

## THE JEWISH RECONSTRUCTIONIST FEDERATION

## THE RECONSTRUCTIONIST RABBINICAL ASSOCIATION

### **FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT RABBINIC EVALUATION**

*For more background, context and information, we recommend reading [The Rabbi-Congregation Relationship, a Vision for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century](#), the 2001 report of the Reconstructionist Commission on the Role of the Rabbi, especially Part III, and the section on “communication” on pages 64-74. The report is available from JRF.*

#### **Q: What kavanna (intention) should govern evaluation?**

Evaluations should be conducted in ways that support and strengthen the rabbi-congregational relationship. Rabbis and congregations should focus on the “valu[e]” in “*evaluation*,” with an emphasis on how the rabbi contributes to the life of the congregation. Keep in mind that a goal of evaluation is to increase the effectiveness of the *congregation* in fulfilling its mission.

#### **Q: How does the Reconstructionist movement see the issue of evaluation?**

A: A productive and continual process of communication, review and evaluation should focus on how the *entire congregational community* is fulfilling its goals, mission and vision. It should *not* focus only on the rabbi, but on the rabbi within the larger context of the congregation.

#### **Q: What is the purpose of rabbinic evaluation?**

A: Evaluation should be a helpful tool for ongoing monitoring of the rabbi-congregation relationship. Evaluation should celebrate success, identify mistakes, note progress, indicate areas open to growth, and help to resolve problems. Evaluation can identify adjustments needed in a job description, and note areas where the rabbi needs increased support.

#### **Q: When should evaluation take place?**

A: In addition to the regular communication and feedback between the rabbi and congregation leaders, many congregations and rabbis find an annual evaluation of the rabbi’s accomplishments within the congregational system to be a useful resource.

The rabbi and congregational leaders should establish goals for the congregation and the rabbi not later than the month of Elul (August-Sept.), a time of reflection and assessment. Some congregations do this earlier in the spring when preparing the program and budget for the coming year. The season of Shavuot, with its theme of harvest, should be a time for reviewing those goals.

#### **Q: What should evaluation focus on?**

A: Evaluations should be both retrospective (focusing on what was/was not accomplished) and prospective (focusing on what where things ought to be going). Evaluations should also note areas of strength and success, and identify areas where improvement or correction can be made. Evaluations should also note progress on issues identified in earlier evaluation cycles.

Rabbis benefit most from feedback on how they fulfill their primary roles as spiritual leaders. These generally include: teacher, pastor-counselor, “officiant,” service leader, administrator.

**Q: Who should supervise rabbinic evaluation?**

A: Experience shows that effective evaluation is usually a subset of an effective relationship between the rabbi and congregation leaders. A small group of such leaders should be able to collect information and discuss with the rabbi trends, issues and ideas that represent significant concerns.

Feedback needs to be filtered; not every concern and complaint needs to be shared with the rabbi. Congregation leaders should try to identify a few significant common themes, concerns or issues that are representative of a broader set of responses.

**Q: Should evaluation be part of a rabbi's contract renewal process?**

A: No. Evaluation is a tool of communication, not a referendum on the rabbi. When evaluation is tied to contract renewal, it cannot fulfill this function, and instead often becomes, for the rabbi, a "popularity contest," and something against which to be defended.

If the congregation's leaders and rabbi regularly share their concerns, and there is a more formal and documented evaluation each year near Shavuot, there is no need for a separate evaluation when contract renewal is under discussion; the congregation's leaders should already have in hand the information from prior evaluation cycles. All records of evaluations conducted during the term of the existing contract should be available to the board or board committee responsible for the decision on contract renewal.

**Q: Should we use a survey of the congregation as part of evaluation?**

A: No. Experience shows that surveys are counter-productive, unhelpful, and inappropriate for assessing the contribution of a rabbi to a congregation. Surveys inevitably emphasize the negative and generate tension, instead of providing useful information. Given the multiple tasks and roles a rabbi is called upon to fulfill, many of which take place in highly personal and often confidential circumstances, attempts to quantify a rabbi's contributions to a community are not appropriate.

Under no circumstances should feedback be accepted anonymously, which places the rabbi in a totally unfair position, with no ability to respond.

**Q: How can congregants communicate with the leaders of the congregation?**

A: The congregation should be aware that an annual rabbinic evaluation focusing on goals takes place. The president of the congregation should remind the congregation of this sometime near Pesach, usually through the congregation newsletter, and identify what channels of communication are (always) available so that compliments as well as concerns can be conveyed by members of the congregation.

**Q: What happens after the evaluation is completed?**

A: The evaluation committee should first discuss the evaluation with the rabbi. Next, the committee drafts a written summary that is shared with the president and the rabbi; the rabbi has the option of submitting a response. The president and the executive committee should then review the summary (and response, if included), and report to the board. A copy of the summary (and response) should be filed for future reference.