SAYING GOODBYE & SAYING HELLO
MAINTAINING CONGREGATIONAL CONTINUITY DURING A
TIME OF RABBINIC TRANSITION

Written by

Ann M. Albert
Executive Director
This thesis offers a framework for administrators of congregations to proceed smoothly through the period of rabbinic transition. The focus is on the period of transition rather than the process by which congregations conduct their search for a senior rabbi.

The term "transition" means the passage from one form or activity to another. In the case of rabbinic transition, this passage is marked by several steps. It begins with the rabbi announcing he/she will vacate the pulpit. This is followed by the congregation saying "goodbye" to the rabbi, a search for a successor, preparation for the new rabbi and his or her welcome by the congregation and the service of installation. The change felt during transition can be traumatic for the congregation, the staff and the community.

What follows are four scenarios presented by different congregations that experienced a rabbinic transition over the past few years. The administrator, current rabbi and rabbi emeritus (where applicable) were consulted concerning their perception of the process. Following these scenarios will be an examination of the similarities and differences in the cases, and an analysis of the transition process.
CONGREGATIONS IN TRANSITION

Case One - Westchester Reform Congregation, Scarsdale, New York.
Rabbi Jack Stern was Senior Rabbi at Westchester Reform Congregation for twenty-nine years. He announced his plan to retire five years prior to his departure in 1991. While planning for the upcoming change, the Temple felt it was important to involve the congregation in every step of the transition. One way this was accomplished was through a questionnaire asking the congregation what qualities they desired in a rabbi. The congregation also obtained transition consulting services from The Alban Institute, a non-profit organization based in Washington, D.C. The Alban Institute specializes in helping congregations experiencing periods of conflict. Their trained staff works individually or through workshops with clergy, professional staff, governing boards and congregations. Consultation with The Alban Institute is handled independently of the search process.

During the last year of Rabbi Stern's tenure, he appeared at temple committee meetings and affiliate functions to say goodbye to congregants in a more personal setting. In addition, the congregation hosted many events at a variety of price ranges for members to acknowledge Rabbi Stern's departure. There was a special service preceded by a dinner for the Rabbi and his guests, and a dinner dance honoring Rabbi and Mrs. Stern. The Rabbi received a bound book of memories where individuals expressed themselves in
writing. Rabbi Richard Jacobs, incoming rabbi of Westchester Reform Congregation, was present at the festivities. Rabbi Jacobs had served as a rabbinic intern at Westchester Reform several years earlier. Rabbi Jacobs stated, "In the transition, it was important to first celebrate Rabbi Stern, and then welcome the new rabbi".

After his retirement, Rabbi and Mrs. Stern relocated to the Berkshires, several hours from Scarsdale. As Rabbi Emeritus, he attended very few functions and chose not to perform life-cycle events at the Temple. The role of the rabbi emeritus will be discussed later in this thesis.

At the time of Rabbi Jacobs' engagement, the Transition Committee (which was formed when Rabbi Jacobs accepted the position) arranged several small get-togethers for members to welcome and meet him. At these informal settings, the Rabbi was able to interact with members and begin to build relationships with them. This was particularly beneficial for the older congregants who had a relationship with Rabbi Stern and were interested in developing a relationship with Rabbi Jacobs. There were also members who had maintained a relationship with Rabbi Jacobs since his internship at Westchester Reform. By the High Holidays, Rabbi Jacobs knew almost fifty percent of the congregation.

Beth Mauser, Temple Administrator, made sure that Rabbi Jacobs began with a fresh start by redecorating his office. For Beth and
the Temple staff, working with a new Rabbi meant getting accustomed to a new style. A large Temple staff was also a change for Rabbi Jacobs. He had previously worked at a small temple where he did much of his own work. A larger congregation meant interacting with a professional staff to ensure the success of programming.

For the congregants, it was an exciting and frightening time. Beth's role included providing reassurance to both members and staff. Rabbi Jacobs spent his first year building relationships and trust with the congregation. He took time to learn names and faces and get acquainted with the members. It was important to keep changes to a minimum so the members were comfortable in their temple.

As a formal and final welcome to the Westchester Reform Congregation, Rabbi Jacobs was installed at a special service following his first High Holiday season. Rabbi Jacobs had always viewed Rabbi Stern as a mentor and this made Rabbi Stern the ideal person to install him. The Temple invited Rabbi Jacobs and his guests to a dinner prior to services. The congregation celebrated with Rabbi Jacobs at an oneg shabbat following the installation.

Case one represents a smooth transition, and outside of arranging events and other activities relating to the new rabbi, the administrator did not experience any dramatic difficulties. In this situation, both the Rabbi Emeritus and the Rabbi had a bond that
preceded the transition. They knew each other, and this enabled the congregation to psychologically prepare for a person who would be careful to perpetuate the work of his predecessor, while still expressing himself and his own unique perspective. In this scenario, Rabbi Stern let the congregation know that the new Rabbi was "his Rabbi". This type of public statement helped make the congregation even more receptive to the change.

Case Two - Rodeph Sholom Congregation, New York, New York.
Rabbi Gunter Hirschberg served Rodeph Sholom as Cantor and then Rabbi for over thirty years before his untimely death in 1989. Even though Rabbi Hirschberg had been out of the office ill for several months, his death left the congregation in a deep state of mourning. After a large funeral where the Rabbi was eulogized by many, the congregation was sent a special newsletter which included excerpts of the eulogies (Appendix 1).

Until a rabbi could be engaged through the rabbinic search process, Rabbi Harold Saperstein, who had previously retired, was hired on an interim basis. Rabbi Saperstein was described as a "makes you feel good about yourself" rabbi. He seemed to be the kind of individual needed by a congregation who had just lost someone special. With Rabbi Saperstein, congregants and staff were able to mourn their loss and find their way through a very difficult period. For Monika Hamburger, Executive Director, the mourning process was particularly intense. Monika, who was grieving the loss
of her friend and colleague, had to be strong, supportive and a comfort to the congregants and staff around her.

As a lasting memorial to Rabbi Hirschberg, Rodeph Sholom created the annual "Gunter Hirschberg Memorial Concert." In addition, a section of the day school was dedicated to his memory.

Rodeph Sholom, like Westchester Reform, employed the services of the Alban Institute to help them through the period of transition. After one year, the Temple engaged Rabbi Robert Levine as Senior Rabbi of Rodeph Sholom. By this time the congregation was ready to look to the future. In anticipation of Rabbi Levine's arrival, Monika oversaw the refurbishing of new offices for him.

Rabbi Levine was welcomed with a series of gatherings. He knew that following in the footsteps of Rabbi Hirschberg would not be easy. Rabbi Levine made small slow changes during his first year. His goal was for the congregants to get to know him and his style. This also gave Rabbi Levine time to establish himself and learn the internal workings of the temple. He relied on and was grateful to Monika, whom he felt knew Rodeph Sholom best, and was willing to take him into her confidence. "It has been a process of evolution rather than change" states Monika, "where the congregation has maintained many traditions of Rabbi Hirschberg while incorporating the style of Rabbi Levine."
The congregation formally installed Rabbi Levine several months after his arrival. A dinner preceded the service, and a special service booklet was created for the evening (Appendix 2).

Case two represents a more difficult period of transition for the congregation. With the death of a beloved and popular rabbi, the congregation feels bereaved and is likely to mourn his loss for many years even after the engagement of a new rabbi. That is why it is important for the administrator to support the new rabbi in establishing his/her style, and also work with the temple leadership to memorialize the deceased rabbi. In case two, the interim rabbi helped the congregation during its mourning period, which made it easier for the new rabbi to assume the pulpit.

In many instances, a family's association with Judaism is through the rabbi. Even though a new rabbi is on the pulpit, the family may still long for the rituals and feelings that accompanied their previous life-cycle experiences. An administrator needs to be aware of these feelings on the part of "grieving" congregants which may manifest themselves long after the death of the former rabbi. These feelings are real and surely can impact the relationship between the present rabbi and an individual family.

**Case Three - Temple Solel**

Temple Solel, a young and vibrant congregation, was faced with the

---

1'The name of this congregation has been changed.
resignation of its founding Rabbi of six years. The Rabbi's notice of departure gave the congregation one year to prepare for a rabbinic transition. During this time the officers and staff worked to build a feeling within the membership of security and continuity while embarking on a new beginning. A search committee was formed which successfully engaged a new rabbi. The temple held a "send off" consisting of an oneg/reception and a farewell gift where well-wishers bid goodbye to their rabbi and friend.

Four and one-half years later another change occurred. With no advance notice, the successor rabbi was asked by the executive officers to resign his position, effective immediately. An officer of the board informed the staff, and together they determined how to approach the situation in a positive manner. Notice of the Rabbi's departure was mailed to the congregation. For the staff and congregants there was shock and disbelief.

Fortunately, at this time, the congregation had a cantor who was able to provide continuity in temple life. The staff and congregation pulled together to maintain stability through this period of change. Temple Solel's staff filled in as needed to give the search committee enough time to interview and select a rabbi. During this time, information continued to go out to the congregation keeping them informed of the progress. This helped the membership feel like they were a part of the process.
The next rabbi who was selected came to the temple and met members through various planned meetings and receptions. This gave him the opportunity to address questions and areas of concern while getting acquainted with the congregants.

A transition committee, consisting of the members of the search committee and representatives of various working arms of the temple, was formed to facilitate a smooth melding of personalities between the congregants, board, committee members, professionals and support staff. A facilitator, skilled in management and human relations techniques, was engaged to meet with the board, key leaders and the professional staff.

The Rabbis from Temple Solel were involved not only in congregational life, but also within their community, participating in various committees and councils. The community was prepared when the first Rabbi left, but not for the second Rabbi's abrupt departure which left a vacancy on a community council. The third Rabbi came into the community and became a vital and active part in many phases of the community.

This case shows a congregation experiencing several transitions. A founding rabbi left the congregation only to be followed by a rabbi whose tenure was cut short. Such events may leave the congregation frustrated and uncertain, but circumstances inherent in this situation may enable a new rabbi to come to the community with few
impediments. Because his predecessor was forced to resign, the incoming rabbi might not feel compelled to preserve the work done by previous rabbis. The congregation is prepared to make a new beginning and will be receptive to new programming ideas. This can be an ideal time for a congregation's professional staff to set new priorities and directions for the congregation.

Case Four - Congregation Shomer Emunim, Sylvania, Ohio.
Rabbi Alan Sokobin was retiring after twenty years at The Temple. The congregation had been aware of the Rabbi's plans for about five years. As the time grew near, the Temple began to prepare for the upcoming transition. Rabbi Sokobin was also preparing for major changes in his life. He was entering law school in the fall after leaving the pulpit. The Sokobins had family in Toledo and were not relocating. Rabbi Sokobin would still belong to and be a visible face at the Temple and in the community. In the year prior to Rabbi Sokobin's retirement he was hospitalized with Guillain-Barre syndrome. With Rabbi Sokobin ill, the congregation experienced temple life without him.

As Rabbi Sam Weinstein prepared to assume his rabbinic duties, the question was how to make everyone (rabbis, staff, congregation and community) understand that a new senior rabbi had taken over, while also letting the Rabbi Emeritus know that he was still part of the Temple family. It was important that there be a clear division in the rabbis' roles.
Ann Albert, Executive Director, prepared to accommodate the Rabbi Emeritus and welcome someone new. The Temple provided new office space for Rabbi Sokobin which required remodelling, and the vacated office was redecorated for Rabbi Weinstein. In addition, many details were attended to including new clergy robes, parking signs, letterhead, staff orientations and health insurance changes.

Rabbi Sokobin was honored in the fall with a weekend of festivities for the congregation and the community. Any congregant interested in working on the retirement committee was encouraged to participate. Friday evening services were open to the community with an oneg shabbat following. The congregation hosted a dinner dance the next night where Rabbi Sokobin was presented with a gift acknowledging his twenty years at The Temple. The Rabbi was also presented with a bound book of remembrance letters from congregants and community members. The guests at the dinner received a copy of this book (Appendix 3). Finally, congregants, who so desired, could contribute to a temple fund in honor of Rabbi's retirement.

When the Weinstein family arrived, they were welcomed at small gatherings at the Temple and in members' homes. The congregation also welcomed the Rabbi and his family at a summer Friday evening service and oneg. Later in the fall, Rabbi Weinstein was formally installed as Senior Rabbi of The Temple. A congregational dinner preceded the formal installation service. The evening ended with an oneg for everyone to attend.
Rabbi Weinstein spent his first year getting acquainted with the membership and getting a feel for all of the "intangible" aspects of the congregation that did not come out in the interview process. With this knowledge he, along with the professional staff, was able to evaluate the direction in which the congregation would move. In turn, the members learned about Rabbi Weinstein's philosophies and practices.

Case four is fairly common among congregations and has the potential of being either smooth or disruptive. In this case, the retiring rabbi remains in the community and is visible to the congregation. Yet, according to the guidelines of the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) and the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC)\(^2\), the rabbi emeritus has no authority in congregational life. Nevertheless, the rabbi emeritus has developed intimate relationships with individuals and it is likely that his services will still be requested. Whether or not a particular transition is smooth, depends in great measure, on the personalities of the two rabbis. The administrator needs to be aware of the guidelines set forth by the CCAR and sensitive to the feelings of both rabbis.

CONCLUSIONS

\(^{2}\text{Guidelines for Rabbinical-Congregational Relationships; UAHC and CCAR; Spring 1990}\)
The four scenarios presented above are different, yet they offer a variety of suggestions that can be helpful for administrators experiencing a rabbinic transition.

Transition is about saying good-bye and then saying hello. The welcome is not successful unless there has been closure with the past. The Administrator of Temple Solel states, "Circumstances that have created the transition determine the way in which closure and preparation occur." If the membership has had sufficient closure with the outgoing rabbi, the new rabbi can begin his/her tenure with the ability to establish his/her own style and have the feeling that the congregation is now receptive to someone new.

There were many similarities in the manner that the congregations moved through the transition period. The first and probably most important similarity was the desire by the temples to keep their congregants informed of changes on a timely basis. When the bond is severed between a rabbi and congregation, there is a natural feeling of loss experienced by both the members and the rabbi. The rabbi may have officiated at a life-cycle event, or been a confidant during a time of need. Just the idea of change can be disconcerting for members. For many reasons, congregants need to be a part of the process and have the opportunity to "mourn" the loss of the rabbi and to say good-bye. The administrator should be sensitive to the needs of the congregants, staff and community, and provide support. The administrator is the individual to whom people
can come with questions, concerns and opinions or to receive assurance that everything will be fine. The task of reassuring members continues long after the new rabbi has arrived. It is important for the administrator to be informed of changes and to maintain a close relationship with the "Transition Committee". This committee will be addressed later in the thesis. It is also important to note at this point, that the congregant is not always cognizant of the fact that the professional staff, along with the congregation, is also going through a period of transition. Congregations change rabbis infrequently and the clergy and administration are not trained in handling the stress associated with transition.

A questionnaire, asking the membership what they desire in a senior rabbi, is equally important. A congregational self examination looking at membership expectations can help ease the difficulty of transition. The questionnaire is usually designed to aid the search process, but this important information can be shared with the membership, the committee working through the transition process, and with the incoming rabbi and professional staff to establish programming ideas, congregational demographics and look at both the strong and weak points of temple life. This valuable source of information can be beneficial to the new rabbi to help him/her learn more about the congregation.

Congregations need to make sure there is a way for everyone to say
good-bye. This can be done simply or with many festivities. A committee should be chosen to handle all of the affairs. Evaluate the situation under which the rabbi is leaving and ask the rabbi for input and suggestions. Provide different opportunities for members to express themselves. A dinner dance may be affordable to many, but a farewell service and oneg can include everyone. Is the rabbi active in the community? Should the community be included in the festivities? What about the staff? They are a part of the rabbi's everyday life. The staff are not necessarily congregants, and may not feel comfortable coming to services or a dance. A separate function for the personnel can assist the staff in bidding farewell in a more intimate setting.

Many congregants like to express themselves to the rabbi in writing. A book of remembrance is a good way to bind these thoughts together. This book can extend beyond temple members, into the community and possibly to colleagues. When compiled, it can be professionally bound as a gift from the congregation.

In addition to a book, congregations usually purchase a gift commensurate with the length of the rabbi's service. In some cases, an endowment fund is also established for future temple needs. Congregants can contribute different denominations in honor of the rabbi.

The title of Rabbi Emeritus may be conferred after a rabbi has
served the congregation for five years or more at the time of retirement. If the rabbi is retiring, it is important for the congregation, staff and new rabbi to understand the role of the rabbi emeritus. The guidelines governing the relationship between the rabbi emeritus and the congregation are outlined in the Guidelines for Rabbinical-Congregational Relationships\(^3\), and the administrator should have a copy for reference. The temple lay leadership and rabbis should also develop guidelines specific to their individual congregation. This exercise further emphasizes the change in leadership.

The rabbi emeritus should feel comfortable during the search and transition process. Since he is no longer the central figure of the congregation, he can feel isolated during this time of change. It is not often that the retiring rabbi is succeeded by someone they have developed a relationship with or even know. Rabbi Sokobin compared the congregation to "a child that must be able to grow and move in a new direction". With this in mind, a rabbi may have feelings of separation, especially if a stranger is coming into his/her "home". Once the new rabbi is in place, the rabbi emeritus must step aside and allow the new person take over. If the emeritus is still visible, the membership receives mixed messages regarding spiritual leadership. The Alban Institute recommends that the rabbi emeritus no longer officiate at life-cycle events, but rather lend

\(^3\) Guidelines for Rabbinical-Congregational Relationships; UAHC and CCAR; Spring 1990
support to the individual or family by sitting in the congregation as a friend. They also suggest that the emeritus keep his/her presence at temple to a minimum until the congregation has had time to adjust to someone new. Many retiring rabbis are finding interim work within the rabbinate to help them make the adjustment away from their congregations, but still maintain ties to their vocation.

In cases where the retiring rabbi is afforded office space in the temple, adequate arrangements should be made in a timely manner so that the rabbi emeritus is in his/her new space before the new rabbi begins his/her responsibilities. In addition, if there are other benefits that the rabbi emeritus would like continued, these agreements should be finalized with the executive committee of the temple before the new rabbi arrives.

Marking the beginning of a rabbi's tenure is as important as marking the end. The two should not be mixed. A positive first step should be the appointment of a "Transition Committee" by the temple board. Ideally, this committee is formed at the same time as the search committee. The transition group should represent all arms of temple life. It is their responsibility to oversee the change in temple leadership and, with sub-committees, handle the specific congregational programs. They should provide support to both rabbis and their families during the transition period. It should be remembered that the rabbis are leaving someplace where they may
have deep attachments. Moving can be a stressful time for the entire family. The transition committee also acts as a public relations committee for the temple. Their responsibilities extend into the congregation and community to promote and support the new rabbi and his/her family. Committee members should also make the effort to introduce the rabbi to members of the temple and community. With the transition committee working as a strong advocate for the new rabbi, the membership will be more receptive to the change. The transition committee may find it helpful to consult with an outside party as to the most effective way for the congregation to work through this period of time.

The Union of American Hebrew Congregations' Department of Synagogue Management has recently established the "Rabbinic Transition Management Team". These individuals, consisting of lay leaders as well as retired rabbis, have been trained as facilitators by The Alban Institute to aid any congregation in transition with their senior rabbi. Rabbi Arnold Sher, Director of the CCAR/UAHC Rabbinic Placement Commission recommends this service to congregations at the beginning of the search process. For additional information, congregations can call Joseph Bernstein, Department of Synagogue Management at the UAHC.

The administrator and other temple professionals also play an important role in the preparations for the new rabbi. Almost immediately, the administrator is in constant contact with the
rabbis discussing upcoming calendar events, holidays and logistics. Stationery needs to be ordered, provisions made for insurance coverage and other details that might seem minor, but are important to make a new staff member feel at home. The administrator should start sending the rabbi the temple bulletin and any other pertinent congregational correspondence (Appendix 4).

It is also helpful if the outgoing rabbi and new rabbi are in contact before the change in leadership. Not only will this take care of practical matters, but it also plants in both of their minds that there is going to be a change in leadership. Rabbi Weinstein suggested that the Central Conference of American Rabbis offer a periodic retreat for rabbis in transition. The two rabbis could attend and together with other rabbis in the same situation, work to understand how transition affects the congregation, and on a more specific level, address issues relevant to their membership.

It is beneficial to the rabbi if the administrator maintains two information files. The first one is for correspondence that the rabbi begins to receive before his/her arrival. Keep it for the rabbi to see or mail it to him/her periodically. The second file is a "future" file. This contains ideas for the future. It may be clippings from other congregational bulletins, something from the newspaper, or ideas suggested by members. This file provides an excellent resource for programming. The future file can be a continual asset to the professional staff.
Contact the local media to inform them you have engaged a new rabbi (and if your rabbi is retiring, let them know that too). This may be major news. Send the newspaper a biography and picture of the new rabbi. Don't forget the Jewish newspaper if your community has one. Make sure you send the rabbi a copy of these articles. The local media should be continually informed of upcoming temple events during the transition period.

Prepare the staff for the rabbi's arrival. It is important for the professional and office staff not to draw comparisons between the past clergy and the present. It is best for all concerned to remember that everyone has a different style and approach to their work. When the new rabbi arrives, make the day special in the office. Hang a banner. Take polaroid snapshots of the staff with their names underneath and hang them in the rabbi's office. It will make it easier for him/her to learn who people are. Show the rabbi around the building again. Introduce him/her to the staff. Arrange a staff luncheon in her/his honor. Finally, the administrator needs to make himself/herself available to the rabbi to provide any assistance. Help him/her put a congregant's name with their face. Do not assume he/she has met someone; introduce him/her anyway. Go over yahrzeit lists for Friday evening to make sure names are pronounced correctly. If you know of something that your congregants feel strongly about, make sure the rabbi knows too. Just as importantly, be honest with the rabbi. If something needs to be changed, discuss it with her/him. The administrator needs to
be the new rabbi's strongest advocate and public relations person.

The Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC) should be informed of your change in clergy immediately (this includes the regional office). By informing the UAHC on a timely basis, the rabbi will continue to receive important information without interruption.

The rabbi and his/her family should be welcomed by the congregation in some manner when they arrive. Perhaps this can be done with an open house at the temple, or an oneg shabbat after Friday evening services. In addition, it was noted in the above cases that members were given the opportunity to meet the rabbi at small gatherings. Less formal functions are beneficial for the rabbi and congregants to get to know each other.

Before the rabbi arrives, or upon his/her arrival, a date should be set for the rabbi's installation. This service of installation is the formal welcome for the congregation to their new rabbi. It is a very important event in the congregation's life recognizing the official beginning of the new rabbi's service to the congregation. The rabbi will prepare the service of installation, but a committee should be formed to make this occasion a special life-cycle event for the congregation.

The process of transition does not end after the first week, or
month or after the installation. The past is what is familiar, and it is easy to say, "But this is the way we have always done it". During the first year, the administrator needs to continue to be a strong advocate for the rabbi. Meet with the rabbi often to analyze and make changes in plans if necessary. Rabbi Jacobs suggests, "Manage your change thoughtfully, carefully and with tender loving care. Change can be slow, hard and not always painless. But you need to understand the change and not pretend it is not there. Go slowly".

The transition committee should meet with the rabbi, professional staff, and board of trustees at the end of the new rabbi's first year for follow up. Congregational expectations can be examined to see if the year met with positive results. The rabbi may also have insight for the committee and board to aid them in long range planning. This meeting can be a very positive experience for the congregation.

It is the administrator's responsibility to try and provide stability in the congregation. The administrator's workload doubles in an effort to keep disruptions to a minimum while still overseeing the organization of many additional activities beyond what is normally programmed at the temple. With the help of a dedicated transition committee, a supportive board of trustees and an enthusiastic professional staff and office staff, the time of transition can be an exciting and memorable experience for the
congregation and all involved participants.
REMINDEERS FOR A SMOOTH TRANSITION

1. Clean/redecorate the rabbi's study.
2. Prepare a study for the rabbi emeritus.
3. Does the new rabbi need a robe?
4. Is there sufficient parking space available? Does a sign need to be ordered?
5. Order new temple letterhead
6. Order personal stationery for the rabbi
7. Order business cards for the rabbi
8. Provide the rabbi with health insurance forms to fill out. Make sure the rabbi knows when your policy takes effect (30, 60 or 90 days from beginning date)
9. Notify UAHC of change in clergy
10. Notify local media of change in clergy and temple functions in association with the change.
11. Establish correspondence file for new rabbi.
13. Notify the new rabbi of future events on the temple calendar.
14. Put the new rabbi on the temple mailing list.
15. Prepare something special in the office for the rabbi's first day.