

TRANSITION

Integrating the Rabbi into the Congregation

One of the central tasks of the first year, when the foundation for the rabbi-congregation relationship is being established, is the integration of the rabbi into the congregation. While congregations often devote a good deal of time, energy, planning and resources into the rabbinic search process, they often overlook the importance of integration, which in addition to strengthening the rabbi-congregation relationship, can also serve as an important community-building opportunity.

The arrival of a new rabbi (and especially the arrival of a first rabbi) generates excitement as well as anxiety, enthusiasm as well as ambivalence, hope as well as fear, and comfort as well as discomfort. The inevitable changes that result from the introduction of a new rabbi into the congregational system generate disequilibrium. Everything that the rabbi does is new, from the way she announces pages from the *siddur* to the style of counseling he embraces.

Change is often accompanied by anxiety. Congregation leaders can help alleviate some of that anxiety, and help ease the rabbi's entry into the community, by modeling ways in which change can be accommodated and directed, rather than resisted. A primary task of the first year is for the rabbi and congregation leaders jointly to monitor and manage the reaction of the congregation to change, and to guide the congregation through the transition process so that the relationship between rabbi and congregation can be consolidated, stabilized and made effective.

In addition to managing the impact of change on the congregation, rabbis in their first year are integrating on many levels into life in a new place. Like all people, rabbis (and their families) undergo many significant changes when moving. A congregation that consciously takes on the tasks of helping the rabbi settle in helps the rabbi feel at home in both professional and personal terms. Just as a congregation appoints a chair of the rabbinic search process, congregations should name a chair for the rabbi integration/transition process. The chair should take responsibility for marshaling resources in the congregation. Since the rabbi knows members of the search committee 2 or 3 could be part of this process. The committee should have no more than 6 members and the president or co-presidents should not be included since they will have to establish their own working relationship.

Examples of steps that might be taken in the first year to help integrate the rabbi--many of which are also of significant benefit to the congregation--include:

- Guide the rabbi to key players in the congregational system, formal and informal, who can share the history of the congregation and convey something of its culture.

- Create occasions (a social event, parlor meetings) where congregants can tell the story of the congregation and speak of its role in their lives.
- Communicate the specific customs that a community recognizes as carrying its identity. These are often casual and informal, and for a new rabbi can be easily missed. It is especially important to note customs associated with the fall holiday cycle, when the rabbi is meeting the congregation for the first time. If there are videos of congregational services and events, these can be very helpful to a new rabbi.
- Ensure that in addition to hearing all the positive things about the congregation, the rabbi hears the problems as well.
- Introduce the rabbi to groupings within the congregation, such as veteran members, interfaith families, various havurot and so forth.
- Introduce the rabbi to key people and places in the community – funeral home/funeral director, hospitals, long-term care facilities, schools, Jewish and non-Jewish clergy and so forth.
- Help the rabbi to identify members and families who may need immediate attention: there has been a recent death, someone in the hospital or just home from the hospital, someone with ongoing health issues, member or family member in a long-term care facility, recently divorced, issues with a child or children, concerns for an aging parent, loss of job and so forth.
- Discover the special gifts the rabbi brings to the congregation and find ways to highlight and publicize these.
- Communicate to the new rabbi the experiences and impact of the previous rabbi; help the new rabbi understand where s/he is picking up.
- If the rabbi is succeeding another rabbi, monitor the steps necessary to continue and complete the process of closure for the congregation with the previous rabbi, which normally continues at least through the first year of the new rabbi's tenure, and sometimes beyond.
- Find people in the congregation who can help with specifics. For example: recommendations for daycare, home contractors, transportation, carpooling, making suggestions for places to take a family (museums, etc.) and finding congregant families (with children close in age to those of the rabbi, where possible) to invite the rabbi (and family) to such places. (In general, rabbis should avoid doing business with congregants so as to avoid potential complicating factors in their relationships with congregants.)

- Check with the rabbi before doing the following: Invitations to, for example, High Holiday meals, Shabbat dinners and lunches (although many rabbis may not be able to accept Shabbat invitations because of synagogue schedules), Hanukkah candle lightings and Pesach seders. It is always better for the rabbi to receive too many invitations than too few if this will work for the rabbi (and family.)
- If the rabbi's partner will be seeking employment, find people in the congregation with similar interests and backgrounds to provide suggestions on where to look for work.
- Plan and time the rabbi's installation as a key event in the integration of the rabbi.
- Make certain the rabbi receives copies of the prior year's newsletters as well as policies, meeting minutes and other documentation.
- Enter a subscription for the rabbi to local general and Jewish newspapers.
- Have the integration chairperson meet with the rabbi monthly. Questions worth asking include: "How is it going? What can we do to help? Are you getting what you need to settle in?"

Adapted from...

"The Rabbi-Congregation Relationship: A Vision for the 21st Century
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