



Jewish Life

EAST OF MOSCOW • WHEN EICHMANN CAME

SHOULD MY SON BE A RABBI?

THE LAVON AFFAIR • THE VISION OF SAINTLINESS

THE FREEDOM TO BUILD

KISLEV, 5721
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December, 1960

"Should My Son Be A Rabbi?"

By NORMAN LAMM

I HAVE no doubt that most of those who have glanced at the question in the title have already answered it—in the negative. The majority of even orthodox Jewish parents, and of yeshivah students themselves, are not receptive to the thought of the rabbinate as a full time career.

Unquestionably, one of the more important reasons for this attitude is the confused idea most of us have of the typical rabbi. A number of mutually inconsistent and undefined images compete for our conception of the rabbi today. Because of a cultural or psychological lag, there is one stereotype that often dominates our thinking. It persists stubbornly in the recesses of our unconscious although we know, on the conscious level, that real flesh-and-blood rabbis bear very little semblance to that unfortunate image. This is the woeful picture of the pious *rav*, who struggles valiantly to make ends meet, hopelessly out of touch with "real life," and whose people treat him respectfully but patronizingly. Despite the fact that this kind of rabbi has been superseded in the past decades by a far different sort of rabbi—more assertive, more confident, receiving respect without a trace of condescension—this impression does have a hold on the minds and memories of some parents whose personal

experiences in the early part of this century discourage them from considering the rabbinate for their sons.

The yeshivah student who rules the rabbinate out of his future is motivated by a quite different stereotype, one which bears a greater resemblance to reality, but is still a distortion, for a modern rabbi need not necessarily conform to it. Paddy Chayefsky caricatured this type in his "The Tenth Man"—a smooth, suave, disillusioned, philistine young religious functionary. The intellectually honest and idealistic student of any of our many yeshivoth feels an abhorrence and disdain for this kind of imitation-rabbi who spends his life in a weird nightmare of flattery, submission, and religious hokuspokus. These two mental pictures of "a typical rabbi," so different one from the other, both account to an extent for the diminishing attraction of the rabbinate for some of our people, both old and young.

The purpose of this article is to disabuse the reader of such bias and plead for a more realistic kind of attitude which will not allow for a spontaneous "perish the thought" reaction to the suggestion that the rabbinate be seriously considered as a career for a modern young Jew.

It is wrong and dangerous to allow a dreadfully distorted perspective of

the rabbinate to persist and do its damage without interruption. A new world has come into being since the stereotype of the old, poor *rav* held sway. Without any diminution of commitment to Torah, some of the worst, most objectionable disadvantages of the rabbi's position have become deservingly obsolete. Along with a new set of problems has come a new surge of confidence, and the dedicated rabbi can use his newly won status to forge a stronger, more vital Jewish life in America. And yet, while modern and well established, he is worlds apart from the rabbinic functionary of "The Tenth Man" notoriety. He can, in addition, count upon the assistance of a new sort of layman who combines piety, worldliness, and social acceptability with a respect for the rabbi and understanding of his position. The prestige of the rabbinate as such will determine not only the caliber of young man attracted to its ranks, but also the basic attitude of the public to that which the rabbinate stands for: Torah, the authority of Jewish law in Jewish life. This, together with the fact that rabbis today, by virtue of the new configurations in American life, exert a broad influence upon the community, makes it imperative that a more realistic appreciation of the rabbinate be developed in the public mind.

A PROPER perspective on the contemporary rabbinate should begin with a consideration of the necessary ingredients that go into the making of the rabbi. The sense of dedication should be placed at the very top of the list. Without it, a man can be a fine *lamdan* of good character, but he will be a failure as a rabbi. Before deciding to enter the rabbinate, a young man must believe in the Torah

tradition with all his heart and soul and might to the point where he is willing to offer himself for its sake. He must never become a rabbi because he was not trained for anything else. Dedication is the magical ingredient that will usually spell the difference between a sense of spiritual fulfillment and ignominious failure. Dedication includes both an absorbing love of Torah, and an undiminished love of Jews, and therefore the urge to teach one to the other. Under dedication I include moral courage, the courage to stand alone, patiently and without bitterness. A stout heart and a strong backbone are the very first prerequisites for the rabbinate.

The rabbi must, of course, be a scholar. It is inconceivable that an authentic rabbi should be anything else but a *talmid chochom*. All his preachments will ring hollow if he will himself abandon Torah. To this end it is necessary that he devote himself to Torah and Talmud from his earliest youth. There is no substitute for the hard and relentless discipline of Torah scholarship.

A love of human beings cannot be learned, but the innate capacity for it can be enhanced. The young man with aspirations for the rabbinate must begin early to overcome any inhibitions about genuinely liking people. If he has a congenitally dyspeptic disposition, if he finds it hard to relate to others, let him rather pursue some other career.

BECAUSE a major aspect of the rabbinate is teaching, in the larger sense, and because teaching is a form of communication, the aspirant for the rabbinate should have at least some ability to articulate his thoughts and express them in an intelligent and ac-

ceptable manner. Not every rabbi need be an orator. But if he believes that it will be impossible for him to stand before an audience and make himself understood, a candidate for the rabbinate should be encouraged to reconsider his decision. Too much depends upon the rabbi's ability to speak and speak well to afford the luxury of downgrading elocution as a prerequisite for the rabbinate. The place of preaching should not be exaggerated, but neither should it be minimized.

It is good for a student to recognize early the need for organizational ability and administration. Schools, yeshivoth, charities, Jewish institutions of all kinds will depend upon his leadership. While administrative talents are not at all indispensable, they should not be deprecated.

These are only a few of the requirements. Others will become evident in the course of this article. It is in recognition of their importance that Yeshiva University has recently extended its Semichah program to three years after graduating from college. Such courses as homiletics, practical rabbinics, community administration, education, Jewish philosophy, and a number of others are taught to all its rabbinical students. Dedication and scholarship depend upon certain professional skills for their effectiveness.

ONE of the real problems with regard to recruiting for the rabbinate, one that deserves serious study, is the economic question. Those of more modest means are more likely to consider the rabbinate than those in more comfortable circumstances, who are generally unreceptive to it. It is unusual for the scion of a wealthy home to enter the field. It is the middle and lower economic classes which

yield the largest number of practicing rabbis, not the upper and upper middle layers. The situation is not entirely novel in Jewish life. As far back as Talmudic days our Sages were moved to admonish Jews to treat the children of the poor with care "for Torah shall issue from their midst." Even then the son of the substantial Jew went grazing in greener professional pastures.

Today, with the economic progress of most American Jews, the situation is sometimes aggravated. The unrealistic retention of the image of the rabbi who was barely able to eke out a living for himself and his family often interferes with an objective, sensible approach to the rabbinate by possible candidates and their families. While there is understandable reluctance to discuss such matters in public, it should be pointed out that the orthodox rabbi in the United States and Canada of today is no longer on the bottom of the financial scale; he does fairly well for himself. In not many other professions can a young man expect so handsome a starting salary as in the rabbinate, often with a home provided by the congregation, and other incidental benefits.

It is true that as additional fields open to the young Jewish student, the rabbinate must compete not only with his father's business, but with law, medicine, engineering, science, management, and a host of other, better-paying careers. There has developed of late an alarming tendency for some of our best minds to be siphoned off to other fields, leaving only a small, hard core of talented, dedicated men for the "chair of the rabbinate." With all the improvement in the rabbi's economic position, it still does and always will require a modicum of authentic idealism to enter the rabbinate.

IN URGING that the rabbinate be actively considered as a career by more and better qualified men, I do not mean to say that there are no difficulties that ought to discourage one from it. That would be silly as well as dishonest. Like every other profession, the rabbinate has its disadvantages. No one should ever contemplate the practical rabbinate unless he has prepared himself for these objectionable features.

The rabbinate, for one thing, is overdiversified. What may be good in a portfolio is bad in a profession. Other observers have already mentioned and lamented this sad state of affairs. In an age when everyone else is specializing, the rabbi must be a scholar and administrator, preacher and psychologist, expert in youth and in Golden Age activities, writer and book reviewer, fund raiser and father-image (a real contradiction!). The rabbi, consequently, cannot concentrate on what he regards as truly important and must fritter away his time on the things he neither likes doing nor considers worthy of his exertions. He soon becomes an amateur in many things, an expert in none. Dilletantism is, indeed, one of the occupational risks in the rabbinate.

The rabbi generally finds that Talmudic scholarship—that which was rated highest in his yeshivah training—is in least demand by his community. He is seldom intellectually stimulated by his members. His *lamdanuth* remains a largely unused asset. The one area in which most *she'elo*th arise and are directed to him, is the one higher Jewish learning never even mentioned to him in school: the transgenderization of Hebrew names. "Rabbi, how do you make a girl's name out of *Yaakov*?" This is not the kind of atmosphere that encourages

scholarship or values the intellect. On the contrary, it makes the rabbi sometimes feel that his long and arduous years of studying were an exercise in irrelevance.

ANOTHER objection to the rabbinate which does not often occur to the parents of young men but which looms large in the eyes of rabbinical students, is the demand insistently pressed upon the rabbi by some communities to compromise his ideals because of the exigencies of contemporary life. No person of principle looks forward with relish to surrendering his integrity. Yet this is what a congregation often demands of its rabbi: abolish the *mechitzah*, mix pews, institute a late service, close your eyes to driving on the Sabbath, don't be too strict in your Kashruth requirements for the Sisterhood affair, and then—then what? What is a rabbi, after all, if not a guardian and teacher of the Torah? Shall he condone the violating of Halochah with impunity?

This point is a most serious one, and ought not be dismissed or treated casually. There is no sincere rabbi who has not, at one time or another, wrestled with the problem. We obviously cannot sanction the diminution of standards of observance. But we are also most reluctant to abandon any Jew, let alone a Jewish community. It is easy enough for a *rosh yeshivah* or a practicing rabbi in a *kosher* synagogue to ignore the problem; but the problem just will not go away. Somehow an approach will have to be forged which will consider the realities of the Jewish community and yet provide for a return to the preeminence of the Halochah and our allegiance to it. Here is not the place to comment on the substantive questions, which are both Halachic and philosophic in na-

ture. But the student who, in addition to matters of principle, finds such conditions personally repugnant, should remember this: in the best professions certain unpleasant duties must be undertaken. The dentist must often expose himself to the vilest odors of rotting teeth. The physician must occasionally bring his person in contact with the most nauseating kind of human filth. The lawyer, in pursuit of justice and the protection of his client, must at times deal with the dregs of society, the very scum of the earth. Are these pleasant tasks? Should the rabbi protest if he has to deal with spiritual wreckage, with the result of two or three generations of religious neglect? The rabbinical student ought perhaps temper his youthful zeal with just a trifle of charity for his fellow-Jews, and view his synagogue as a spiritual hospital, his study as an operating room, and his pulpit as a pharmacy. The Berditchever, in his *Kedushath Levi*, rightly said that if you wish to save your friend from the mud and mire, you must yourself descend into it in order to bring him up. It is not always a clean, or sweet-smelling task, but it must be done—and we dare not leave it to charlatans!

THE old complaint that as a rabbi you have too many "bosses," that you have to please too many people, is not as cogent and as valid as it used to be. The "personality market" dominates in most of our society today, and the need to "sell yourself" is well nigh a universal prerequisite for success. "Lone wolves" are a vanishing race, and "team work" is on the ascendancy, from science to management. "Team work" means, simply, that you have to "please everybody" from your immediate superior to your

colleagues, to the menial underling who may report your offenses to the personnel manager, who, of course, wants only "cooperative" and "well adjusted" people on the "team." Even the owner himself must learn to please others—from customers to union officials. So the rabbinate is no exception. In some ways it is even superior to other fields of endeavor, for people will admire and respect independence and courage in a rabbi, if it is manifested in an intelligent and dignified manner. There still are people left who expect a spiritual leader to lead.

The most troubling feature of the practical rabbinate is not "practical" at all. It is a deeply personal dissatisfaction, a profoundly painful spiritual anxiety that is inescapable because it is indigenous to the very nature of the rabbinate. It consists of this: that the rabbi can never fully achieve the goals set for him. He may come close to success, but he can never totally succeed. This sense of failure to achieve the ideal lends a tragic note to the whole life of the rabbi. For his goal is a magnificent one: transforming his people into a true *kehillah kedoshah*, a holy congregation, a community of saints, and raising a *dor de'ah*, a generation of Jews who will study Torah and know G-d. He can achieve some of this with individuals. But it is safe to say that, in the context of our times, it is impossible to accomplish it with a large group. It is a messianic, an eschatological goal, and the harder the rabbi tries to reach his ideal, the more agonizing is the gap he has not yet bridged. The more power he puts into his labors, the harder does he stub his toe against the immovable wall of reality—and the louder his cry of anguish and the more embarrassing his feeling of spiritual impotence. The lawyer can win most of his cases, the

physician can heal most of his patients, and the merchant can make his million dollars—but the rabbi will never really produce his one *kehillah kedoshah*, let alone the transformation of the entire House of Israel. If the lawyer or doctor or businessman are “realists,” they can reduce their goals and spare themselves unhappiness later. But what rabbi has the right to forego the spiritual destiny of even one single Jew? The goals are neither his to set nor his to abandon. They are prepared for him by his tradition; at best he can approach them, but never reach them.

SO MUCH for the negative features of the rabbinate in twentieth century America. What now are the positive aspects that ought to encourage young people and their parents to strive for it?

The rabbinate is about the only profession in which you deal with people as human beings created in the image of G-d. To the tradesman, a fellow man is a customer or competitor; to the lawyer, a client; to the psychiatrist, a case; to the physician, a patient. But to the rabbi he is a human being, a “thou” and not an “it.” His people are not simply “members” or individuals whom he meets at special “professional” occasions such as religious services or board meetings. They are his “people”—he is with them in times of sorrow and in times of joy, at birth and at death, in good times and in bad times. Sooner or later he becomes, simultaneously, their friend and their teacher—a dual role hard to maintain, but a most fertile and fruitful one if it can be preserved. Besides its obvious benefits in furthering the rabbi’s religious program, this aspect of his service, in its deepest sense, is also a

source of great personal satisfaction. It makes his life and his work more meaningful, not just perfunctory.

EVEN more important is the opportunity to express the idealistic compulsion that every dedicated rabbi brings to his task. It is a compulsion (the word “calling” suggests itself) upon which the future of Judaism in our Western World may well depend. A young man who has received the right kind of Jewish education is more than informed in Jewish knowledge. He is grasped by the vital concerns of Judaism. Torah exerts a passionate influence upon him. He feels profoundly unhappy at the prevailing ignorance of Torah and utterly dumbfounded by the laxity in the observance of its precepts. He is driven by an irresistible love for his people and an intimate concern for their spiritual as well as material welfare. The kind of person who is satisfied to live in a miniature ghetto, in private little cubicles of pious neighborhoods, is not the kind of person who should become a rabbi. This is the *tzaddik in peltz* type, the saint in a fur coat. (The Kotzker Rabbi explained that there are two ways of keeping warm, by either building a fire or wearing a fur coat; the true saint builds a fire so that others may share his warmth, whilst the lesser saint hoards his religious warmth for himself and his family.) The young Jew who has this kind of fervor or dedication, who is willing to cast off his *peltz* and set the Jewish world afire with the flame of his own enthusiasm, will find in the rabbinate an outlet for living a meaningful and creative life.

As a practicing rabbi, a young idealist will find that he is in a position uniquely suited to the implementation of his ideals and ideas. The

American rabbi today is becoming more and more the true leader of the community. Even the secular agencies and the uncommitted turn to him for advice and respect his opinion. He has the power, prestige, and position—conditioned only by his own personality and ability—to mold his ideals into realities. He can exert a most powerful influence over individuals, families, and whole communities as never before. If he has the will, the wisdom, and the moral courage, he can send children to yeshivoh, lead families to Sabbath observance and to family purity, reintroduce Kashruth observance to all organizational functions as well as into individual homes. He may, with sufficient perseverance, become one of the growing number of American orthodox rabbis who, with patience and determination, have succeeded in reestablishing the *mechitzah* in their synagogues and leading their people to a rediscovery of the meaning of *kedushath beth ha-knesseth*. There are few experiences to equal the inner satisfaction—and lasting objective value—of having such an effect on one's fellow Jews.

ONE of the strongest arguments for entering the rabbinate is that of scholarship. Not only is the training for the rabbinate one of thorough scholarship in the vast literature of Judaism, but the practicing rabbi can never really divorce himself from the world of books. He cannot afford to lag behind the best of his congregants in general culture. He will find himself forced to be *au courant* with a great deal of the best in literature and sometimes the fine arts. He must become, gradually, a cultured person in the finest sense of the word. His congregants will soon enough learn the truth about him if he is negligent.

Of far greater significance is, however, his Torah scholarship. There was a time in American Jewish history when the rabbinate and Jewish scholarship were not equated with each other. Only a few decades ago, some of our leading yeshivoh actively pursued a policy of discouraging their graduates from the rabbinate. These schools aimed solely at producing Talmudic scholars, and preferred that they constitute a new, learned, lay aristocracy. Most schools have since been forced to change their policy and, if I am not mistaken, they are now much like that of Yeshiva University which combines both ambitions into one: that of producing scholarly practicing rabbis. The original conception was certainly valid. In essence the professional rabbinate was never really assimilated in the Jewish scheme. It came on the scene fairly late, and there always existed an uneasiness about it. We do not believe that the study of Torah is or should be confined to any one class or that it should be undertaken for "professional" reasons. Torah is the inheritance of the whole House of Jacob, not only a priestly coterie, and must be studied *li'shemah*—for its own sake. Yet modern life has to a considerable extent decided the case differently.

In theory we still maintain the independence of scholarship from the practical rabbinate. In practice, however, it is most difficult for those not in the rabbinate to pursue a program of study with any kind of vigor and success. The businessman finds himself committed to all kinds of community endeavors in his leisure time, and the professional often must study his own "homework" to keep up in a highly competitive society where new knowledge is constantly being acquired. Despite the fact that there are some notable exceptions, it is mostly rabbis

who keep up any real, living contact with Talmud or Midrash or Tanach. This is said in full knowledge of the criticisms currently leveled at rabbis that they sorely neglect *lamdanuth*; of the complaints of rabbis themselves that after all the attention they are forced to pay to the utterly trivial and even nonsensical duties imposed upon them by congregation and community, little time is left for serious scholarship; and of the fact, previously mentioned, that congregants seldom adequately appreciate Torah scholarship. Yet, after all is said and done, preparing a sermon means constant contact with Midrash and exegesis, adult education means renewed acquaintance with Talmud or history, and the *she'elah*, infrequent as it is, means that the *Shulchon Oruch* must be referred to. Every holiday means preparation in *Orach Chayim*, and questions in *ave-luth* are always in season. Call it superficial, irregular, or what you will. But the rabbi *does* have a real connection with Jewish learning. All other things being equal, the rabbinate offers far greater opportunity for study than business or the professions.

The American Jew, even the confirmed *am ha'aretz*, dimly perceives this truth. We have heard *ad nauseum* the protest of compassionate mothers who wish to spare their youngsters the unbearably difficult burdens of a Talmud Torah education by announcing, "I don't want my son to be a rabbi!" (A colleague of mine, fed up with this kind of twisted logic, recently asked one such distraught young mother why she doesn't write a note to the principal of her boy's public school objecting to the teacher's lessons in brushing teeth. "After all, you don't want your son to be a dentist, do you?") Behind this specimen of syllogistic reasoning lies the awareness

that there is today a deep relationship between the rabbinate and Jewish learning.

IF THIS is so, and I am convinced that it is, then we must undertake a relentless campaign to recruit the very best minds for the rabbinate. More than the rabbinate is at stake—Torah is at stake, Jewish life is in question. No greater tragedy can befall our people than to suffer further attrition in the ranks of the chosen few who are knowledgeable in the Torah and its vast literature. After a long and detailed list of the horrors (*tochachah*) with which G-d threatens Israel in case of disobedience, the Torah reaches its climax in a verse which conceals rather than reveals, where the threat is suddenly implicit rather than explicit: "also every sickness and every plague which is not written in the book of this law . . ." (Devorim 28:61). What is it that is so painful that even in this awesome, explicit chapter the Torah prefers that it be "*not* written in this book of the law?" The Sages said: this refers to the death of *talmidey chachomim*. Nothing is more unspeakably tragic for Israel than the dearth of scholars. The Torah cannot bring itself to describe such an eventuality.

The young man who is caught up, heart and soul, in the truth of Torah, can find no better and more meaningful avenue in which to express his loyalties. The parent who directs a child of this kind to the rabbinate will be guiding him not only to a career but to a purposeful life. Jewish parents should feel proud when their children choose the rabbinate. And the Jewish community, for its very perpetuation, must organize the recruitment of rabbis with skill and insight, and not leave it to hit-and-miss "batlonus."

There will always be a need for good, well-educated, knowledgeable laymen. If a young man does not have the particular qualifications necessary for the contemporary rabbinate—dedication, learning, love of people, articulateness, tough moral fiber—then he can contribute mightily to Judaism as a layman too. But if he does have the talents and gifts prerequisite for the

practical rabbinate, then by all means let us—parents and community leaders alike—encourage him. He will find himself fulfilled in the rabbinate. And we shall need the very best of our youth for the great challenges that lie ahead of us, until that day when “the world will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.”

