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Rabbi and Teacher

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Rabbi and Teacher

Abstract

The title *rabbi* (lit., my master) first appeared in ancient Palestine around the first century of the Common Era to designate an individual of exceptional learning and expertise in Jewish law. The term *rav* (lit., master) emerged several centuries later in Babylonia to distinguish a learned sage consecrated by his mastery of the Torah. The professional rabbinate, however, became visible only in medieval times, although the precise origin and development of this new and distinctive communal institution remain somewhat obscure.

Disciplines

History | History of Religion | Intellectual History | Jewish Studies | Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion

Comments

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Rabbi and Teacher

רב ומורה

David B. Ruderman

The title *rabbi* (lit., my master) first appeared in ancient Palestine around the first century of the Common Era to designate an individual of exceptional learning and expertise in Jewish law. The term *rav* (lit., master) emerged several centuries later in Babylonia to distinguish a learned sage consecrated by his mastery of the Torah. The professional rabbinate, however, became visible only in medieval times, although the precise origin and development of this new and distinctive communal institution remain somewhat obscure.

Simḥah Assaf's definition of the traditional rabbi, presented in his early study of the subject, represents, more or less, a conventional characterization of this religious leader: "A scholar with authority over the Jewish community to adjudicate, to teach and to direct its religious life."¹

Such a definition, however, obscures a critical ambiguity regarding the source of rabbinic authority. Did the rabbi hold power over the Jewish community by virtue of his sanctified status as scholar or did he derive his authority from the community itself? Stated differently, was the rabbinic function a concept of leadership emerging primarily within the context of

Jewish communal institutions or a concept of learning and scholarship unrelated to public service? Without exception, rabbis viewed their roles and standing among other Jews neither as deriving from nor depending upon the Jewish community. Nevertheless, because of the growing professionalization of the rabbinate and the gradual subordination of the rabbi to the communal will since the late Middle Ages, a degree of uncertainty remained regarding the rabbi's status and function. In more recent times, the contemporary rabbi often finds himself in an even more difficult and paradoxical position than his medieval ancestor. He strives to maintain his autonomy and integrity when employed by people he seeks to lead.

The rabbi of late antiquity, however, unambiguously functioned as a holy man whose devotion to the study of Torah in both its written and oral forms distinguished him as the dominant religious leader of his community. Earning his livelihood from sources unrelated to his religious role, the rabbi assumed a relatively independent status within the community. As a religious judge and a kind of divine magician, he was seen to possess a special knowledge of Torah that enabled him to perform supernatural acts and eventually to effectuate the redemption of Israel.

Sometime in the twelfth century a new rabbinic office emerged, embedded directly in the novel forms of Jewish self-government evolving in medieval Europe. In Muslim countries, the primary function of the rabbi remained judicial; he was essentially a scholar of Jewish law who strove to interpret the norms of Judaism in the context of the changing conditions of Jewish life in the Diaspora. In Christian countries, the rabbi functioned in a similar capacity, although his sacerdotal responsibilities as chief officary of the Jewish community were more pronounced. Assuming duties more closely analogous to those of a Christian priest, the rabbi became more directly associated with a specific synagogue or congregation. Moreover, the rabbis themselves assumed greater ecclesiastical prerogatives; in some instances, they even demanded the honorific distinction of being called to the reading of Torah prior to those claiming priestly ancestry, whose normative privilege this would be.

The growing professionalization of the rabbinate in Christian Europe reached a further stage of development sometime in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. By that time, most rabbis received various tax exemptions and salaries from the communities they served. They supplemented their regular income by revenue from weddings, divorces, civil litigations, and other such private services.

In the same period, a fixed formula of ordination distinguished by the title *Moreinu ha-rav* ("our teacher, the rabbi," equivalent to the Christian

titles *Meister* and *Magister*), together with the stipulation of well-defined rabbinic qualifications and privileges, was instituted among Ashkenazi Jewish communities in Christian Europe. Rabbis previously had been ordained in ancient Palestine, receiving maximal judicial privileges operative within the framework of a Jewish court system. When this earlier institution was abolished, rabbis personally authorized their most worthy students to function as rabbis. The Ashkenazi institutionalization of this practice was considered a necessity for safeguarding the academic standards of the rabbinate at a time when social and cultural upheaval threatened the continuity of traditional Jewish life. However, as soon as the granting of rabbinic diplomas was routinized, standards for entering the rabbinate gradually were lowered. This practice was severely criticized by Sephardic rabbis such as Isaac Abrabanel in the fifteenth century, who cynically noticed the parallel between the rabbinic certificate and a university degree: "I have no idea how this [Ashkenazi] practice originated except for the fact that they were jealous of the ways of the non-Jews who award doctorates and thus they did the same."²

By the late Middle Ages, the rabbinate had become a more complex and multi-faceted office. As communal functionary, the rabbi still acted as judge and chief expert on Jewish law, but he also served as occasional preacher who sought increasing opportunities to exhort his congregation to observe the law. He supervised the ritual life of the community, directed the educational program of its youth, and, in some cases, also served as cantor. Despite the growing responsibilities of his position, the rabbi's actual hegemony within the Jewish community was increasingly attenuated. Most rabbis were appointed only for limited terms; government officials and powerful communal leaders often interfered with their decisions, and rabbinic posts sometimes went to the highest bidder.

Nevertheless, the institution of the rabbinate was still associated with the tradition of sanctity and transcendent scholarship originating in ancient times. Notwithstanding the stark realities of economic and political power upon which every Jewish community was based, individual rabbis continued to occupy the central religious and cultural role among their constituencies. By virtue of their prodigious learning, their personal piety, and their own spiritual vocation to shape the Jewish community in the image of God, they refused to accept the mere status of communal appointees. They continued to speak in the name of a hallowed tradition that transcended all powerful special interests within the community.

By the late eighteenth century, first in western Europe and later elsewhere, the rabbi suffered an even greater crisis of authority, brought about

by the cataclysmic forces of Enlightenment and political and social emancipation. Writing at the beginning of the seventeenth century, the illustrious Italian rabbi Leone Modena still described the rabbinic leader in traditional terms:

These men, that is to say, the Cacham [*hakham*], Rab, or Morenu, decide all controversies concerning the things that are either Lawful or Prohibited, and all other differences; they Marry, and give Bills of Divorce; they Preach also, if they can; and are the Chief men in the academies before mentioned; they have the uppermost seats in their Synagogues, and in all Assemblies; and there is generally great Respect shewed unto them in all things.³

Of course, Modena's idealized portrait already did not reflect the reality he knew so well. Most Italian rabbis of his day, including Modena himself, had limited judicial authority and meager economic resources, and were not always shown "great respect in all things."

Some two centuries later in Germany, Zechariah Frankel clearly had a strikingly dissimilar concept in mind in discussing what he considered to be the ideal contemporary rabbi. For Frankel, "To be intimately familiar with the Talmud is not enough; the muses must also not be strange to him. . . . Would our age in fact take instruction from a man trained otherwise?"⁴ Even more divergent was the startling characterization of the American rabbi attributed to Solomon Schechter, who lived only one generation after Frankel: "From now on, no one can be a rabbi in America who does not know how to play baseball as well as study Talmud."⁵

Common to Frankel's and Schechter's perceptions of the modern rabbi was their view of his transformed function and status: His professional duties were now tailored to the new social context in which he operated. The modern rabbi, unlike his medieval counterpart, was primarily a synagogue pulpit rabbi, secularly educated, oratorically gifted, and adept at pastoral guidance. He functioned in a community where his power and prestige were highly circumscribed, which allowed him no coercive power, and where the constituency he served was becoming increasingly secular and increasingly illiterate in Jewish affairs. Like the Protestant minister, the modern rabbi served as preacher, pastor, administrator, priest, and social ambassador. Yet unlike his Christian colleague, he worked in a community suffering a more acute sense of loss of confidence and commitment to its inherited values of the past.

No doubt the leap from Modena's to Schechter's concepts of the rabbinic office authentically reflects the major disruptions in Jewish life that mark

the last three centuries. The American milieu especially has produced a singular expression of the rabbi who serves a community whose interest and involvement in Jewish beliefs and practices are decreasing. Quite often, the American rabbi is given an unwritten proxy by his congregation to excel in those Jewish qualities and deeds to which every member aspires but usually fails to realize. He becomes an exemplary Jew who commands no special authority except by virtue of the quality of his personality, sincerity, and devotion to the values he espouses. He performs his duties as a leader of prayer; as a spokesman for Judaism, albeit neither as scholarly in Jewish matters as some of his traditional predecessors nor as informed in secular matters as some of his congregants; as a custodian of Jewish knowledge and observance; as a hired hand, subjected sometimes painfully to the whims and passions of congregational leaders, and on precious occasions, as a figure whose personal piety and human concern touch the lives of some of his congregants. The recent dramatic entrance of women into a profession that had previously excluded them has yet to have any perceptible impact on the function and style of this sort of American rabbi.

Such blatant discontinuities with the past, however, need not obscure the vital and substantial bonds that premodern and contemporary rabbis have continued to share. The sharp dichotomy often portrayed between the secure authority of the traditional rabbi, in contrast with his modern counterpart, is usually exaggerated and misplaced. Rabbinic authority, even in most traditional settings, could be limited, as we have seen, by lay leadership. Rabbis in the past were also economically dependent on the communities they served. Like the modern rabbi, they also assumed a multiplicity of roles, including sacerdotal and pastoral functions. And also like the modern rabbi, their rabbinic function encouraged them, indeed required them to immerse themselves in both Jewish and non-Jewish spheres of knowledge. To know only Jewish texts was never enough. On the contrary, an overwhelming number of rabbis living in both western and eastern Europe regularly fostered cultural liaisons with the outside world. Many were versed in literature, philosophy, and science. They saw their function not as adversaries to general learning but as cultural intermediaries between the Jewish and non-Jewish worlds—primary interpreters of non-Jewish cultural modes within the context of traditional Jewish values and mores. Above all, the medieval and modern rabbi continue to share a common psychological condition. They remain communal role models whose personal authenticity is measured by their ability to know and live the law. Despite the changed circumstances of modern Jewish life, rabbis are still

perceived to have a "calling"; they are still differentiated from the Jews they serve by another "realm of being," by an aura of saintliness associated with the traditional responsibility of knowing and living the Torah.

What might one speculate about the future of the rabbi, especially the American rabbi, in the light of the apparent mutability and erosion of the community he or she will continue to serve? However bright or lugubrious the future of Jewish life in America may be, there is little doubt about the pivotal importance of rabbinic leadership to that future. Jews, whether diminished in numbers by the declining birth rate or deflated by intermarriage and assimilation, still require teachers and practitioners of Judaism. They seek a sympathetic human being, a holy man or woman, a role model who offers them the cultural treasures and warm human links binding them to their ancestral tradition. Some Jews have attempted to subvert the rabbinic role by making the rabbi a surrogate Jew through whom other Jews live vicariously. Too often the rabbi is tempted to fill the void of Jewish observance by obliging a congregation and acting Jewish for everyone else. No doubt there is a fine line between surrogate and role model, but only the latter role offers any promise that the rabbi might achieve minimal success.

Undeniably the rabbi has suffered some loss of political power to lay groups within the Jewish community; the rabbi also sees his or her exclusive claim to expertise in Jewish matters somewhat eclipsed by the new breed of Judaic scholars in university and seminary settings. Yet lack of political power was a constant in the history of the rabbinate and to the committed rabbi and teacher it never remained an impediment to effective communal leadership and communication of values. The new Jewish academics are neither hostile nor unsympathetic to the rabbinic calling; many of them are rabbis themselves. Not all rabbis in the past were great scholars; like contemporary rabbis, many had little opportunity for uninterrupted study. Nevertheless, they were aware and appreciative of scholarly distinction, and they were able to utilize and disseminate the erudition of great rabbinic teachers to educate their own congregations. They performed the unique function of mediating between esoteric scholarship and the needs of the lay community. Little has changed in this respect. The modern rabbi need not be a great scholar in Jewish or in secular matters, though some are. Yet the rabbi has the capacity of being conversant and stimulated by academic issues and provides the unique bridge between pure book learning and pragmatic human concerns. In short, he or she performs a function the academic scholar can never perform: to learn in order to teach and in order to do. By studying, applying, and living the Torah, the rabbi remains, in the

language of Salo W. Baron, "the chief protagonist in the drama of Jewish communal survival."⁶

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