

## **SUGGESTIONS FOR A PRODUCTIVE INTERVIEW WITH RABBINIC CANDIDATES**

Developed jointly by  
the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation, the Reconstructionist Rabbinical  
Association and the Reconstructionist Placement Office

July 2009

### **A. Introduction and Background**

The suggestions in this document provide a brief orientation and overview for having a productive interview process with rabbinic candidates. These suggestions are not a substitute for the carefully developed **Reconstructionist Placement Guidelines** that reflect the shared values of the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation (JRF) and the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association (RRA) and incorporate best practices that make the best use of the time and energy of the congregational members who volunteer to serve on a rabbinic search committee. More detailed guidelines for interviewing rabbis are found in Section XV of the **Rabbinic Placement Guidelines**. The guidelines provide a thorough and detailed step-by-step overview of the rabbinic placement process and are an excellent ongoing resource that is valuable to review at each stage in the rabbinic placement process.

The president of the board and each member of a Rabbinic Search Committee, which ideally should be comprised of five to eight members, should carefully review the **Reconstructionist Placement Guidelines** prior to embarking on a rabbinic placement process. For more information about forming a Rabbinic Search Committee, please see Section XII of the **Reconstructionist Placement Guidelines**.

The **Reconstructionist Placement Guidelines** are available in the following ways:

- Electronically at [www.reconplacement.org](http://www.reconplacement.org)
- Hard copy by contacting Rabbi Joel Alpert, Reconstructionist Placement Director, by phone at (215) 576-5201 extension 304 or by e mail at [jalpert@reconplacement.org](mailto:jalpert@reconplacement.org)

If you have specific questions about the **Reconstructionist Placement Guidelines**, the rabbinic interview process or would like more information about the suggestions recommended below, please contact Rabbi Joel Alpert, Reconstructionist Placement Director at [jalpert@reconplacement.org](mailto:jalpert@reconplacement.org) or by telephone at (215) 576-5210 extension 304.

### **B. Clarifying the Goals of the Interview**

The objectives of the interview are as follows.

For the Rabbinic Search Committee to:

- Communicate key information about the congregation and the community to the rabbi
- Get to know the rabbi both as a person and as a professional
- Ask questions of the rabbi and learn about the rabbi's experience and perspectives

For the rabbi to:

- Communicate key information about her/himself to the Search Committee
- Learn about the congregation, including demographics, policies, and decision-making processes
- Ask questions of the Rabbinic Search Committee about the congregation's perspectives, history and experience

### **C. General Best Practices**

#### Preparing for the Rabbinic Interview

1. The synagogue/havurah board should provide the Rabbinic Search Committee with its charge, based on the mission statement of the congregation and any additional considerations identified by the board. The role and boundaries of the Rabbinic Search Committee should be clear. (For example, most Rabbinic Search Committees are charged to *recommend* a candidate as per the congregation's by-laws. Most Rabbinic Search Committees *do not* negotiate hiring with a rabbinic candidate.)
2. When an inquiry and resume are received, the resume should be distributed confidentially to all the members of the Rabbinic Search Committee. As a courtesy, the chair should acknowledge to the rabbi that the resume has been received. In advance of the interview, questions by individual committee members about the resume should be sent to the Rabbinic Search Committee chair, who may be able to obtain some answers in advance of the interview by contacting Rabbi Joel Alpert. It is not appropriate for members of the Rabbinic Search Committee to make inquiries about the rabbi outside of the interviewing process. This preserves the rabbi's privacy and confidentiality. For more information about checking a rabbinic candidate's references, please see Section XV (q) in the **Rabbinic Placement Guidelines**.
3. The Rabbinic Search Committee should meet in advance of the first interview to plan, in general, how to use interview time effectively and efficiently. It should also agree on its shared goals for each interview in advance of that session. If committee members do not know each other well, it is useful to devote the first Rabbinic Search Committee meeting to sharing member's individual backgrounds, involvement with congregation, and learn why each person is serving on the committee.

4. A KEY ISSUE TO REMEMBER: Members of the Rabbinic Search Committee are expected to represent the interests of the entire congregation, not their own personal concerns or interests. More information about this is found in Section XIII of the **Reconstructionist Placement Guidelines**. When interviewing a rabbinic candidate, it's natural for a committee member to think personally "*I wonder how s/he would handle my son's Bar Mitzvah next year.*" It is important that Rabbinic Search Committee members contain these personal interests and focus on the appropriate role of the committee to address the needs and nature of the congregation-as-a-whole. For example, one committee member with a teen may be insistent on pursuing an interest in having the rabbi form a youth group. But if the rabbinic role involves the religious school and the majority of children in the congregation are ages 5-11, it would be a better use of time during the interview to ask questions about the religious school than about forming a youth group. If there are differences of opinion about the interests of the congregation-as-a-whole, these should be discussed in advance among committee members and not debated during the interview session with the rabbinic candidate.

#### Conducting the Interview

1. The Rabbinic Search Committee should assemble at least thirty minutes prior to the interview to review its goals for the interview as well as to prioritize the specific questions that will be asked (see "The Three Key Points Guideline" in #4 below). Committee members should also review the agenda, process and procedures for the interview. If the committee has not already done so in advance of the interview, it is useful at this time to also share impressions about the rabbi's resume and any other communications or materials submitted. Questions about any specific areas of concern in the rabbi's resume or submitted materials, special interests or lack of clarity should be agreed on by the committee in advance of the interview session.
2. A phone interview can generally be sustained for up to ninety minutes. An in-person interview can generally be held for about two hours, but it is important to have a break midway through. The chair should use the break to review the goals of the interview with committee members and to assure that the remaining key issues are covered in the second half. Interviews generally become non-productive if they run longer than these timeframes.
3. The chair is responsible for keeping the conversation moving and for accomplishing the goals and agenda of the Rabbinic Search Committee by:

- Monitoring how time is being used and being willing to ask committee members to move on if the discussion starts to wander or gets stuck on any one point.
  - The chair can either ask the questions or pre-arrange for each member to ask a pre-determined question (or questions). This helps keep to the agenda and avoids a potentially awkward or inappropriate question from spontaneously arising.
  - A note about telephone interviews - It is optimal if the Rabbinic Search Committee members are all in the same room with a speakerphone. After each person introduces herself or himself, the call will work best if the chair of the Rabbinic Search Committee asks the questions. It is hard for the rabbi at the other end of the phone to respond when many people talk. The advantage of the committee being together is that members can signal to the chair or pass a note about questions they want to raise, etc. without having to jump in on a conference call in which the chair has less control of the conversation.
4. The “Three Key Points Guideline”: The Rabbinic Search Committee should have in mind the three key points about the congregation that it wants to be sure to communicate to the rabbi and its three key issues to raise with the rabbi. It is important to make sure these are worked into the discussion to make sure the most relevant issues are raised and the most relevant questions are asked. A Rabbinic Search Committee might time an interview so that there is an equal distribution of questions around each of the three areas. Rabbis are also encouraged to use the “Three Key Points Guideline” and to reciprocate by having in mind three things about themselves they want to be certain to communicate.
  5. While each rabbi is unique, and therefore each interview is different, it is wise to try and keep most of the questions the same for each candidate so as to obtain a common baseline of information.
  6. The first fifteen to twenty minutes of an interview often set the tone for the rest of the discussion. Many Rabbinic Search Committees spend the first fifteen to twenty minutes doing more of the talking, and therefore, learn little about the rabbi. This is sometimes a natural response to the social awkwardness of the conversation and the need to “break the ice,” but it does not help the Rabbinic Search Committee gather important information and impressions about the rabbi.

The first few questions asked of the rabbi should provide an opportunity for the committee to begin to get a sense of “the person” as well as “the rabbi.” This helps start a comfortable rhythm of exchange. It is a good idea to plan at least two opening conversation-starters or questions that meet this goal.

Try to avoid questions like “So, *why are you interested in this job?*” or “*Tell us a little bit about yourself*”, which can be difficult conversation starters.

Suggested opening questions include:

- “What led you to choose the rabbinate as a career?”
- “What Jewish experiences have been most significant to you?”
- “What have been some of your most positive experiences as a rabbi?” (If interviewing a newly ordained rabbi, this question is best emended to ask about their most positive experiences as a rabbinical student.)
- “What have you found most satisfying about being a rabbi?” (If interviewing a newly ordained rabbi, this question is also best emended to ask about their satisfactions as a rabbinical student.)

A full list of sample interview questions is contained in the appendix below.

8. Personal questions about gender, marital status, sexual orientation, and ethnicity, are inappropriate to ask during the interview. It is the responsibility of the chair to intervene if a committee member asks such a question. The chair can say: *“We have agreed in advance that such questions of a personal nature are not part of the interview. If the rabbi chooses to share anything of a more personal nature, that is her or his choice. So let’s move on....”*

It is also inappropriate to ask the rabbi how many other positions to which she or he may be applying.

9. Congregations often have questions about the rabbi’s approach to issues of intermarriage and interfaith families within the congregation. These are complex and nuanced issues. Some ways of framing questions that have proved helpful include:

- “What is your approach to working with interfaith couples?”
- “In other settings where you have worked, how did the community approach issues arising from interfaith families, such as ritual honors or serving on the board or committees? Were those positions with which you were comfortable? Why/why not?”

The Search Committee should be familiar with congregational policies and practices regarding interfaith families so as to be able to share these with the rabbinic candidate.

10. Avoid using the interview to “problem-solve.” If for example, the congregation is in the midst of revising the school curriculum or deciding if there should be more or fewer hours of class time for the school or if Friday night services should be at 6:30 or 8:00, asking the rabbi his or her opinion about an issue like this when s/he does not know the community

or the history of the issue, is not a good nor appropriate use of time. You may want to inform a rabbi that the congregation is currently debating an issue like this, but recognize that by asking for an opinion, you are asking the rabbi to weigh in on one side of the issue without knowing anything about the context, the personalities, and the history of the issue in your congregation. A productive question might be to ask the rabbi in general how she or he would approach handling such an issue and/or how she or he approached handling a similar issue in the past.

11. It is not appropriate to ask the rabbi his or her salary/compensation expectations or current compensation. The congregation has already conveyed the compensation range for its rabbinic position when it submitted its candidate-request form to post the position through the Reconstructionist Placement Office. If the rabbi submitted a resume for your position, he or she is already aware of that range.

12. It is important at the end of the interview to leave about ten minutes for the rabbi to ask any other questions or ask for any clarifications.

13. Interviews should end with the chair thanking the rabbi and the committee members and informing the rabbi as to where the congregation is in its process and when she or he can expect to hear back from them.

14. While well-intentioned, it is not helpful to have food, snacks and/or drinks in the same room where an in-person interview is taking place. It is very hard to focus on the interview conversation when people are getting up to get food and drink from a table in the room. Food and drinks should be reserved for before the meeting or during a break.

## **Appendix**

### **List of Sample Recommended Questions**

#### **A. TORAH (Study and Learning)**

1. What are your personal practices around Torah study?
2. Which groups do you particularly enjoy teaching? Do you prefer teaching adults or children?
3. How would you envision your role in the synagogue education program?
4. How do you like to work with students becoming Bar/Bat Mitzvah around issues of Torah study, particularly as this relates to their Torah/Haftara portions?
5. What sort of topics do you choose for formal sermons, such as on the High Holidays?
6. How do you present Judaism to people who are not Jewish?

#### **B. AVODAH (Prayer, Religious Services, Spirituality)**

1. Would you share some of your personal religious/spiritual practice(s)?
2. How do you approach leading a prayer service?
3. How do you introduce life-cycle liturgy and ritual to people with minimal Jewish background?
4. Are there ways you have found to involve and inspire children in terms of prayer?
5. What is the place of music, singing, and/or chanting in a service you lead?
6. What is your understanding of spirituality, and how does that influence your work?
7. What have been among your most meaningful experiences in your work?

### **C. GEMILUT CHASADIM (Connection to Community)**

1. What is your vision of your role in the wider community?
2. How do you imagine a congregation being involved in community service?
3. Have you been involved in inter-faith activities, and if so, how?
4. What types of community service or social action programs inspire you?

### **D. THE ROLE OF THE RABBI**

1. What rabbinic roles give you the most satisfaction?
2. What is your model of how the rabbi fits into the synagogue staff system?
3. How do you envision the sharing of leadership between the rabbi and lay leaders?
4. Are there ritual or other practices that you choose not to participate in, and if so, can you explain how you reached your position? (examples: officiating at a memorial service after a cremation; officiating at a wedding on Saturday night before Shabbat is over; sounding the Shofar on Shabbat when Rosh Hashana falls on Shabbat.)
5. What synagogue or board committees would you feel it important for a rabbi to be a part of?
6. What do you think is the place of the rabbi in setting the synagogue budget?