodox-affiliated he's somehow separated from the world. I imagine I can figure out how the myth originated, but it's not part of any association I've had, and I have been observant all my life...Judaism was designed to be connected to the world. There are volumes of Jewish civil law [describing] how a Jew is to engage the rest of humanity in our day-to-day activities, so there's not only no contradiction but I think the finest expressions of observant Judaism are seen outside the context of the four walls of the synagogue.

In any case, as Wood points out, "religious culture is not destiny."<sup>53</sup> Opportunities exist within all movements to apply a theological and halachic lens to public problems, and therefore put congregants to work to solve them. Differing Jewish traditions, says Spitzer, "share one common thread: an understanding that the world as it is now is not how it is ultimately meant to be, that things can be different, and that part of our obligation as Jews is to help bring about this transformation."<sup>54</sup>

### ***3.3.1 Service Work and Organizing Work***

Based on the Jewish concept of *tikkun olam* and the writings of the prophets, Judaism has been committed to justice work at least since the emancipation of European Jews in the nineteenth century,<sup>55</sup> and all of the rabbis I interviewed have spoken or written about social action at some point in their sermons and in the synagogue newsletters. Synagogue-based committees with names like *Tikkun Olam* ("fixing the world"), Social Action, Social Justice, and *Hesed* ("kindness/compassion") mobilize congregants to serve shifts in local homeless shelters, organize canned good drives for food shelves, and build homes with Habitat for Humanity.

Such activities typify service work, in which benevolent volunteers help those less fortunate. What results from this type of social action is, in the words of the Southside Solidarity Network at the University of Chicago, “not a single community but two distinct groups: one community of service providers and another of service receivers, distinguished and separated by the fact that they do not interact as equals, but rather through non-reciprocal relationships. Although it is possible for more robust sorts of relationships to evolve, it can be difficult...”<sup>56</sup>

Says the Jewish Fund for Justice:

Sophisticated and well-intentioned synagogue social action committees experience frustration at not knowing how to go about truly making a difference in people’s lives, at not knowing how to get involved in systemic social change work. While many synagogues regularly sponsor important direct services... volunteers often become frustrated as they see problems persist or even worsen over time despite their efforts. Few congregations know how to take the next step of engaging in sustained efforts to address...underlying causes...<sup>57</sup>

Rabbi Richard Hirsch, in a 2003 issue of *The Reconstructionist*, noted that “in current parlance, *tikkun olam* has... become a generic term for social-action policies and positions...”<sup>58</sup>

He continues by posing a series of questions and challenges to the reader:

To what degree should the Jewish community concern itself – as a Jewish community – with the needs of the general society and the individuals within that society?...there is an obligation of concern and an imperative to action that clearly derives from Jewish tradition.

...do we spend enough time identifying community issues on which a coalition of synagogues – and/or other religious organizations – could work? ...Should synagogues be where *tikkun olam* projects happen, or should synagogues be the liaison between their members and the wider community programs?”<sup>59</sup>

Six years after Jewish Funds for Justice and *The Reconstructionist* suggested organizing as a foundational approach to *tikkun olam*, Daniel David May wrote in the spring 2009 issue of *Reform Judaism* magazine that more than 100 Reform congregations across the country currently participate in congregation-based community organizing.<sup>8</sup> In this work, through one-on-one meetings and small group conversations, he writes, congregants share with each other their experiences, values, hopes, aspirations, and fears. May quotes Rabbi John Linder of Temple Solel in Arizona, “One of the profound impacts of these meetings...is the recognition

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<sup>8</sup> May wrote a similar article for CJ, the magazine of the conservative movement, in the summer of 2008.

that members of a middle-class suburban congregation share common concerns with people who live in the working-class neighborhoods of south Chicago. Both have families without healthcare.”<sup>60</sup>

Though May doesn't touch on Minnesota in his article, some synagogues in Minnesota are also moving to an organizing model with respect to both internal and external congregational activities. One of the rabbis described a congregant-led “inreach” initiative at his synagogue, the foundation of which was the one-on-one meeting, a key organizing tool. The purpose of the inreach was to determine what concerns congregants held and what social justice issues the synagogue might address.

In this work, Minnesota synagogues can draw on an important resource. Founded in 1995, Jewish Community Action (JCA), a Jewish communal organization dedicated to social justice, claims “deep and ongoing organizing relationships with 11 congregations in Minnesota.” In partnership with congregations, JCA brings together existing synagogue social justice/social action committees to “build capacity to promote and take action on social- and economic-justice issues.”<sup>61</sup> JCA currently addresses issues like affordable housing, community reinvestment, racial justice, immigrant rights, and health care, and partners with synagogues to reach and train members in the broader, deeper, more meaningful and more empowering participation that typifies organizing work.

### ***3.4 The Third Dimension: Rabbi as Both Teacher and Learner***

“In a congregation of learners, everyone would be a potential teacher...everyone would be encouraged to assist someone else in learning...”<sup>62</sup>

The third emergent dimension examines the role of the rabbi *within the realm of the congregation and in relation to his or her congregants*. In this dimension, Judaic knowledge, rather than externally applicable organizational or civic skills, is the focus. What happens within the walls of the congregations in terms of everyday Jewish practice, and Jewish decision making? Does the Rabbi support and actively encourage Jewish learning at levels close to his or her own? How does he or she respond to challenging decisions on Jewish law or practice?

Rabbi Herring points out that:

Judaism has been rather democratic when it comes to learning, and...historically, the classical rabbis who helped to create the liturgy and the Mishna and the Talmud were

rebel rabbis in their own right. [They] sort of cut off the notion that leadership [depends on] lineage...in order to become a rabbi you didn't have to be born into a clan, it was a matter of learning. In other words there was equal access; it was democratic.

One of the questions I asked was “what do you learn from your congregants?” In response, more than one rabbi referenced the rabbinic wisdom: you learn something from your text, more from your teachers, but the most from your students. Every rabbi recognized that congregants can be sources of knowledge, though not all named knowledge that is Jewish in nature.

Here, too, there are differences among movements. Though the Reform movement strongly emphasizes social justice and organizing work in the world beyond the congregation, and though the movement prioritizes adult Jewish learning and independent study, its adherents, as a body, may be less confident in their Jewish knowledge than those who participate fully in other movements. As a result, within the walls of some of the Reform congregations, the rabbis are viewed, and treated, as the experts. One Reform rabbi, when asked to describe the relationship between rabbis and congregants, explained, “congregants don't see themselves as equal, they see the rabbi as ...above, as uber-pious.” Another young rabbi, who grew up Reform, said “Nothing I ever went to was lay-led. The synagogue depended on the rabbi.”

Regardless of the movement, rabbis can change this dynamic, and many are. A Reform rabbi says, “[I may] sometimes solve a problem or heal a person, but I don't ever want to see myself as the guy with the degree who has the answer. Because that's what I always hated about other rabbis.”

Another Reform rabbi explained:

[in a High Holiday sermon], I set the stage to look into Sephardic observance of Passover. Even though I'm not a Sephardic Jew, if I understood why there are differences, I could make a more informed choice about my Passover eating. There were a few congregants who'd previously studied [this], or wanted to study it, and we got together. One of them brought a friend from the conservative movement who'd previously studied this in depth, and [ultimately] I learned more from them than I offered to them.

The power of this example rests in the rabbi's recognition that he doesn't possess an exclusive cache of knowledge, even in Jewish subjects. At the same time, the study required congregants to have the confidence to engage with the rabbi as *partners in study* - recognizing shared interests and valid knowledge - rather than as *students of a teacher*.

Rabbi Marcia Zimmerman, senior Rabbi at Reform Temple Israel, explains a task force she established to study the question of rabbinic officiation at interfaith marriages:

I started a task force... whatever decision I make, [though] it's up to me, it is my decision, I want there to be a very well-informed group of people. [I asked them to] look at what other congregations are doing, look at what the Reform Movement has said for years, look at what the movement says today. [I want you to be] my ambassadors, to go out to the community, so that [the ultimate decision] is not just coming from me, it's... a decision that the congregation is making...

The March 2009 issue of the synagogue newsletter, *Hakol*, describes the process from the congregation's perspective:

...As we came together for the first time and shared anecdotal stories, we began to understand the journey ahead. Thus started several months of studying and exploring the issue at hand. We learned about the practices adopted by other synagogues and policies... At our second meeting we studied the history of the policy statements put out by the Central Conference of American Rabbis... In addition, Rabbi Adam Spilker, Senior Rabbi of Mount Zion Temple in St. Paul, spoke to us about his journey as he transitioned into officiating at Jewish weddings for interfaith couples... Rabbi Stacy Offner (Vice President of the Union for Reform Judaism)... led us through an interesting assessment of marriage and weddings from a Jewish perspective. Rabbi Offner shared her own reasons for officiation, and her national view...<sup>63</sup>

One of the Reconstructionist rabbis acknowledges that many of her congregants know as much as she does in terms of Jewish history, Torah, and practice.

In some ways [the congregation] treats me more as "Rabbi as expert" than I feel like I am. But some of them know as much as I do about Jewish texts and traditions. When the congregation was re-examining ritual policies and *kashrut*<sup>9</sup>, they would give me a lot of authority, saying, "well she's the rabbi and she knows about *kashrut*." I know about *kashrut*, but [given] the people on the committee, I'm sure some of them know as much about the halacha of *kashrut* as I do... I saw my role in the process as a guide, with training in building Jewish community, who could be conscious about how the policies function and could help the committee examine them with a bigger eye.

Instead of being threatened by this dynamic, the Rabbi is quite open to it. In part, she credits this openness to her training: "I was trained in a way that was much more 'rabbi as teacher and facilitator' than 'rabbi as expert.'"

In the Conservative movement, Pamela Nadell describes a growth in the knowledge level of congregants, and its effect on the rabbi:

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<sup>9</sup> Jewish dietary practices

...rise in the educational level of conservative congregants has limited the rabbi's status as the community's 'wise man.' In most contemporary [conservative] congregations, the rabbi is one professional among many, each of whom is paramount in his own field, and who regards other professions more or less as equals. The pre-eminence of the rabbi in knowledge of the Jewish tradition, while acknowledged, is evaluated without the awe accorded by a previous generation.<sup>64</sup>

Several community examples support this. One Conservative rabbi said of his synagogue's ritual committee:

"Anything of a halachic nature is a decision of the rabbi. Still, we have [worked with] that committee. They don't make ritual decisions but serve as a sounding board. When, for example, we introduced the *imahot* in the *amidah*<sup>10</sup>, we studied the issue with them and got their feedback and insights. This was helpful in knowing how congregants would respond. It was also an important process that allowed us to introduce change with congregational support and input."

Another Conservative rabbi described a Shabbat booklet:

that will [be] in the pews all the time that will explain the service...the beauty of it is that it's being written by congregants – not by me and not by Xeroxing it from the web or something. So they're studying, and when we present it, they will teach it.

Within Orthodox Union-affiliated synagogues, one rabbi encourages congregants who are capable of teaching having their own circle of classes that they teach, so we're able to have a wide range of interests for people who want to study different things. I try in my own classes to make them the kind of thing that automatically have some value for anyone from any background ...I feel strongly that [anyone] has the right to connect to the rabbi on [the basis of education] and therefore I have to make sure that what I'm doing is not limiting anybody.

Indeed, congregants, congregations, and rabbis, across movements, have made great strides in recent years. "Synaplex" is an initiative of the organization STAR: Synagogues Transformation and Renewal. According to the STAR website, "Synaplex synagogues strive to offer programming that is relevant, inspirational and significant so that more people will want to come to synagogue on Shabbat, with the goal of strengthening Jewish Identity and building community."<sup>65</sup> What Synaplex does, in short, is bring the expertise of the congregation into a synagogue setting, and apply to it a Jewish lens.

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<sup>10</sup> A reference to recent trends (in more liberal Jewish movements) of being gender-inclusive in prayers

One of the guiding values of Synaplex, as described on the website, reveals much about the transformative nature of the initiative:

*Contracting the presence of professional staff and allowing volunteer talent to flourish—*... most synagogues vastly neglect the large reservoir of volunteer talent that they possess. This is quite surprising, given the unprecedented accomplishments of Jewish individuals in the arts, academia, medicine, business, government, education and the professions... synagogues typically underutilize these talented individuals because the culture of the synagogue is principally staff-driven when it comes to providing programs. Many rabbis, whose training is still primarily driven by a hierarchical leadership model, are especially vulnerable to thinking that they must at some point have direct contact with everyone who enters their building during Shabbat. This kind of behavior and outlook stand in direct conflict with Synaplex, which understands that a conscious contraction of staff presence will create an atmosphere where the talent of individuals can expand. In fact, it will also allow for a more creative use of other staff members, whose multi-faceted talents may also be underutilized. When synagogue staff members understand that they are both experts and talent scouts, and actively recruit and utilize volunteer and staff talent, they will create a flourishing community with unlimited potential.<sup>66</sup>

## SECTION 4: CONCLUSION

### TOWARD A NEW PARADIGM: RABBI AS CITIZEN PROFESSIONAL

Boyte writes that “public professional work frees the powers not only of ordinary citizens but also of professionals as well.”<sup>67</sup> If one of the more common frustrations of congregational rabbis is the inability to do everything and be everywhere, is it possible that moving practice closer to a citizen professional model can offer a solution?

Sullivan suggests that “a profession is a means of livelihood that is also a way of life. Professionalism seeks freedom in and through significant work, not by escaping from it.”<sup>68</sup> Bill Doherty talks about his own transformation:

... change gets done through the work. What I was hearing from therapists was, “I have to volunteer more. I have to work outside of my profession.” So this whole idea of reconceptualizing professions [themselves] as public activities, of seeing professions as groups that have a stake in the public welfare, was very powerful.<sup>69</sup>

How can rabbis make their work more public, and why would they want to? Rabbi Herring rephrases Boyte’s contention within the congregational setting:

When I look at the changes that are going on right now, this revolution in access to knowledge and learning, [if I were a congregational rabbi], I would begin to think about what can I do differently now that I didn't have a chance to do before. How can I do more of what I like, and what I'm trained for, because now there are other people who can actually do some of the things that I thought I was supposed to do? What can I do to raise the level of learning in my congregation? How can I bring knowledge from around the globe into my congregation and... what can I do in terms of my dream for the world that I now have the opportunity to spread to others?

Says another Rabbi:

There's probably in theory not much that anybody couldn't do, if they have the knowledge of Judaism, knowledge of the congregation, and experience of doing and functioning in those realms. You don't need a rabbi to do weddings, funerals, even a conversion. You just need someone who's knowledgeable of the laws, and has experience in doing it. In fact, however, because of training, experience, and personal religious commitment, people rely on rabbis to do lots of things.

I asked a third why her congregation needed a rabbi. Her reply:

I have jokingly said that my role as a rabbi is really to make [myself] obsolete, and to teach people to be able to do for themselves... We have this strong lay leadership that, if neither [I nor the cantor] was here, they would function. I'm not sure they realize that. There's always been a rabbi. They don't need a rabbi but they want a rabbi and I think in a lot of ways that makes a difference, certainly for me it makes a difference because if I do need to be away [I know] they will keep functioning...

Rabbi Morris Allen of Beth Jacob Congregation, a national leader in the drive to bring worker justice to the food koshering process,<sup>11</sup> is one whose congregants have a high degree of Jewish knowledge and are fairly self-reliant. Beth Jacob's website emphasizes "a diverse, egalitarian congregation... We believe that everyone's talents and energy are necessary to sustain our communal life." Riv-Ellen Prell quotes one of Beth Jacob's founders, who emphasized the importance to the congregation of Jewish knowledge:

We come together around torah. We use torah as our reason for being together as a congregation. We study together. That is how we grow with one another, and we make decisions about our lives and our communal life with the torah process for making decisions...<sup>70</sup>

When Rabbis help to educate congregants about Judaism, and empower them to practice Judaism in their own lives, outside of in addition to within the synagogue, the congregants, over

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<sup>11</sup> See [http://www.uscj.org/Heksher\\_Tzedek7477.html](http://www.uscj.org/Heksher_Tzedek7477.html)

time, become much more knowledgeable. If the congregation is, as a body, knowledgeable enough to be self directive and self reliant, it frees the rabbi to spend more time on his or her own interests, keeping him or her fresh and fulfilled in the work.

Rabbis whose congregants are able to lead services or teach classes themselves; rabbis who can study Jewish text alongside congregants; rabbis whose congregants are of necessity more self-reliant because they cannot be at every Shabbat; and rabbis whose congregations encourage a commitment to Jewish learning, all operate in a more “democratic” fashion, along one or more of the three dimensions of citizen practice.

It bears remembering that synagogues need not remain static, nor must rabbinic practice be unchanging. Rabbi David Locketz writes: “To learn about our history is to realize that the Judaism we practice today was only possible because it evolved in America.”<sup>71</sup> If Judaism has evolved in a distinctly American way, so too can the institution of the American synagogue evolve, assisted by the professional practices of the rabbi.

## AFTERWORD

Citizen professionalism is still a fairly new area of analysis and practice, and I hope that this study adds to the conversation. At the same time, the study barely scratched the surface, and could be deepened or broadened in many ways.<sup>12</sup>

First, of the congregations examined in this paper, I might choose one, or one from each of the major movements, and conduct a more in-depth study. In so doing, I would first speak with congregants. How do they interact with the rabbis? How empowered do they feel, what do they look for? How do they address the rabbi? How connected are they to the synagogue, and how much of that has to do with the way the rabbi operates? Second, I would look at sermons and other writings of the rabbi. What language is used? Is it privatized, personalized, therapeutic, or is it empowering and outward-focused? Third, I would connect with other clergy at the synagogues - cantors as well as rabbis who serve in non-pulpit positions within the congregation (for example, as director of education), and explore their roles. Fourth, I could follow the rabbi into the community, looking at his or her participation on external boards and committees, relations with other institutions, and home life. It would be particularly interesting to examine rabbis' interactions with one another as part of the Minnesota Rabbinical Association, which was formed to "promote the rabbinical profession, create fellowship among its members, and enhance the role of Judaism in Jewish community life."

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<sup>12</sup> In addition to deepening the study, I came across two practical opportunities and suggestions which synagogues may want to consider. First, Minnesota's Active Citizenship Initiative (MACI) offers congregations an opportunity to engage in the public sphere, as civic institutions, in furthering the common good. According to MACI's website, "Renewing the Public Congregation renews the public role of faith communities, making them places where faithful citizens learn the political competence needed to build whole, vital communities with the capacity to work with other institutions [businesses, schools, and non-profit organizations] for the common good."

Second, in the fall 2003 issue of *The Reconstructionist*, Rabbi Mordecai Liebling recommended integrating *tikkun olam* values into the internal decision-making life of the congregation, so that they move out of the province of a single committee. He suggests the kinds of "just" decisions a synagogue might consider, like paying support and maintenance staffs a living wage versus minimum wage, banking at a community development financial institution versus a large financial corporation, examining the environmental impact of the facility, and purchasing reusable or compostable paper/plastic goods as well as fair-trade coffee and other food items. If the finance, education, ritual, building, and personnel committees, among others, also approach their work out of a concern for *tikkun olam*, the actual *tikkun olam* committee, can be confident that the synagogue is a just place following just practices, and can take more freedom to focus on external work. Moreover, raising the above as policy issues within the congregation encourages congregants to examine their own practices.

Second, the movements, and the institutions (professional unions, synagogue membership bodies, youth movements, and the rabbinical schools) of each, might explore these questions in offering professional development for more seasoned rabbis.

Also, to the extent that they are not already, seminaries might consider adding coursework in citizen professionalism to the curriculum. Two of the newest American rabbinical schools, the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College (est. 1968) and Yeshivat Chovevei Torah (est. 2000) were explicitly founded to train rabbis who could both work within diverse communities and operate in the broader world. The Reconstructionist Rabbinical College emphasizes “a new kind of rabbi, one uniquely prepared to lead and serve a rapidly changing American Jewish community in myriad settings.” Its curriculum, “while emphasizing Jewish theology, history and ritual, also addresses the practical aspects of rabbinic life and the responsibility of rabbis to act as agents of social change”<sup>72</sup> Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, a modern Orthodox rabbinical seminary less than a decade old, “[believes] that the future of Orthodoxy depends on our becoming a movement that expands outward non-dogmatically and cooperatively to encompass the needs of the larger Jewish community and the world. For this vision to succeed, we require a new breed of leaders - rabbis who are open, non-judgmental, knowledgeable, empathetic, and eager to transform Orthodoxy into a movement that meaningfully and respectfully interacts with all Jews, regardless of affiliation, commitment, or background.”<sup>73</sup>

Though both RRC and YCT are still outside of the mainstream,<sup>13</sup> such training may also be happening at the more mainstream institutions. One of the rabbis ordained at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York describes his approach to work with congregants:

If our goal is to develop deeper meaning in our own lives and for [the lives of] other people, as well as continue Jewish continuity, renewal, and connection to the world, we’re all partners in that. I’m only as strong as my congregants. It’s about delegation and team leadership and team building. So we all are community organizing. That’s what a Rabbi’s role is, rabbi as community organizer. I consider my congregants my coworkers. As much as I’m serving them, we work together to accomplish our goals.

Finally, this study might serve as a model for similar case studies of clergy from other faiths, whether in the Twin Cities or elsewhere. What might be the effect on the religious

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<sup>13</sup> In 2006 YCT applied for membership in the OU, in the rabbinical union associated with the mainstream Orthodox community, but withdrew the application when it appeared that it would be denied.

community, and on America's civic health, of a sustained theoretical and practical attention to the citizen roles of clergy in the workplace?

I am deeply indebted to the rabbis with whom I spoke, many of whom sat down with me more than once, and continued the conversation via email. Though most of my colleagues in the Humphrey Institute's master's program complete their professional papers in the matter of a semester, this project took more than a year from conceptualization, which began in the summer of 2008, to completion, in November of 2009. In addition to distractions caused by the birth of our second child, a new job, and everyday life, the process took as much time as it did because it was difficult to stop gathering information. Each fascinating conversation opened new windows and pointed me in new directions; there are many rabbis with whom I could have spoken but did not have the chance.

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