

“THE ‘FICTIONAL’ AMERICAN RABBI”¹

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Description: Most “fictional” American rabbis serve congregations, and a continuing subplot involves conflict with their boards of trustees. Fiction thrives on dramatic moments, and there is more drama in conflict than moments of contentment. Are these conflicts depicted accurately? Sure, some are, some are not. The ongoing tensions between Rabbi David Small and his board in the *Weekday Rabbi* series by Harry Kemelman were overdrawn. That Small survived his congregational experience for twenty-five years was one of the mysteries of those books. Some fiction comes closer to reality than others. Though published three decades ago, Noah Gordon's *The Rabbi* rings true. In *The Rabbi*, Michael Kind serves at a number of pulpits, but then he settles very successfully. At the close of the novel, he thinks about how many sermons he has delivered over the years. “So many services, so many words. He grinned in the dark. Not so many as still stretched in front of him; he felt it in his bones, he could almost reach out and touch it, a ladder of Sabbaths to be climbed into the future.” Depictions of fictional women rabbis are a small, but growing category. It simply will take more time, more history, for authors to “imagine” rabbis-as-women into fiction. The phenomenon is simply too new to be a part of normative thinking.

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Most rabbis in fact, and in fiction *who serve professionally as rabbis* do so in a congregational setting (as opposed to having rabbinic ordination and then serving in some other occupation).

This paper compares and contrasts the real world of *factual* congregational rabbis with the portrayal of their counterparts in the *fictional* congregational world, and then concludes with observations about the future of both of these worlds.

Rabbis are primary Jewish role models: leaders of religious services, preachers, teachers, and pastoral counselors. Their satisfactions and frustrations come from working with people. What does it mean to be the “religious leader” of the congregation? Jack H. Bloom (1981) succinctly explains that “the most distinguishing factor of the pulpit rabbi . . . is that [the rabbi] is, most of all, a symbolic exemplar. The rabbi is the symbol of something other than himself [or herself] and the pulpit rabbi is a symbolic leader who is set apart to function within his [or her] community as a symbol of that community and as an exemplar of that community’s desire for moral perfection.”²

A. Some Frustrations

To be a symbol and exemplar is a high honor, but it also brings its share of isolation and frustration. As Bloom noted, the rabbi is “set apart.” People often are nervous around symbols and exemplars.

Many rabbis are dismayed by the fact that they are regarded as only tangential to the lives of their congregants. The fact that the rabbi is a human being first, and a rabbi second, is often overlooked.

1. The Rabbi as the Congregation's "Religious" Representative

Often rabbis are regarded as the "religious representative" of their communities. A few decades ago, Rabbi Martin Siegel addressed the phenomenon of the rabbi-as-religious-specialist in his work *Amen: The Diary of Rabbi Martin Siegel* (1971). He writes: "Slowly, I am beginning to recognize my position. I am only their public property. They pay me to be instantly available; they pay me to lead them in acting out their abstract sense of religion; they pay me to bar mitzvah their sons [and bat mitzvah their daughters], marry their children and conduct their funerals. I'm not a human being. I'm an institution. A symbol."³

Nearly twenty-five years later we see little has changed. Still in the factual world, in the mid 1990s Rabbi Daniel B. Kohn (1994) writes that he has "heard many congregational rabbis express their secret suspicions that they are actually being paid to observe Shabbat, Kashrut and daven [pray] regularly in the synagogue *instead* of their congregants ... many American rabbis today have been recast in the role of 'substitute Jew,' expected to fill in and observe Shabbat, Kashrut and attend Shabbat and holiday services when their congregants (frequently) can't or choose not to."⁴

In the fictional world, Rabbi Gideon Abel (in the novel *Heaven Help Us!*) is told quite directly, "*Rabbi, you are our representative.*"⁵ His fictional counterpart, Rabbi David Small (in Kemelman's *Thursday the Rabbi Walked Out*) is very resentful of his congregation's expectation that he is to be their *representative*. "While the commandment to visit and comfort the sick was enjoined on all Jews, the congregation expected its rabbi to perform this function for them, quite content to have him gain the credit for the mitzvah."⁶ Their fictional colleague, Rabbi Brownmiller (*So Help Me God!*) says that is the "trouble now with congregants. They turn over Judaism for safekeeping to the rabbi ..."⁷

In Jewish religious tradition, rabbis are not classified as a "separate" and "holy." They have no status in Jewish law different from a lay person when it comes to leading services or performing most ritual duties. The unique position of the Hasidic "rebbe," his special and revered place as *tzaddik*, is based on Hasidism's own internal traditions, not on the concepts of mainstream Judaism. Jewish law notwithstanding, rabbis nonetheless are seen by their congregants as being special, as being separate and apart.

2. Rabbis are Considered the "Link" Between the Congregation and God

Rabbis often are seen as the link between the congregation and God. How rabbis are accepted by their congregants as their spiritual leader may depend on the rabbis publicly maintaining certain stances. In Jewish law and custom rabbis often, but not necessarily, lead the congregation at prayer. In more ritually observant/traditionally-oriented congregations, lay persons often lead the services. Yet, the common expectation is that the rabbi is properly qualified to lead services. Being qualified to do so, is a matter of training, morality and literacy, not a question of belief systems. Nonetheless, congregants expect the rabbi to have a certain set of "beliefs."⁸

In the novel *Thy Daughter's Nakedness*, Rabbi Ed Gordon explains that he does not personally believe that people return from the dead. He goes on to say that he does not believe in life after death. This comes as a shock to his congregants. He asks a woman, "Do you believe it?" She answers, "Well, I don't know ... It seems to me that's what we pay the rabbi to believe. If the rabbi doesn't believe it what are we here for?" "That's right" another lady says. "If the rabbi doesn't believe I can't even believe in the rabbi."⁹

3. Rabbis are Expected to be "Involved" in a Wide Variety of Areas

Congregants expect their rabbis to be actively involved in a variety of programming. Paul Wilkes' describes the factual rabbinate of Rabbi Jay Rosenbaum of Worcester, Massachusetts, in his work *And They Shall Be My People: An American Rabbi and His Congregation* (1994). Wilkes writes of a "plethora of religious and community responsibilities [which] adds up to considerably more than a full-time job."¹⁰ These activities include "social action," "ritual," "youth," and "administration." In addition there are the duties of visiting the sick and bereaved congregational families. "[He is] not only the spiritual leader of his congregation; he must also be a principal representative of the Jewish community in the secular world ..."¹¹

Fictional rabbis are accurately portrayed as being involved in a variety of duties. Rabbi Lynda Klein (in the novel *A Place of Light*) had just skipped her lunch. "She'd missed breakfast too, for there had been no time. The Religious School board had scheduled a coffee meeting in the morning ... After it broke up, the singles-group president came in, and it took her half an hour to talk him out of resigning. Then ... she'd dashed off to the hospital, where Nita Gold was undergoing emergency surgery. She'd gotten back in time for Abe Katz's funeral ... she still had correspondence to do, not to mention the two boys coming in for bar mitzvah training."¹²

4. The Rabbi in the Non-Jewish World

If being the "model Jew" means rabbis are relegated to a different status, then likewise being the "model Jew" means they are delegated to the position of spokespeople to the non-Jewish world.

Depending somewhat on their inclination, rabbis might spend a greater or lesser amount of time on (non-Jewish) community relations. Though rabbis' time must be centered primarily around their congregation, and secondarily around the Jewish community, generally speaking, they do not "ignore" the wider community, nor does it ignore them. Modern rabbis are heavily committed to communal activities, both Jewish and non-Jewish. Though not exclusively so, rabbis often are expected to be a public relations worker on behalf of their fellow Jews.

Involvement with the non-Jewish community is portrayed well in the world of fiction. In the novel *Pedlock Saint, Pedlock Sinner*, Progressive Conservative Rabbi Charles Shaphan Pedlock is frequently involved in interfaith activities. He is a good friend of the Archbishop of Los Angeles, Cardinal O'Drood. "Charles Pedlock often felt the cardinal's faith was second only to his own." Both Rabbi Pedlock and the Cardinal are publicly political and social conservatives. Both are powerful within their respective "dioceses" and both have high aspirations, though someone who disliked the cleric said of him, "Cardinal O'Drood has no ambition to become Pope, he is waiting for

a vacancy in the Trinity.” No doubt, if there were a comparable position in Jewish life, Rabbi Pedlock would have sought it.¹³

Jewish-Christian dialogue between rabbis and Christian clergy, or between Jewish and Christian groups, as well as rabbis and ministers’ exchange of pulpits is featured in the fiction.¹⁴ On the whole, however, though in principle much good can take place, more often than not the authors highlight the pitfalls of such activities, such as when a minister gives a sermon wherein he tells the Jewish congregation why they bring anti-Semitism upon themselves,¹⁵ or where a minister speaks of the superiority of the church over Judaism.¹⁶ Triumphalism, the message that “my” religion is better than “yours,” regrettably is not a one-way street. On several occasions, Rabbi David Small (of the Weekday *Rabbi* series) sounds a note of triumphalism when comparing Judaism to Christianity.¹⁷ As one Protestant minister wryly remarks to a rabbi, “What a mess! We each learned just enough to prove to ourselves why the other’s denomination was inferior to our own.”¹⁸

B. Yet, Great Satisfactions

Though there are many frustrations, and incredible stresses in congregational life, the fact is that most rabbis speak highly about the satisfaction of serving in their positions. There is enormous gratification in being the one who offers comfort and consolation to a mourner, the one who serves as officiant at a life-cycle ceremony, being the person who acknowledges another milestone in a Jewish life. Whether it is at a *brit milah* [circumcision], at a bar or bat mitzvah, Confirmation, or wedding, the rabbi often sets the tone for these sacred occasions. In one study more than eighty percent of Reform rabbis indicated that they were reasonably pleased with the way that things have worked out for them.¹⁹ The Conservative rabbinate tells a similar story. “There are two spheres of activity which give me greatest satisfactions. One is education,” explains a Conservative rabbi. “The second sphere ... is personal contact with my congregants, including visitation and counseling. Many hours of my day are spent listening to people talk. In addition there are moments in my congregants’ lives that require emotional and spiritual support.” Another rabbi indicates his satisfaction at influencing “young people to a deeper commitment to Judaism.”²⁰

Reflecting on his rabbinate, a retired “Traditional” Orthodox rabbi notes the wonderful memories of a long and distinguished career. “Teaching ... The study of Torah and the instruction of others in the history, values, texts and ideas of our people and faith have been a continual source of deep satisfaction.” He indicates that it is good to know that some of his sermons or addresses moved his listeners to action. He also notes the personal gratification “derived from the heartfelt handshake of a mourner after a funeral who tells you that you have been helpful in softening the blow of a bereavement.” He concludes by saying it is in these things “that one finds the greatest rewards of the rabbinate, and which make of it a sacred calling.”²¹

Fictional rabbis derive similar satisfactions. Rabbi David Small, of the Kemelman Weekday *Rabbi* series serves his congregation for twenty-five years. In that time he touches many lives and positively influences a generation of congregants. Many congregants regard him with affection. That he is able to succeed in working with what often are feisty, petty and contentious

boards is one of the greater questions of the mystery series itself. In any event, after a quarter century, he decides that he wants to explore other areas. He chooses to take early retirement, and moves into academia.²²

In the novel *The Rabbi*, Michael Kind serves at a number of pulpits. He too, touches many lives along the way. At the close of the novel he reflects over his career and what lies ahead of him. Joyfully, he thinks “So many services, so many words. He grinned in the dark. Not so many as still stretched in front of him; he felt it in his bones, he could almost reach out and touch it, a ladder of Sabbaths to be climbed into the future.”²³

C. The Future of the Rabbinate in Reality and Fiction

Broadly speaking, the fictional rabbinate does reflect reality. No one novel, or set of books give the whole picture, but taken as a whole, fiction follows fact. Yet, what will happen in the century ahead? According to one legend, Adam said to Eve, “We are living in a time of crisis.” “Yes,” she replied, “and I have some foreboding about the future.”²⁴ Does the rabbinate, and the fictional rabbinate *really* have a future? Is rabbinical stress but the prelude to rabbinic demise? Alternately, is Simon Schwartzfuchs correct when he asserts in his scholarly work *A Concise History of the Rabbinate*, that the rabbinate has “an assured future”?²⁵

It is clear that rabbis in contemporary North America fill a great variety of roles. Many are found in congregational life, many others in education, chaplaincy, administration, social work, and organizational life. There are rabbis who have earned *semikhah* (ordination) and continue their studies in yeshivot, while still others do not serve as rabbis at all but rather go into business, law, medicine, or other occupations.

Rabbis today are both a new breed of men and women, radically different from their predecessors over the centuries, and yet they share a great deal with those who preceded them in the pre-modern world. Some observers of the present-day rabbinate lament that rabbinic authority does not have the “honor” or “reverence” that it did in past. Yet some of that honor or reverence was more theoretical than practical. Lay people then, as now, often have very strong opinions and great influence. Rabbis who are economically dependent upon their communities is not a phenomenon that was introduced in the twentieth century.

Social scientists do not have a great record in predicting the future. Consequently, the suggestions which follow can only be offered conditionally. If this century is a reflection of the last decades of the 20th, we can expect that the face of the rabbinate will look very different from what we see now. The most striking change will be a much greater percentage of women rabbis. The graduating classes of the Jewish Theological Seminary, the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College and the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion feature very high numbers of women. Whether this century to come will also find Orthodox women rabbis is unknown. I would guess that this will eventually happen. Women are serious students and scholars of Torah and Talmud. In time, their call to achieve *semikhah* (ordination), along with men, shall come about. Meantime, all kinds of rabbis, and in particular women rabbis will continue to populate fiction. Women rabbis are at the center of novels and short stories by Joseph Telushkin, Erich

Segal, and Eileen Pollack²⁶. Recent examples of fictional women rabbis include Rabbi Gabrielle Lewyn in Roger Herst's 1998 novel, *Woman of the Cloth*, and Rabbi Michelle Hertz in Anita Diamant's new novel, *The Good Harbor*.²⁷ Rabbis real and fictional, men and women, are here to stay.

¹ A much fuller treatment of this subject is found in the author's book, David J. Zucker, *American Rabbis: Facts and Fiction*, Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1998. For information: djzucker@juno.com.

² Jack H. Bloom, "The Inner Dynamics of the Rabbinate," *Proceedings of the Rabbinical Assembly* 42 (1981), p. 132. The article is quoted in Jacob Neusner in *The Rabbinate in America: Reshaping An Ancient Calling*, ed. Jacob Neusner (New York and London: Garland, 1993), pp. 2-7.

³ Martin Siegel, *Amen: The Diary of Rabbi Martin Siegel*, ed. Mel Ziegler, New York and Cleveland, 1971, pp. 185-186.

⁴ Daniel B. Kohn, "Modern Congregants: Jews by Proxy?," *Jewish Spectator* 59:1 (Summer 1994), p. 26.

⁵ Herbert Tarr, *Heaven Help Us!*, New York: Random House, 1968, p. 94. See also Israel Jacobs, *Ten For Kaddish*, New York: WW Norton, 1972, p. 106; Hyman and Frances Agress, *The Firing of Rabbi Levy*, New York: Manor Books, 1978, p. 46. Alan M. Ullman suggests that in "no less than seven different novels such words as 'Rabbi, you are our representative' underscore the congregants' understanding of the rabbis' role." Alan M. Ullman, "The Rabbi in American Jewish Fiction", unpublished rabbinic thesis, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, 1985, p. 56, see also pp. 71 ff. in his thesis.

⁶ Harry Kemelman, *Thursday the Rabbi Walked Out*, William Morrow, 1978, p. 113.

⁷ Herbert Tarr, *So Help Me God!*, New York: Times Books, 1979, p. 234.

⁸ While the congregation's expectations of the rabbi's "belief in God" certainly is the norm, exceptions do exist. In the early 1960s, American Jews were shocked to learn of "a self-confessed and outspokenly candid 'atheist' rabbi at the head of a congregation of like minded Jews in suburban Detroit." Norman B. Mirsky, "The Vision of Man Triumphant," in *Unorthodox Judaism* Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1978, p. 112. See also the discussion about Cincinnati, Ohio's Congregation Beth Adam, a congregation led by an HUC-JIR ordained rabbi, but which describes itself as practicing Judaism from a humanistic perspective. Congregation Beth Adam had applied for membership to the Reform movement's Union of American Hebrew Congregations, but the UAHC Board of Trustees overwhelmingly voted not to accept it because it excludes God from its liturgy. Lawrence Bush, "Can We Accept a Congregation That Does Not Worship God?," in *Reform Judaism* 23:2 (Winter 1994), pp. 25-27, and accompanying articles.

⁹ Myron S. Kaufmann, *Thy Daughter's Nakedness*, Philadelphia and New York, J. B. Lippincott, p. 315. Note: in Kaufmann's novels women are frequently portrayed as ignorant, almost incapable of learning. They are seen as inferior to men. On page 494 we read: "To teach a woman . . . was to write your name on water." An additional factor in the Kaufmann novel is that this is a new congregation with its first rabbi. He has been there less than a year and clearly has been unable to make his congregants understand that he is neither "God's representative" to the Synagogue nor the "synagogue's representative" to God.

¹⁰ Paul Wilkes, *And They Shall Be My People: An American Rabbi and His Congregation*, New York: Atlantic Monthly, 1994, p. 18.

11 Wilkes, p. 17.

12 Rhonda Shapiro-Rieser, *A Place of Light*, New York: Pocket, 1983, p. 271.

13 Stephen Longstreet, *Pedlock Saint, Pedlock Sinner*, New York: Delacorte, 1969, p. 195. Note: “the cardinal’s faith.” Longstreet is ambiguous as to whether Pedlock means faith as belief or faith as Roman Catholicism.

In another novel, Rabbi Everett Siegel is praised for his interfaith activities in the Honolulu area. Allegra Goodman, “The Succession,” in *Total Immersion: Stories*, New York: Harper and Row, 1989, p. 29.

14 Harry Kemelman, *Sunday the Rabbi Stayed Home*, New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1969, pp. 53 ff.; Longstreet, pp. 31, 131, 306; Kaufmann, pp. 509-510; Arkady Leokum, *The Temple*, New York and Cleveland, NAL/World Publishing, 1969, p. 162 ff.

15 Leokum, p. 167 ff.

16 Herbert Tarr, *The Conversion of Chaplain Cohen*, New York: Avon, 1963, pp. 83 ff.; *Heaven Help Us!*, pp. 82 ff.

17 Harry Kemelman, *Sunday the Rabbi Stayed Home*, pp. 53-55; *Monday the Rabbi Saw Red*, Greenwich, CT: Fawcett Crest, 1973, pp. 201 ff.

18 Tarr, *The Conversion of Chaplain Cohen*, p. 77.

19 Theodore Lenn, *Rabbi and Synagogue in Reform Judaism*. New York: Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1972, p. 94.

20 Jacob Agus, Neil Brief, Elias Charry, et al, “The Congregational Rabbinate and the Conservative Synagogue: A Symposium”, *Conservative Judaism* 29:2 (Winter 1975), pp. 19, 35, 70.

21 Daniel Goldberger, “Some Parting Reflections,” in [Denver, Colorado] *Intermountain Jewish News*, August 26, 1994, p. 5.

22 Harry Kemelman, *That Day the Rabbi Left Town*, New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1996, p. 10.

23 Gordon, p. 388.

24 My rendition of this conversation is based on the opening lines of Selma Weintraub, “Dreams Are Realized in Accordance with Their Interpretation,” in *The Seminary at 100. Reflections on the Jewish Theological Seminary and the Conservative Movement*, ed. Nina Beth Cardin and David Wolf Silverman, New York: The Rabbinical Assembly and The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1987, p. 411.

25 Sidney Schwartzfuchs, *A Concise History of the Rabbinate*. Oxford, UK, and Cambridge, USA: Blackwell, 1993, p. 145. “An Assured Future” is the title of the final chapter of his book!

26 Joseph Telushkin, *The Unorthodox Murder of Rabbi Wahl*, New York: Bantam, 1987; Erich Segal, *Acts of Faith*, New York: Bantam, 1992; Eileen Pollack, “The Rabbi in the Attic” in *The Rabbi in the Attic and Other Stories*, New York and Encino, CA: Delphinium Books, 1991.

Roger E. Herst, *Woman of the Cloth*, New York: Shengold, 1998; Anita Diamant, *The Good Harbor*, New York: Scribners, 2001.