

How a Congregation Chooses New Rabbi

By Henry W. Levy

Hundreds of thousands of American Jews go through the experience each year of meeting and greeting a new rabbi. With six million Jews in this country and three or four thousand congregations, this is not unusual. But put down in black and white, this simple fact will stun the average reader.

And the average congregant knows little or nothing about how his new rabbi came to his congregation, how he was chosen, or to put it in more professional terms, "received the call." All he knows is that his previous rabbi has left, and that a committee was appointed and that a successor was finally selected.

But the truth is that "choosing a new rabbi" is a highly organized, and generally efficient operation, particularly in the congregations that are served by members of the large rabbinical and congregational organizations. There are, of course, some small congregations that maintain no national affiliations, and that operate completely on their own, without relations to the recognized rabbinical seminaries, national denominational organizations or their affiliated rabbinical groups.

Let's take a look at the situation in Conservative Judaism, which with its 1100 member Rabbinical Assembly has the largest rabbinical organization in the world. With offices at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, from which most of its members are ordained, and with close relations with its affiliated lay group, the United Synagogue of America, the Rabbinical Assembly has a formal, and thoroughly organized technique of rabbinical placement.

Who better could answer these questions than Rabbi David H. Panitz, of Temple Emanuel of Paterson, New Jersey, the current Chairman of the Joint Commission on Placement of the Rabbinical Assembly and the United Synagogue. How, I asked, do you operate? And what is the extent of your work?

"First," he told me, "we probably should define the extent of our work. Last year, our Joint Placement Commission made 84 rabbinic placements. Of these, 62 were rabbis in our approximately 800 congregations, large, small and medium sized. A few were made in Canada, another was in the West Indies, in Curacao, and the others were on the mainland of the United States -- from New York to California, from Florida to Washington. An additional ten were placed as assistant rabbis in these congregations and seven as Educational Directors in some of the larger congregations. Of the remaining five, three became military chaplains in the armed services, one a chaplain with the Veteran's Administration and the other was named Director of Camp Ramah, Conservative Jewry's summer camp program. So, you see, this is a considerable project, one which is professionally directed by Rabbi Gilbert Epstein of the staff of the Rabbinical Assembly who serves as Director of the Joint Commission on Placement."

This system of rabbinical placement is something that just didn't happen overnight. It was evolved over the years and is a far cry from old methods. In 1929, forty-five years ago, a special Reorganization Committee was appointed by the then President of the Rabbinical Assembly, Dr. Louis L. Finkelstein. At its thirtieth annual convention at the New Howland Hotel in Long Branch, New Jersey, the committee reported:

"We are dealing with the careers of 160 men, two or three times as many congregations, an annual salary of close to a million -- that's business that cannot be attended to in the Seminary hallways between classes."

The committee further reported that the Rabbinical Assembly had 36 requests for placement that year, and that in the course of its activities, had discussed the openings with 111 men. That was at a time when there were 213 living graduates of the Jewish Theological Seminary, 160 of whom held pulpits in Conservative synagogues.

"Today," Rabbi Panitz commented, "the problem is much larger. We have 800 Conservative congregations and 870 living graduates of the Jewish Theological Seminary among our 1100 members. With nearly a hundred of our members now in Israel, others occupied with full time academic positions, and still others retired, we don't have enough Rabbinical Assembly members to fill the requests made to us, and thus Rabbi Epstein sometimes enlists the aid of his counterparts in the Central Conference of American Rabbis, or various Orthodox Yeshivot, in finding rabbis to help fill the vacancies in Conservative congregations from among their memberships."

Which brings us to the question: How is a Rabbi chosen? Do congregations contact rabbis in whom they're interested? Does the rabbi make a direct approach to congregations in which he is interested?

"No, definitely no," was the emphatic answer of Rabbi Panitz. "We're a professional group. We have standards, rules and regulations. A rabbinical change can start in one of several ways. The congregation approaches our Placement Commission with a request. Rabbis notify us of their desire to make a change. Also deaths and resignations present obvious placement needs."

"When a congregation seeks a new rabbi or assistant, the Chairman of its Placement Committee gets in touch with Rabbi Epstein. First, we look into the situation; if there is an incumbent rabbi, does he know that a replacement is sought for him? Does the rabbi seeking a change notify his congregation of his desire? Is there any reason why a rabbi or a congregation should be denied the assistance of the Placement Commission?"

"Periodically, we send out lists to our member rabbis informing them of possible openings. We also send a questionnaire to the requesting congregations asking them for information that would help rabbis in deciding whether they are interested in being considered. After all, we are not a hierarchy; we do not assign rabbis to congregations, or congregations to rabbis. Basically, we try to match the proper rabbi to the proper post."

I was curious about the questionnaire sent to the congregations. I assumed it was based on the Rabbinical Assembly's experience about what rabbis want to know about prospective posts.

Rabbi Panitz assured me that this was the case, gave me a copy of the questionnaire.

"First," he said, "there are a number of questions about the congregation, about its size, its physical facilities, its budget, its religious school, and the standards for its teachers. The religious school is very important to our Jewish way of life, and the rabbi is deeply concerned about it. Does the school have an Educational Director or a full-time Principal; are teachers paid or are they volunteers? How many hours of study a week are required for students, and so forth."

"Then," Rabbi Panitz continued, "there are a number of questions about the service. How traditional is it? Is there a cantor, a choir? Is an organ used at services? What is the average attendance...for Friday evening services...for the Sabbath service? Is there a daily minyan, and when is it held, mornings, evenings or both? Does the congregation have a Sisterhood, a Men's Club, and how large are they? What is the youth program? Is it affiliated with the United Synagogue Youth? After all, a rabbi can only be happy, and keep his congregants happily, if there is a basic meeting of the minds."

"There are also a number of questions of personal concern to the rabbi and his family. Some rabbis won't accept a post in a community where there isn't a Day School for his own children to attend. Others are interested in the universities and colleges in or near the community. What are the housing arrangements for the rabbi, and if housing is provided, how far is it from the synagogue? And finally, of course, there are questions about the proposed salary, fringe benefits and the like."

It is at this point that the Placement Commission actually begins its main job: matching rabbi to the position. Armed with the knowledge of what the congregation is, and which rabbis are interested in possibly accepting the post, the Placement Commission sends a list of prospective applicants with whom the congregation can set up appointments.

"Of course," Rabbi Panitz pointed out, "there are personal checkups by both the congregation and the rabbis. Does the congregation change its rabbi every few years? Similarly, is the rabbi overly restless. Congregational committee members may sometimes visit the applying rabbi's current congregation. Rabbis may be invited to deliver a sermon. From all this give and take, a shidduch is made. And it's remarkable how successful the process is. For aside from the normal movements of the young rabbi from the very small congregation on to the larger one, as he gets more experience, or from an assistantship to a senior rabbinical post, turnover is comparatively small."

Rabbi Panitz summed it up: "Judaism is basically democratic, is not hierarchical in structure, and we must recognize that the congregation ultimately has the right to choose its rabbi, just as the rabbi has the right to choose the congregation that he will serve. And in this process, we trust that the Joint Commission on Placement of the Rabbinical Assembly and the United Synagogue plays a significant and worthwhile role in establishing standards of dignity and mutual respect in the selection process."

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