

## Rabbi's Role in a Modern Congregation: Spiritual Leader or Fundraiser?

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*By Avrum Lapin*

“For I love him [Abraham] because he will command his children and his household after him that they should safeguard the way of the Lord by performing acts of *tzedaka* and *mishpat*.”

*(Genesis 18:19)*

In many of our engagements with congregations across the US, rabbis often pull us aside and seek special counsel.

“I am the Rabbi of this congregation. My main concern is the spiritual life of our congregants. I am not a fundraiser,” they frequently confide. More frequently they add that “as much as I would love to take a leadership role in my congregation’s campaign, I was never trained on how to raise funds, and I am concerned that I will be crossing a line.”

Many rabbis speak about the conflict between their pastoral duties and responsibilities (“I am their rabbi first”) and their important involvement in their congregation’s philanthropic activities (the rabbi is often the hardest person to say “no” to). This struggle is a source of concern or anxiety for many rabbis as they navigate the many roles they are asked to play as the leaders of their congregations.

A few rabbis may have had a course or workshop on fundraising in their rabbinic training as a part of practical management issues. More likely this aspect of a rabbi’s work, and increasingly a concrete expectation, is learned on

the job, sometimes reluctantly. Though some rabbis have a natural knack for asking for support, most are more comfortable giving a sermon, teaching children and/or adults, or visiting with congregants.

Discomfort for fundraising likely comes from a place of fear. Fear of appearing to pushy, fear of asking for the wrong amount, or fear of offending congregants. The philanthropic landscape is evolving and keeping up with best practices may be beyond the scope of a rabbi's duties. It often seems overwhelming to add fundraising to the seemingly endless list of rabbis' responsibilities. And yet so many rabbis speak of fundraising increasingly being part of their contractual discussions.

Yet rabbis are particularly well suited and well positioned for success at fundraising in the synagogue setting. Perhaps most importantly, cultivating and building meaningful relationships is a primary goal of a good rabbi. These relationships are the cornerstone of any philanthropic endeavor. The rabbi is in a unique position to help sustain the congregation financially. The rabbi's vision of the congregation's future is important, and always a point of reference, and there is usually no one better than the clergy to articulate and map the path to achieve that vision.

While rabbis' role in fundraising is essential, they cannot do it alone and must function as part of a team. Congregational fundraising is one of the areas for collaborative efforts. Rabbis can be a strong partner with synagogue leaders in financial resource development efforts, but should in no way lead or shoulder most of the responsibilities.

There are many ways to resolve feelings of discomfort to make the process less intimidating and seemingly onerous:

**Use a network:** There are sure to be those in your synagogue community with experience with fundraising. Perhaps they are on other boards, or been part of a campaign and have advice for the process. Asking for help can only benefit any clergy's sense of knowledge and comfort.

**Communicate unease:** No one expects that everyone is good at everything. A rabbi should share his or her reluctance with lay leaders, as it can help to inform the process. Perhaps it will mean that the rabbi can concentrate on those areas which are easier or more comfortable. This can be opening doors for others to meet or coming along for a meeting and not asking.

**Stay Updated:** The philanthropic landscape is changing and chances are that these changes affects congregation as well. Effective fundraising works best within the contest of the current culture of giving in each specific congregation.

**Be prepared:** Any "ask," fundraising meeting or call should be conducted using background information on the donor. Rabbis often know personal information about congregants, but it will be the job of the development committee or fundraising professional to fill in the gaps. It is important to know not only capacity, but what is a meaningful gift for that individual or family.

Asking for money is challenging in today's competitive philanthropic environment, and is especially so when working outside of one's comfort zone. The solution to this problem is the need for training rabbis to navigate the challenging terrain, coupled with clergy's willingness to be a part of the process. With guidance, practice, expertise and advice, rabbis can overcome their hesitations and acquire the tools and techniques to make this process comfortable for all – the rabbi, the leadership, and, of course, the donor. The balance is achievable and can even become a rewarding and spiritual undertaking.

*My colleagues and I welcome your comments and emails. Let us know what you think. Please feel free to contact us at The Lapin Group at 215-885-1550 or [alapin@thelapingroup.com](mailto:alapin@thelapingroup.com) to discuss this further.*

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