

Religious and Spiritual Authority in the New Jewish Paradigm

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The Preamble

The last time I presented a treatise like this to a gathering of Rabbis, the response was, “What are we, then? Dinosaurs?”

I responded they were not dinosaurs. Their environment was changing, but unlike the dinosaurs, they had the ability to adapt. Would they adapt?

That gathering of Rabbis was in South Florida, one of the major Jewish populations in the world. Of the nearly quarter million Jews in South Florida, no more than 15% were affiliated with a Jewish organization. Of the 15%, no more than 10% were regularly active. That gave these Rabbis a 1.5% active market share of the Jewish community.

“But other statistics show that 80% of Jews at some time will be affiliated with a synagogue,” came the expected response.

“Touch and go Judaism,” I said. “They touch to get a kid bar-mitvahed (yes, it has become a transitive verb) and then they go, and we don't see them again until they have kids approaching bar mitzvah age. Fewer and fewer submit to the protocol of Hebrew school. So market share will diminish with each generation.

“The environment has changed,” I said. “The question is, how will you adapt to it? Had dinosaurs the ability to adapt, it's unlikely we would recognize them now as dinosaurs. If Rabbis successfully adapt, it's unlikely, some time from now, we will recognize them as Rabbis.”

For the most part these Rabbis were polite. But what I said made little impression. They were mostly pulpit rabbis, working with the 15% of the affiliated, 1.5% at a time. From their perspective, rabbinic Judaism was still intact. They heard what I had to say, then returned to discussions concerning building funds and how to accommodate interfaith families in bar mitzvah services.

The Amble

If there's a preamble, then there has to be an amble. What follows is an amble through Jewish history, examining the evolution of religious and spiritual authority. That evolution will show us the direction religious and spiritual authority is likely to take in the new paradigm. There is a trend, and we are likely to continue it.

Religious authority is understood here as the steady application of authority for religious practice within a community throughout a paradigm. Spiritual authority may reside within those who manifest religious authority, but it makes itself known to its greatest effect as the agent of change in the course of a paradigm shift.

Authority in Judaism is not an independent institution. It is a function of the nature of Torah and the nature of drawing close to God.

In the time of the first Temple, the nature of drawing close to God was the offering of animals. Torah was *the* Torah, the five books of Moses. Religious authority and spiritual authority were invested in separate bodies: religious authority in the Priests (*kohanim*) and spiritual authority in the early Prophets.

For the 70 years following the destruction of the first Temple and the exile of the leadership of the Jewish community to Babylon, the operating system of the Torah, the central

book of Leviticus, was in hibernation. The Priests had no religious authority because the Temple was, quite literally, down. The spiritual spark of the Jewish people was sustained by the Prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel who overheard the songs the angels sang and had visions of an aspect of the glory of God. In sharing their experience, they reassured the Jewish community in exile that God was still in immediate relationship with them. Their charisma and direction resulted in the restoration of the Temple by Ezra and Nehemiah.

If we refer to the transition from the first Temple to the second as a paradigm shift, the shift was subtle. Torah was still the written Torah. Drawing close was still the offering of animals. Religious authority continued to be the Priests. If there was a shift, it was that spiritual authority broadened from the hands of the few major Prophets to a school of minor Prophets.

In the last centuries of the second Temple, religious practice and the priesthood became corrupt. People voted with their feet, deserting the Temple, developing a proto-rabbinite, along with a proto-synagogue and proto-prayer. When the second Temple fell, the foundations of the rabbinite, synagogue, and prayer were already established. This was to be a paradigm shift of major proportions, involving the very essence of Torah, religious practice, and authority.

By the time of Akiva in the second century it was well established that Moses had received two Torahs at Sinai, one in writing, the other to be passed down orally. The transmission of Torah described in Mishnah Avot — from Moses, to Joshua, to the Judges, to the Prophets, to the men of the Great Assembly, and on to the Rabbis — was this oral Torah, not the written Torah. The oral Torah was standardized by Judah HaNasi at the beginning of the third century, then expanded by the academies in Babylon and Palestine into a Talmud of 63 tractates.

Prayer replaced animal offerings as the means of drawing close to God. The flexible forms of prayer described in Talmud Berachot were articulated into precise words with the passage of generations.

The spiritual authority, which at one time had been invested in the single person of Moses, had broadened with the passage of generations to the hands of a few Prophets in the first Temple period, to a school of Prophets during the time of the second Temple, to still larger academies of *tanna-im* in Yavneh (formulating the Mishnah) and *amora-im* in Babylon and Jerusalem (formulating the Talmud). Religious authority was invested in the ordained Rabbis, those who had mastered the Talmud and been ordained by previous generations of Rabbis.

The institutions of Talmud as Torah, prayer as Divine service, and Rabbi as religious authority remained the structure of the Jewish world for a thousand years, largely unchallenged from the time of Judah to the time of Maimonides.

In the 12th century, Maimonides knew with certainty that the definition of religious authority required adjustment. We know this from his *Mishneh Torah*, a clear codification of the Talmud into fourteen volumes. His intent was to broaden the base of authority from those who had mastered the entire Talmud to those who might master these fourteen volumes. It was a shot across the bows of early rabbinic Judaism, but, as eloquent as it was, it did not succeed.

Why not? The *Mishneh Torah* was surely adequate to the task, but the times were not ready for a change. Maimonides was a spiritual giant, but even one as great as he could not provoke change until the people were susceptible to change.

Shifts experienced within Jewish civilization occurred after the people had suffered a major trauma, when everything was open to question. The first shift was after the destruction of the first Temple and the exile to Babylon. The second came after the destruction of the second Temple. The third . . . Well, the third would not come until the expulsion of the Jewish community from Spain at the end of the 15th century. Maimonides was three centuries ahead of his time.

Each of the traumas mentioned above was devastating to the Jewish civilization in all of the worlds of experience — physically, emotionally, intellectually — and each opened to question the relationship of the Jewish people with their God. Each of the traumas resulted in changes, some subtle, some profound, in the way that relationship would be expressed.

In the 16th century, after the expulsion from Spain, a community gathered around Luria in S'fat. The members of this community were proficient in Talmud (including Luria, who was known primarily as a mystic), and proficient in mystical discipline (including Josef Karo, who was known primarily as a talmudist).

Of note is that the spiritual agents of change had well developed rational and imaginative faculties (Maimonidean terms). A mystic alone could not redirect Torah. A rationalist alone would not have the charisma to create change. The Lurianic community in S'fat is an example, and the generation of Akiva equally so. That generation made the transition from the written to the oral Torah, and, at the same time, experienced profound mystical journeys to overhear the songs the angels sang and bring back those songs as religious service for the new paradigm.

What did the Lurianic community accomplish after the expulsion from Spain?

The nature of Torah was irrevocably changed. The community codified the Talmud into four volumes, the *Shulhan Aruch*, which, with commentary, became the authority for Jewish observance throughout the world.

Religious service shifted from the dry recitation of words to words expressed with intense *kavannah* (inner direction). The observance of Shabbat was elevated to a mystical union with the Divine.

And the institution of Rabbi — the religious authority — was broadened from one who was a master of the 63 tractates of Talmud to one who was master of the four volumes of the

Shulhan Aruch. Religious authority had evolved from the priests to the early Rabbis to the later Rabbis, an expansion and democratization of leadership.

The *Shulhan Aruch*, prayer with *kavannah*, and the expanded rabbinate sustained Judaism into modern times.

Modern Times

As we acknowledge that we are the generations after the *Shoah*, a trauma which devastated Jewish civilization physically, emotionally, and theologically, throwing into question our relationship with God, we might note some commonalities in paradigm shifts that give us a hint of what to expect in modern times.

The shift will challenge both our rational and imaginative faculties.

The change will affect the nature of Torah. It is not that we dispose of earlier received Torahs. The oral Torah of the Mishnah was built upon the foundation of the written Torah of Moses. A biblical Jew would have been astonished to learn that Moses received not one, but two Torahs at Sinai. Some generations from now a rabbinic Jew might be astonished to learn that Moses received three Torahs: one expressed in writing, one by word of mouth, and one built on the foundation of the Talmud over the internet, where Torah is growing with tools that engrave at the speed of light.

The story of Moses in the academy of Rabbi Akiva is well known. In the Yeshivah on high Moses saw the Holy One fixing crowns to the letters of the written Torah. When Moses asked what the crowns were for, he was told there would be one who would build mountains of new law on each of those crowns. Moses asked if he could see. He turned around to find himself in the academy of Rabbi Akiva. Moses didn't have a clue as to what was being taught. When

asked, he was told it was the Torah Moses received at Sinai, and Moses was comforted by that (*Menhuot 29b*). But the story continues. Rabbi Akiva in the Yeshivah on high saw the Holy One keying all the Talmud into the internet. When Rabbi Akiva asked what that was for, he was told there would be communities that would build mountains of new traditions on that foundation. Rabbi Akiva asked if he could see. He turned around to find himself . . . here. Right here, in our place, in our time, when we have the entire Talmud at our fingertips. There is a third Torah emerging, right here, right now. What will we tell Rabbi Akiva when he asks? Will he be comforted by his experience?

This change in reception of Torah will affect the nature of our religious service, how we draw close to God. Priestly service was mandated by written Torah to barbeque animals and send a pleasing odor heavenward. Rabbinic service was mandated by oral Torah to replace the daily offerings in the Temple with words of prayer. Lurianic modifications added intent and intensity. But prayer is unlikely to be the offering in the new paradigm.

Words of prayer have become unstable. Witness the proliferation of prayer books in recent years.

Through the first eighteen hundred years of the rabbinic age we were sustained primarily by a single *siddur* with small changes from community to community. In liberal Judaism, both the Conservative and Reform movements were sustained for generations by a few *siddurim*. In recent times, it seems a new *siddur* is published every year, if not every month. The words keep changing.

There are a number of reasons for this.

The addition of a few feminine names and gender-neutral translations ultimately cannot compensate for a discipline developed by men for men.

Changes in parlance occur much more frequently than in prior generations.

Words themselves have become crude instruments to define the immediacy of our partnership with the Divine.

For two thousand years we offered animals. For the next two thousand, words. We shifted from animals to words. Now we shift from words to . . . ?

Niggunim? Wordless melodies that create a community out of individuals?

We have communities that are sustained by *niggunim*. Singing together, the divine spark within one individual is bonded with the divine spark within another, until the community as a whole is enflamed (*b'hitlahavut*), experiencing a communal ecstasy.

This is an expression of horizontal spirituality, experienced in the plane of the present. Is this what God wants of us as religious service in the new paradigm?

What of *devekut*, the adhesion of a person to the Divine through the extension of soul, from the *nefesh* that attaches a person to this world through the *ruach*, *neshamah*, *chayah*, to a *yechidah* – a connection with the Transcendent?

Communal *niggunim* alone are not likely to accomplish that, but meditation, the offering of self, surrendering ego, submission as an immanent partner to the direction of the Divine. . . That might be an offering that God would desire.

These suggestions borrow from Hasidism, Buddhism . . . They borrow from lots of –isms. But borrowing is part of a paradigm shift. The fellowship of Akiva surely borrowed from Hellenism. The community of Luria, from Sufism and Hinduism.

The new religious service may be a mixture of *niggunim* and meditation, or maybe something else entirely. But a new religious service will surely emerge to replace the convention of prayer.

Note that, with the emergence of the oral Torah and the liturgy, the priest and the prophet became figures of the past. It is likely that, with the emergence of a readily available, virtual Torah and a new form of religious service, the Rabbi, too, will become a figure of the past.

Regressive, Progressive, and Deviant Judaism

At the moment of a paradigm shift there are regressive, progressive, and deviant paths. Regressive is the easiest to determine, because we know with some certainty what was, and we can regress toward that. As for progressive and deviant, that depends upon the perspective of the practitioner. One who considers one's path progressive will likely hold the path of the other to be deviant, and vice-versa.

Consider the transition from priestly to rabbinic Judaism. There were Pharisees, Essenes, Sadducees, the Qumran community, and early Christianity. Which of those would you consider regressive? Which progressive? Which deviant?

Out of the progress of the Lurianic community came Hasidism and Shabbatai Tzvi and Mussar and Jacob Frank. Which of those would you consider regressive? Which progressive? Which deviant?

Consider our current Jewish world in North America. We have Reform, Reconstructive, Conservative, and a variety of expressions called Orthodox. But also Chabad and Renewal and Havurah and Kabbalah Centre and . . .

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If you like, you might take a few minutes in *hevruta* to review the list and add to it. Which, from your current viewpoint, would you consider regressive expressions of Judaism? Which progressive? Which deviant?

Then, how might the other expressions of Judaism consider you?

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Only from the perspective of time can we judge which have been progressive and which deviant.

But regressive today is clear. Regressive is that which returns us toward the last great shift, the 16th century. Then a Rabbi was a Rabbi, and we know what that was. The most regressive expressions of Judaism revert toward 16th century dress, 16th century community structure, 16th century treatment of women, and remove themselves as much as possible from any modern influence. Less regressive, but still regressive, are communities that revert to the forms of regressive Judaism without knowledge of the core substance, but regress nonetheless for lack of any positive direction to move beyond those forms.

Progressive Judaism is anything but clear. By definition it steps into the unknown, guided by deep knowledge of what we have learned in earlier paradigms (the rational faculty) and guidance from the Divine through mystical discipline (the imaginative faculty).

We have already witnessed substantial change in the nature of the Jewish community, if not in the nature of its leadership.

Jews are voting with their feet, walking away from the conventional synagogue and rabbinate. Witness the statistics cited above concerning South Florida. Rabbis have less and less influence and authority within the Jewish community.

Jews are more often taking life-cycle ceremonies into their own hands, managing funerals and weddings with either no assistance or minimal assistance from Rabbis.

The *Jewish Catalogs* of the 1970's, though not nearly the equivalent of the *Mishneh Torah* in breadth and depth, were nonetheless a shot across the bows of modern rabbinic Judaism, teaching Jews how to be Jewish without a Rabbi.

Jewish leaders are being tacitly ordained from below rather than from above. Individuals serving communities as religious leaders are being recognized as Rabbis of their communities, and non-conventional ordaining bodies are providing certification for them, after the fact, undermining the established denominations.

If a Jew has a question concerning tradition, history, or text, Rabbi Google provides an answer in milliseconds. Why should he or she consult any other Rabbi?

A Question of Authority

So, if not a Rabbi, what will religious authority be in the new paradigm? What will be the spiritual agent of change?

Authority has broadened with each shift, to rest on the shoulders of an ever expanding body of people. In the new paradigm it may be that both religious and spiritual authority will rest upon the body of the Jewish people as a whole.

An old tradition: When in doubt about where to go, see what the people are doing. If they are not prophets themselves, they are the children of prophets (*Pesachim 66a*). Individually, Jews may not be knowledgeable. Together as a community in intimate communication, they possess all knowledge.

Torah is available as never before. More and more individual Jews are interacting with Torah, wrestling with her — outside of synagogues, outside of conventional organizations. They no longer need to convene in a single location. Communication is nearly instantaneous, wherever one might be.

It used to be the synagogue was the place to go for Jews to meet Jews. Now one goes to *JDate*. *JDate* is the greatest Jewish meeting place the world has ever known.

So, if the people can learn within themselves, within a virtual community, how to conduct their own life cycle ceremonies, if the synagogue is not necessary for Jews to interact with Jews, what will become of the Rabbi?

Getting Out of the Way

In the new paradigm the role of the religious leader will be counter-intuitive, flying in the face of most everything the conventional Rabbi has been trained to do.

His/her role will be to create vacuums within which creativity might occur, to complete the trend begun with the formation of independent *havurot* in the 1960's, and empower individual Jews and communities so the leadership might spark from one person, one component of the community, to another, spontaneously, as the need demands.

This notion is not new.

In 1974 Eugene Borowitz published an article in *Religious Education* [69(6), November-December], "Tzimtzum: A mystic model for contemporary leadership."

In the fall of 2002, Rabbi Stuart Kelman of Congregation Netivot Shalom in Berkeley, California, and Alison Jordan, a psychotherapist and a volunteer leader, published an article (available on the internet) in the same journal, "The Rabbinic leader and the volunteer leader." They quote extensively from the Borowitz article.

Following are two paragraphs:

One of the most distinctive features of this model is that it places the rabbi in the position of facilitator and teacher instead of performer and focal point of organizational authority. This allows others to step into places the rabbi might otherwise be filling alone. When many learn and do, the experience and the norm changes from that of passive viewing to active engagement and creation, with all members sharing responsibility for our synagogue. One member put it this way: "You don't just sit in the back row and watch the performance. Everyone is necessary; we're each a part of a living organism."

For many, the impact of the rabbi in this model is acutely noted in his absence. "There is a vacuum when he's not there," one congregant commented. "He has a powerful impact on people without putting himself up front. He stays in the background but has a greater impact than one who stays up front. I have learned a lot from how he acts." This person learned from the rabbi's modeling that he too can empower others.

The notion of empowering others through *tzimtzum* (restriction) is more than having the vacuum noted when the rabbi is absent. It is the creation of a vacuum even when the rabbi is present! It is within that vacuum that a spiritual shift takes place.

In 1984, Lawrence Kushner published an article in *New Traditions*, the journal of the National Havurah Committee. "The Tent-peg Business: Some Truths about Congregations." The article is on the website of the Union for Reform Judaism (which mistakenly dates it to 1988).

Kushner writes the following, and also refers to the Borowitz article:

The chief goal of a rabbi is to teach the members of the congregation how to run their congregation without rabbinic help. The rabbi must tell them what he or she knows and then persuade, cajole, and even trick them into doing what they want to do with their congregation.

But is That a Rabbi?

The title Rabbi is so laden with expectations and miscellaneous baggage it may well be an impediment to new expressions of religious and spiritual authority.

This leader is not a conventional teacher. He or she is a coach — a spiritual coach. In Hebrew that would be *m'amen ruchani* — one who teaches a spiritual discipline so others might become proficient.

Consider the difference between a spiritual coach in progressive Judaism and a conventional Rabbi in liberal Judaism.

In the conventional liberal synagogue, the Rabbi conducts virtually all of the prayer, officiates at most all of the life-cycle ceremonies, and is the primary teacher of Torah.

A coach by definition empowers students to become independent, to assume positions of religious and spiritual leadership.

Imagine a soccer coach who demonstrates passing and shooting, but never lets the players touch the ball or play on the field. That isn't a soccer coach. That's a soccer Rabbi.

Imagine a soccer coach who demonstrates passing, and shooting, then distributes as many balls as possible to the players, encouraging them to take risks until they become proficient. Then the coach steps to the side of the playing field and allows the players to evolve as a team.

Is the Rabbi who steps to the side of the praying field still a Rabbi? Are expectations of the Rabbi's role so entrenched that the one who carries that title is impaired?

Can a new expression of worship, of service of the Divine, evolve in the presence of a Rabbi? Can a new expression of Torah develop in the presence of a Rabbi? Rabbis are duty bound, by definition, to teach and convey rabbinic tradition, and to fulfill the role model associated with the title. Can Rabbis bring us into the new paradigm?

If a new form of Torah is emerging, and a new form of religious service, then a new form of leader must also emerge, with new training to encourage, not impede, the development of progressive Judaism.

We have seen that authority has broadened steadily from Moses to the present. It is time for that authority to broaden still further, to the people who are spontaneously receiving and developing Torah, to communities that, through educated, mutual consensus, are developing new forms of religious service. The sum total of our educated laity has become the new religious and spiritual authority.

It is taught, "Wherever two sit to learn Torah, the *Shechinah* sits between them (*Berachot 6a*)." If that is said of two, how much the more so of a holy community that is permitted free reign to learn and grow!

We who used to be Rabbis might best serve our communities by lower-casing ourselves to rabbis, creating holy space within which others can grow, coaching them to ever greater sensitivity and service, and then encourage them to redefine us.

Some questions:

Is a new Torah emerging to stand upon the shoulders of the Oral and Written Torahs? Have you seen expressions of it?

Will the worship of words continue into the new paradigm? If not, what does God want of us by way of religious service (*avodah*)?

Will the title Rabbi continue into the next paradigm? If not, what might the title be?

What will the training of such a religious-spiritual leader be?

How will such a leader be validated? By ordination, accreditation, certification? And by whom?