

LIAISON COMMITTEES

Source: THE RABBI-CONGREGATION RELATIONSHIP: A VISION FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

(Report of the Reconstructionist Commission on the role of the rabbi)

Pages 67-69

Many congregations have a rabbi liaison committee to facilitate communication. A liaison committee can be an effective channel that eases frictions that arise at times in the rabbi's relationships with the president, the executive committee or the board.

There are several possible models for such a committee. One option is to have a formal committee charged with specific responsibilities, whose work is integrated into the communication system of the congregation (executive committee and board, for example). This type of liaison committee could be a small-scale two-way channel for the rabbi and congregation to conduct the ongoing business of their relationship. In a large congregation with a large board and/or executive committee, a liaison committee can be a helpful smaller-scale conduit. Such a liaison committee might also have responsibility for ongoing mutual feedback between the congregation and the rabbi.

An alternative model is for a liaison committee to be informal, with the primary function being support for the rabbi -- a rabbi's "kitchen cabinet." This type of liaison committee would be a relatively safe space for the rabbi to raise concerns, discuss problems and strategize solutions. However, the rabbi remains an employee, and the members of a liaison committee remain congregants; a rabbi should not assume absolute confidentiality and should exercise discretion with even the most supportive liaison committee. When needing absolute confidentiality and a totally safe space in which to discuss issues, rabbis should consult with professionals, colleagues and friends outside of the congregation. The RRA staff, in addition to being available to rabbis, can connect rabbis with other resources.

If the liaison committee supervises or evaluates the rabbi, this should be clearly communicated and understood by all parties. It is also prudent to ascertain to what degree, if any, the congregation's by-laws might be in conflict with the role of a liaison committee. A liaison committee should not have the authority to terminate a rabbi, extend or renew a contract, or change responsibilities of employment as agreed to in the rabbi's contract. Those prerogatives belong to the board as the congregation's elected representatives.

Each congregation and rabbi should evaluate the communication channels that exist, and whether they are adequate. Where good communication exists, it may not be necessary to create a liaison committee. If communication is haphazard, informal or imprecise, or if it has been absent or problematic, a rabbi liaison committee might help facilitate better communication.

The question of whether the president should sit on a liaison committee is a complex one. The president and rabbi presumably have a direct channel of communication, and the president is usually over-extended already; having one more committee to sit on may be a duplication of effort. On the other hand, can the president afford not to be part of this primary communication affecting the ongoing relationship between rabbi and congregation?

But a congregation should also anticipate what would happen if it needed to address a bad relationship between rabbi and president and the president were on the liaison committee. Because liaison committees are relatively new, and because of the variety of models and functions they embody, it is difficult to determine a universal guideline. Congregations and rabbis should weigh and balance the advantages and disadvantages of having the president as a member of the liaison committee.

If a liaison committee is formed, it should be kept small. The rabbi and congregational leaders should mutually endorse and trust the members of a liaison committee, and therefore should consult with each other before any invitations are extended. Specific board officers may be appropriate, but a congregation should also consider members with relevant experience, interpersonal skills, sensitivity, a high level of involvement and respect for both rabbi and congregation.