

When Do You Need an Interim Rabbi?

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As Conan O'Brien, the sixteen year host of "Late Night" contemplated shifting to his gig at "The Tonight Show," he said: "And now we are stuck between two worlds. We're putting on a show here while we're imagining another show there."¹ Similarly when a congregation's rabbi leaves, the community may perceive itself "stuck between two worlds," juggling the shul's governance while imagining a different synagogue under new rabbinic leadership. This shift between two rabbis, whether the result of retirement, illness, death, malfeasance or relocation of a longtime rabbi, may be destabilizing, fraught with varied emotions including anxiety, anticipation, loss, fear, grief, relief, concern, excitement or upset. To 'get on with things' a leadership may be tempted to rush quickly through this change. However, a synagogue's work with a trained interim rabbi allows time for thoughtful, intentional work, strengthening congregations for a healthy search process. Without rushing into a new commitment to a new rabbi, the complicated dynamics of the departure of a rabbi—beloved, hated, deceased, retired—are given time and space. Ultimately, the interim process enables the success of the relationship with the next settled rabbi.

For O'Brien, the physical move from one studio to the next was the least of it; it was the challenge of the transition time. For congregations, the time between rabbis presents vast opportunities for imagining a future while saying goodbye to the past, both assessing what the congregation has been and what it might become. We have heard from movement and congregational leaders that synagogues would be well served by interim rabbis but there were very few trained interims. While congregational and movement leaders have long lamented the paucity of trained rabbis, now the Central Conference of American Rabbis runs intensive seminars for this specialized training to maximize the potential for transformation during and resulting from such transition. Temple Beth El of Great Neck's past president, Nina Koppelman, testifies to this. Ms. Koppelman grew up at Beth El of Great Neck and has known only two rabbis during her

half century membership there. As Beth El's president during the intentional interim rabbi's tenure in 2007-9, she describes the difficulty in envisioning a future when Rabbi Jerome K. Davidson became emeritus after 45 years of service, preceded by the very lengthy tenure of 43 years, of his predecessor, Jacob Rudin. "Rabbi Davidson was such a presence, a rock, a friend and spiritual leader. He had set the tone for everything. It was hard to imagine Beth El without him," she says.

In retrospect Ms. Koppelman says that they discovered that working with their trained interim, Rabbi Richard Shapiro, "was the best for the leadership and for the congregation." They learned much about themselves, about moving ahead and about being strong, about maintaining their identity, as well as considering what they might change. According to Ms. Koppelman, because Rabbi Shapiro was not staying long term, he was able to ask them tough questions, help establish goals for the future and provide an impartial outside perspective. During his interim leadership, the congregation was able to experiment in some areas, implement tough financial and staff decisions, align programs with mission, providing a strong start for the new permanent rabbinic leadership. Ms. Koppelman asserted that the congregation and its leadership were strengthened by this process.

When weighing the benefit of the interim period against the possibility of a synagogue immediately hiring a new permanent rabbi, Ms. Koppelman says there were "absolutely no down sides." She observes that the interim rabbi worked really hard at all of the usual full-time responsibilities plus forged ahead in other areas of transition. Beth El's uniquely qualified and specially trained Rabbi Shapiro left no area untouched in assisting them through the transition, strengthening the congregation all the while. "This was not a substitute teacher who simply teaches the lessons left by the permanent teacher and follows a lesson plan by rote," she explains. On the contrary she notes that the work of an

intentional interim rabbi is very challenging.

Shirley Gordon has repeatedly seen the value of the intentional interim rabbi in her several roles as co-chair of the National Commission on Rabbinic-Congregational Relations (NCRCR) since June of 2003, as president of her URJ region, and as president of Cape Cod Synagogue in Hyannis. This is especially true after a long term rabbi, a rabbi's sudden death or a rabbi's departure after congregational conflict. The interim position enables essential truth telling because there is no expectation of a new contract. Gordon says, "It is the healthiest way to go." In Ms. Gordon's view the successful interim is intentional in approaching the interim work, not someone who simply could not find another job; nor is the interim someone who is seeking a less taxing job in retirement. The ideal interim rabbi is educated and trained for the role of interim rabbi, has the capacity to deal calmly with raw emotions and the ability to model kavod hatzibur.

Experts in Christian settings, where Interim Ministry has long been understood as very valuable, explain that membership and budget remain stable during the interim period. An intentional interim rabbi, what some call "the temporary help" or the "turn around rabbi," has a huge responsibility proactively to understand the systems of congregational life, identify the strengths of the congregation and the current staff, build the lay leadership, learn the culture, develop trust with the leadership and staff, help define the mission, heal the emotions related to the earlier rabbi, help the congregation prepare for a successful search and a stable tenure with the successor rabbi. This work shifts the attention from the previous rabbi's strengths or weaknesses and avoids a frequent reactive decision about the new rabbi. Ms. Gordon regrets having seen congregations make mistakes in hiring a new rabbi either because its leadership has been so full of a heroic attitude of doing everything by themselves or because they simply blame the outgoing rabbi for everything wrong with the expectation that the next rabbi will magically fix everything. The intentional interim rabbi also smoothes the potentially challenging successor/emeritus dynamic where relationships and ego sometimes create complications. The

immense gift of taking time to grow the congregation's identity through self study—by examining its role in the community, in demographics, in the neighborhood, in the movement and in national religious trends—makes the well used interim period all extremely worthwhile.

Judaism knows numerous paradigms for the possibilities and opportunities for change, transition and transformation that take place in our synagogues. Embedded in our Festival celebrations—our chagim of Sukkot, Pesach and Shavuot—has been the notion of pilgrimage. That spiritual journey from the home to the Holy Temple in Jerusalem surely brought altered perspectives.

Our concepts of Shabbat, the Sabbatical year, and a Sabbatical rest for the land recognize the necessity for an in-between time for future growth and transformation.

For our post Exodus ancient ancestors, the wilderness interlude was a necessary interim when they could grow out of their hunger for the familiarity of slavery's garlic and onions. Through this wandering stage, they learned more about themselves as the people of God. They said goodbye to Moses and he to them. They repositioned themselves for spiritual growth, blessing and renewal in the Promised Land. Only then were they ready for a new, strong beginning with Joshua leading as they finally entered Canaan. The synagogue's interval with an intentional interim rabbi promises the same.

¹"Heeeeere's...Conan!!!" by Lynn Hirschberg, New York Times Magazine, May 24, 2009 and www.nytimes.com/2009/05/24/magazine/24Conan-t.html?pagewanted=1&_r=1