

The Rabbi as Pastor-Theologian

Torah Scholars Qua Ecclesial Leaders in the Post-Biblical Jewish Context

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David J. Rudolph, Ph.D.
david.rudolph@gmail.com

When the theme of this symposium was first proposed, I considered my own ecclesial context—the Messianic Jewish community—where rabbis are expected to be pastor-theologians. In this essay, I seek to describe how rabbis (traditional and Messianic) serve in this capacity. Following a brief word on the origin of the congregational rabbi and the nature of his ordination, I comment on nine areas where he leaves his scholarly and pastoral footprint.¹ In discussing these areas, I have attempted to (1) focus on aspects of the rabbinate that are less well known in the Christian world,² (2) point out ways in which modern rabbis may differ from their historical counterparts, and (3) note ways in which the Messianic rabbi may differ from his modern non-Messianic counterpart.

History

In Rabbinic literature, the earliest person identified as a “rabbi”³ is Rabbi Gamaliel I (the grandson of Hillel), also known as Gamaliel the Elder.⁴ This was probably the same Gamaliel whom Paul studied under, a respected Jewish leader who did not oppose the early community of

¹ My use of the third masculine singular pronoun is not meant to imply that rabbis are always male. Today, half of all non-Orthodox rabbinical candidates are women. The Messianic Jewish community is more conservative on this issue. See Kollontai, “Women as Leaders: Contemporary Perspectives on the Roles of Women in Messianic Judaism,” n.p.; Silberling, “Women and Ordination,” 68-81.

² The full range of a rabbi’s functions may be described as follows: “The rabbi as a surrogate priest, serving within the context of Israel, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, performs the following functions...(1) Serves as a custodian of Israel’s revelation and traditions [Note: In the Messianic Jewish context this would of course include revelation and traditions explicitly embodying our response to Yeshua and the Apostolic Writings]; (2) Teaches Israel the ways of God as embodied in the revelation and traditions; (3) Models fidelity to God, the revelation and the traditions; (4) Advises the community on matters of ritual life; (5) Acts as a judge in disputes; (6) Coordinates financial and logistical matters pertaining to the community; (7) Facilitates the community’s worship of God; (8) Expedites rites of passage; (9) Seeks to insure that the presence of God continues to abide with the community and its members, by serving as a spiritual director, coach, and mentor; (10) Helps the community and its members when life is disrupted (as by crisis, sin, or disease). This is the counseling and healing function of the rabbi; (11) Is a catalyst in outreach and conversion; (12) Serves as a spokesperson for the congregation, the Jewish people, and Judaism to the outside world; (13) Speaks blessing and strength to the congregation and its members from the symbolic exemplar aspect of the rabbinic role; (14) Offers to God prayers as service of the heart, if necessary offers his/her life for the sanctification of the Divine Name, and presents his/her holy studies as a surrogate priestly sacrifice; (15) Intercedes for himself/herself, his/her family, for his/her congregation, the people of Israel, the nations, and the cosmos as an agent in the Divine consummation of all things; (16) Leads his/her congregation” (Dauermann, *The Rabbi as a Surrogate Priest*, pp. 259-260, 276-277).

³ Hebrew for “my teacher.”

⁴ Eisenberg, “Rabbi,” p. 338.

Jesus-believing Jews (Acts 5:34; 22:3).⁵ In the early Rabbinic period, “rabbi” became widely used as a title for trained Torah scholars in the land of Israel.⁶ Their Babylonian counterparts in the Amoraic period (200-500 CE) were referred to as *Rav*. It is not until the medieval period that we have evidence of rabbis taking on more pastoral care roles, with the locus of their authority shifting from the rabbinical academy to the local community, where they became known in Aramaic as *mara de-atra* (the master of the place).⁷

Ordination

In post-biblical Judaism, Torah scholars became rabbis through study and *semikhah* (laying of hands). *Semikhah* in the first through fourth centuries was only possible for a scholar who resided in the land of Israel and ordination connected the rabbi to a chain of authority that was traced back to Moses laying his hands on Joshua (Num 27:23; Deut 34:9).⁸ As Moses interpreted the Torah in an ecclesial context,⁹ the post-biblical rabbi was expected to carry out a similar role in the Jewish community. *Semikhah* authorized the rabbi to be a teacher and a *posek* (decisor of Jewish law) “ranging from the lowest level of deciding only religious questions [e.g. concerning dietary laws, menstruation, Sabbath, festivals] to the highest level, which permitted one to judge criminal cases (Sanh. 5a).”¹⁰ Biblical/Talmudic studies and theology is the wider context in which rabbis today practice their pedagogical and juridical role.

Beit Midrash

The *beit midrash*¹¹ was a study hall (with library) often built adjacent to the synagogue.¹² The rabbi not only taught Torah to his congregation in the *beit midrash*, and thus was called by his flock *morenu ha-Rav* (our teacher the rabbi), but he also typically started his own *yeshiva* (academy) there to train students and served as *rosh yeshiva* (head of the academy). Sometimes these students lived in the rabbi’s house where he modeled Torah life. The congregation or individual members financed student accommodations. It is notable that “the yeshiva was his

⁵ Tomson, “Gamaliel’s Counsel and the Apologetic Strategy of Luke-Acts,” p. 598.

⁶ For a survey of the lives and teachings of the early rabbis, see Nadich, *The Legends of the Rabbis* (2 vols.). Also Cohen, “The rabbi in second-century Jewish society,” pp. 922-990; Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society*, pp. 103-128, 162-176.

⁷ Eisenberg, “Rabbi,” p. 339. “We can say that it was in the late eleventh and twelfth century that the professional—and modern—rabbinate was born. In round figures, the modern rabbinate dates to the year 1100 (Schwarzfuchs 1993:12)” (Dauermann, *The Rabbi as a Surrogate Priest*, p. 195).

⁸ “*Semikha* (rabbinic ordination) disappeared in the fourth century, but reappeared in the second half of the fourteenth century. First reference to this reappearance comes in the context of a dispute in 1386-1387 concerning the chief rabbi of France” (Dauermann, *The Rabbi as a Surrogate Priest*, pp. 197-198).

⁹ Note the use of ἐκκλησίᾳ in Acts 7:38 with reference to the Jewish people of Moses’ day. Cf. ἐκκλησίαν κυρίου in LXX Deut 23:3, 8; 1 Chron 28:8; Mic 2:5 and ἐκκλησίας Ἰσραὴλ in LXX Deut 31:30. Based on these texts, I sometimes use the term “ecclesial” more broadly to include Jews who are in covenant relationship with God but who do not know the Messiah of Israel. This should not be taken as implying a dual covenant soteriology. See the UMJC’s “Statement on the Identity of Messiah” (<http://www.umjc.net/home-mainmenu-1/faqs-mainmenu-58>).

¹⁰ Eisenberg, “Semikhah,” p. 341.

¹¹ Hebrew for “house of learning.”

¹² Another term for “synagogue” is *shul* (Yiddish), from the German word for “school.”

[the rabbi's], and not the community's. It flourished and disappeared with him; the students, the *Benei ha-Yeshivah*, the sons of the Talmudic school, evinced a closer personal relationship with their leader than with his community.”¹³

Today the *beit midrash* remains central to synagogue life, though it is not always a separate building structure. And as Rabbi A. Mark Levin explains, the rabbi leads the way in prioritizing the *beit midrash*:

The rabbi of the congregation is the central figure in transforming the synagogue from being solely a Bet Knesset, a place of prayer, worship, and ritual life-cycle functions, into encompassing the role of Bet Midrash. In order to be effective in this capacity, the rabbi must serve as a *model*. It is imperative that his congregation and community perceive him to be a student of Torah, who is frequently engaged in the study of Torah. The rabbi must be in a state of continual personal growth in Torah. When the congregation understands this priority in his life, it is more likely that they will be more accepting of his leadership in transforming the Bet Knesset into a Bet Midrash.¹⁴

Talmud Torah and Jewish Day Schools

Rabbis have historically involved themselves in early childhood education, overseeing *Talmud Torah*¹⁵ and Jewish day schools. The Sages underscore the importance of teaching Torah to children, “He who learns when a child—what is he like? Ink put down on a clean piece of paper. And he who learns when an old man—what is he like? Ink put down on a paper full of erasures” (*m. Avot* 4.20). Some rabbis are especially called to work with children in Jewish schools. They have a passion for the ethic of *l’dor vador* (from generation to generation) in Jewish life. All rabbis, even the most erudite, are expected to prioritize children and communicate well with them.

Hebrew Language and the Sefer Torah

A rabbi uses his advanced training in Hebrew and cognate languages not only to study and teach Jewish texts but also to answer questions that members of his community have about these texts. Today, many synagogues have daily “morning *minyan*” services that are mostly in Hebrew. Even the average Reform synagogue service requires a considerable level of Hebrew literacy. The rabbi must therefore serve as the resident Hebrew scholar in his congregation. He not only explains the grammar of the language, but also its history and theology. Moreover, the rabbi handles the *sefer Torah* (handwritten Torah scroll) on a weekly basis—carrying it, opening it, reading directly from its unpointed Hebrew and teaching his community how to properly honor the Word of God, even to the point of burying it when a Torah scroll is no longer usable.

¹³ Schwarzfuchs, *A Concise History of the Rabbinate*, p. 17.

¹⁴ Levin, “The Rabbi as Teacher,” pp. 18-19.

¹⁵ *Talmud Torah* (Hebrew for “teaching Torah” and “Torah study”) is Jewish religious education on the primary school level.

Kosher Food

Rabbis have historically been responsible for examining, licensing and supervising the ritual slaughter of animals (*shechitah*) so that kosher meat may be available in the community. A rabbi who specializes in this area of Torah is called a *mashgiach* and will work either in the kosher meat industry or supervise the *kashrut* status of a restaurant. The role of the *mashgiach*-rabbi in the observant Jewish community is vital. I was eating in a Kosher Chinese restaurant last year and the rabbi came out of the kitchen to talk with people at the tables. This was the ecclesial context in which he served.

Festivals

Like the conductor of an orchestra, the rabbi coordinates his synagogue's observance of festivals and fast days—Rosh HaShanah, Yom Kippur, Sukkot (Tabernacles), Simchat Torah, Chanukah, Purim, Tu B'Shevat, Passover, Holocaust Remembrance Day, Israel Independence Day, Lag B'Omer, Jerusalem Day, Shavuot (Pentecost), Tishah B'Av, etc. He makes sure that these seasons of spiritual renewal are fully in line with Torah, reflect the *minchag* (custom) of the community and show pastoral sensitivity toward those who are at different places on the ladder of observance. All of this requires halakhic expertise and pastoral wisdom to pull off. Rabbis use the festivals, which are loaded with theological meaning, as a springboard to teach about creation, the God of Israel, divine revelation, the Kingdom of God, redemption, covenant and consummation, sin and forgiveness, the World to Come, evil and its conquest, etc. Messianic rabbis have the additional task of drawing out the New Covenant significance of the festivals and showing how they fill full our understanding of the life, death, resurrection and return of Yeshua (Jesus) the Messiah.

Circumcision

Sometimes a rabbi has specialized training to perform *brit milah* (circumcision) and thus serve the community as a *mohel* (covenant surgeon). My father attended several years of medical school before he became a lawyer and then a Messianic rabbi in the Washington, D.C. area. He received certification from the Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations (UMJC) as a recognized *mohel* in our community by interning with a Messianic Jewish physician and studying the history and theology of *brit milah*. As a boy, I tagged along with my father when he visited homes to perform his rabbinical duties as a *mohel*. He passionately taught about God's covenant with Israel, led the family in saying the appropriate Hebrew blessings and circumcised the child according to Jewish custom. This is pastoral-theological work that not only receives a lot of tips (that's an old Jewish joke ☺) but also closely connects the rabbi to his community in a cross-generational way.

Marriage and Divorce

Rabbis perform weddings and counsel couples about the covenant responsibilities of marriage from the standpoint of Jewish law. They also offer pastoral wisdom from their years of experience. If a Jew wants a divorce, Jewish law requires the husband to request a *get* (divorce

document) from a *bet din* (Jewish court), which is typically overseen by a congregational rabbi who serves as the *Av Bet Din* (Father of the Court). This is why rabbis are sometimes referred to as *Rabad*, a Hebrew acronym for *Rab Ab Bet Din* (Rabbinic Head of the Court).¹⁶

***Livui Ruchani* (Pastoral Care) and Counseling**

The heart of a rabbi is supposed to be like that of Moses, the shepherd *par excellence*. When describing their pastoral calling, rabbis will sometimes refer to the below *midrash* on Exodus 2:

Once, when Moshe Rabbeinu [Moses our rabbi] was attending the flock of Yitro in the desert, a young lamb ran away. He ran after it . . . and found it drinking at a pool of water. When he saw this sight, he said “I did not know that you ran away because you were thirsty; you must be tired.” He put the lamb on his shoulders and carried it home. Said God: “If you are so compassionate to treat dumb animals thus, by your life you shall tend my flock, the people of Israel” (*Exod. Rab. 2.2*).

Rabbi Joel Tessler explains that modern rabbis seek to “synthesize” their roles as scholars and pastors, and that much of their pastoral work takes place in their homes:

As tired as Moshe is, he nevertheless carries the animal all the way back. These images of our leader’s concern and empathy for every member of his flock rest firmly in the minds of all in reflecting on Jewish leadership and being a *Rav be’Yisrael* [rabbi in Israel]. Intellectual prowess and mastery of sources is crucial for the rabbi/teacher. But the elements of empathy and *chesed* [lovingkindness] have also served as the hallmark of the rabbi/pastor. Indeed, the success of every congregational rabbi depends upon the degree to which he is able to synthesize the skills of educator and pastor. . . Rabbis are gracious to a fault in opening up their homes to all for meals, sleeping, and study. People in the community, rightfully or not, often consider the rabbi’s home as their second home. . . As rabbis we are called upon to be the shepherds of God’s holy people and to view them as our flock.¹⁷

Though modern rabbis recognize the importance of formal training in pastoral care and counseling, this was not always the case. Until the early twentieth century, rabbinical training programs did not emphasize these areas and there was a dearth of literature on the rabbi’s pastoral role. Over the past twenty-five years, this situation has changed dramatically. All of the major rabbinical seminaries now have pastoral care components in their programs and there is a steady stream of books being published to help rabbis grow as pastor-theologians. Below are a few titles I recommend:

- Dayle Friedman (ed.), *Jewish Pastoral Care: A Practical Handbook from Traditional & Contemporary Sources* (2005)
- Yisrael Levitz and Abraham Twerski, *A Practical Guide to Rabbinic Counseling* (2005)
- Joseph Ozarowski, *To Walk in God’s Ways: Jewish Pastoral Perspectives on Illness and Bereavement* (1995)
- Robert Katz, *Pastoral Care and the Jewish Tradition: Theology and Pastoral Care* (1985)

¹⁶ Schwarzfuchs, *A Concise History of the Rabbinate*, p. 54.

¹⁷ Tessler, “The Rabbi as Counselor,” pp. 78, 85-87.

Conflict Resolution

The *bet din* is widely used in the traditional Jewish community for conflict resolution and a rabbi may serve on a bet din in one of three capacities: *Av Bet Din* (Father of the Court), *Rosh Bet Din* (Head of the Court) or *Dayan* (Rabbinic Judge). I met an artist in Jerusalem last summer who had a business dispute with a fellow Orthodox Jew. Rather than go to the secular court, he took the dispute before a *bet din*, and the Jewish court issued a *psak din* (decision) against him. Afterwards, the artist sought to reconcile with his Jewish brother. He writes about the experience:

We couldn't untangle the knotty issues. Both of us wanted this settled in a way that would be fair to the other; we just couldn't agree how to do that. We decided to take the issue to a *Bet Din*, a Jewish, religious court to adjudicate it. This was the first and only time I had ever been to a *Bet Din*. I found the process fascinating, enlightening and remarkably freeing. The main judge was careful, thorough, sharp and insightful. For me the whole process concretized a vast, essential arena of Judaism and Jewish law that until then had only been theoretical for me. It gave me an enormously increased respect for Torah and its remarkable ability to touch all aspects of life. I was stunned by the remarkable ability of this court to transform conflicting viewpoints and discordant opinions into resolution. It almost felt miraculous.¹⁸

The rabbi's role as pastor and theologian is apparent in the *bet din* context. He draws on his vast contextual knowledge of Torah and Jewish law to make a right judgment while at the same time showing pastoral concern for the individuals involved.

Questions

The congregational rabbi is a particular kind of pastor-theologian—one who serves the unique needs of the Jewish wing of the ecclesia. Despite this specialization, the wider ecclesia can learn from the rabbinical model. Below are a number of open questions to get the gears grinding as we discuss the rabbi as a pastor-theologian:

- What are the various titles for a rabbi?
- What is Torah and what does a rabbi do with it?
- What can we learn from the *beit midrash* concept?
- How would a *yeshiva* look in a Christian context?
- How does a Torah scholar relate to children?
- Why is the festival calendar so important to a rabbi?
- Why do rabbis view Moses as an exemplar?
- Why do rabbis open up their homes?
- How does a rabbi's involvement in a *bet din* impact his community?

¹⁸ Moss, "An Offering of Peace," n.p.

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