

The Rabbi as *Moreh Derech Chayim* Reconceptualizing Today's Rabbinate

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"Rabbi, what is it exactly that you do?" How many times have congregational rabbis been asked this question or some version of it? While we may then proceed to answer it by listing the multitude of official and unofficial duties that we perform, we may still feel that we have failed to capture the essence and significance of our work. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we were able to provide a simple answer to others, but one that also respected the uniqueness and significance of our calling? More importantly, for ourselves, how can we conceptualize the rabbinate in a way that both honors the tradition that we represent and recognizes the dynamic environments in which we work?

I offer a suggestion to my colleagues, hoping that it will find a resonant chord in some of you or encourage others to suggest additional responses. I propose a simple yet significant phrase to answer the "Rabbi, what is it that you do?" question: we are *morei' derech chayim*—literally, guides to a [Jewish] way of life. Every pastoral, educational or administrative encounter with other human beings provides us with an opportunity to share some aspect of our Jewish wisdom, at whatever point along their life's journey we meet them. Every encounter is also an opportunity to learn from others about their journeys and, in turn, incorporate some of their wisdom into our own understanding of the Jewish experience. What follows is an elaboration of how this phrase can serve as a lens through which we can explain to others what we do and how it can help us deepen our own appreciation for our sacred work.

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How Do You Define Your Rabbinate?

Why is it important to find the right concept for who we are and what we do? Our self-understanding influences both the work that we do (and refrain from doing), and the manner in which we do it. The way in which we conceive of our work affects how we interact with people, the areas in which we invest our religious energies, our ability to infuse even more mundane aspects of our work with a sense of *kedushah*, and our relationship with God.

For some time, liberal rabbis² have been searching for terms that capture their essential work. *Rav*, the classical term for rabbi, is inadequate to describe the reality of the contemporary rabbinate for several reasons. One dimension of this classical term is the possession of halachic erudition and the masterful application of *halachah*. *Rav*, in this sense, is rooted historically in the context of a knowledgeable, halachically observant community. Additionally, a *rav* was also characterized by his communal leadership role and activism. This was a role bestowed upon him by virtue of his learning and piety, which were perceived as superior to those in his community. With these qualities, a *rav* was potentially well-qualified to lead his religious community.

Although these functions are still operative to some degree in the liberal movements, they do not capture the multi-faceted roles that rabbis play—including pastor, counselor, communal leader, preacher, and teacher. (After all, there are few professions in which one might be telling stories to pre-school children one moment and counseling a family on whether to remove life-sustaining medical equipment from a loved one the next.) While the Conservative movement speaks of the rabbi as *mara d'atra* ("communal rabbi"), that phrase misses the broader role that rabbis play. Also, it is unclear what it means to be a halachic decision-maker in a community in which the majority of its members have rejected the notion of *halachah* as binding.³

It is also true that rabbis are communal leaders, but they do not have a monopoly on that role. In addition to philanthropists, Jewish communal volunteers and professionals have played increasingly significant communal leadership roles in contemporary times; some would argue more so than rabbis. With membership in the Association for Jewish Studies standing at about 1,600, rabbis also no longer have an unrivaled claim to Jewish learning.

Some more recent Hebrew terms that I have heard are *mashgiach ruchani* and *rofeh nefesh*⁴—helpful efforts, but not nearly as descriptive as the term *moreh derech chayim*.⁵

Four Reasons Why Moreh Derech Chayim Is so Apt

Moreh derech chayim may be useful because:

1.

The individual words that comprise the term *moreh derech chayim* beautifully evoke several central components of rabbinic work. *Moreh*—many of us live to teach (through text, self, and experience); *derech*—we experience fulfillment from helping people along a Jewish path; and *chayim*—our tradition directs us to affirm life in all of its awe, mystery, and wonder. For some, *derech* also alludes to the concept of *halachah*, of helping people find their Jewish path specifically through the practice of *mitzvot*. Each individual word in this phrase suggests a valuable reason for thinking of ourselves as *morei derech chayim*.

2.

A second reason that *moreh derech chayim* is so apt is that it fits the *Zeitgeist* of our times. Much has been written about spiritual seekers, individuals on a religious quest. In an age when some of our most fundamental social structures and religious beliefs are open to revision, it is no surprise that so many speak about a search for meaning. Given this questing mode that many are in today, thinking of ourselves as *morei derech chayim* can supply us with ample ways to respond to the many different kinds of searches that people present to us. Now is indeed the time for us to help supply the kind of expertise that we have as knowledgeable guides of the Jewish tradition to people in need of it. The phrase *morei derech chayim* calls upon us to assert our voices publicly on the challenging moral issues that beset us today and to apply our learning privately to the many people who seek our help and advice in times of joy and sorrow. Thus, *morei derech chayim* positions us to be proactive in setting the tone of public moral discourse within our communities, and enables us to be responsive to individuals when they call upon us.

3.

A central Torah text suggests the authenticity and value in using this term. It is a phrase that can connect us to our own ongoing quest

and give us empathy for those who have more recently embarked upon their own spiritual journeys.

Following the incident of the golden calf, Moshe makes his most daring personal request to God: to behold directly the Divine presence. Listen to the terms that Moshe, our rabbinic role model, uses in expressing this wish:

Moses said to the Lord: "See, You say to me, 'Lead this people forward,' but You have not made known to me whom You will send with me. Further, You have said, 'I have singled you out by name, and you have, indeed, gained My favor.' Now, if I have truly gained Your favor, pray let me know Your ways (*hodi-eini na et d'rachecha*), that I may know You and continue in Your favor...." And God said, "I will go in the lead..." (literally, My face will go with you [*panai yeileichu*]).

Exodus 33:12-15

Moshe does not ask God for specific answers to the Divine mystery. Rather, he requests insights into understanding God's nature so that they can guide his own path. Moshe pleads, "Show me the ways of understanding." In that plea, we hear echoes of our own quest and the desires of many Jews who seek to experience life through the wisdom of Torah, in its broadest sense. After all, many of us were propelled on our own Jewish journey by those same kinds of questions. As we grow through the years, we come to understand that the questions are unceasing and the journey, therefore, is unending. *Talmidei chachamim ein lahem m'nucha lo ba-olam hazeh v'lo ba-olam habah* ("For the disciples of the sages there is no rest, neither in this world nor the next").⁶ We find ourselves on paths that we never anticipated—for good and for ill—so we continue on an unending search for meaning through text, through prayer, through acts of *chesed*, and hopefully, through the myriad of human interactions that we have.

Life is the terrain that we traverse, Torah is the map, and we, who devote our lives to study, teaching, and practice, can be eager, well-equipped guides for the varied and unpredictable paths of life upon which our people travel. Why? Because in some way we have been there before, know others who have traversed similar roads or can access wisdom and faith from our tradition that enable us to walk together with someone in uncharted territory.⁷

4.

Finally, the phrase *morei derech chayim* speaks to the unique context in which we work. This context distinguishes us from others who may possess even greater Jewish knowledge than we do. For example, some Christian theologians may be our equals in mastery of rabbinic texts. Academics who specialize in Jewish studies are also quite knowledgeable about Jewish subjects. Why are they not qualified to claim the title of *morei derech chayim*?

While we need to possess a certain depth and breadth of knowledge to qualify us as *morei derech chayim*, ultimately it is the context in which we work that allows us to assume this role. Unlike that of others who are Judaically knowledgeable, our context is not the university. Rather, we labor *b'chatzrot elokeinu* ("in the courtyards of our God"). However we define it, the belief in a living God is always in the background and often in the foreground of every personal and professional interaction that we have. When we meet people, or when people seek us out, that is an assumption they correctly have of us.

Limitations of the Phrase

The utility of all metaphors is in knowing when they are useful and when they become limited. In conceiving of ourselves as *morei derech chayim*, we must recognize that unlike a tour guide, who begins literally with a fixed destination and proven roads to get there, we experience guiding someone on a life's journey as complicated, unpredictable, and non-linear. We can use our experiences, training, and religious and spiritual sensitivities to a degree, but must recognize that at times we must play the roles both of knowledgeable guides and empathetic fellow travelers. Making this distinction is critical. After all, we are dealing with someone else's *nefesh*. That means that we must respect the right of each individual to pursue his or her own journey and not coerce someone onto ours.

Tips for Being Successful *Morei Derech Chayim*⁸

If *morei derech chayim* is a phrase that is useful in redefining how we do our work, how might the use of this phrase impact on our day-to-day encounters with the many people that we meet? Here are a few suggestions:

1. *It's not your journey, it's theirs!* We have our own, ongoing religious journeys and we should not confuse ours with someone else's. The astute guide begins with the question: "Where are you?" *ayeka*—a profoundly good Jewish question. Our role is not to impose our path on someone else, but, using our experience and knowledge, to begin where they are to help them get moving on their journey. Really great guides are not embarrassed to discuss the times when they were lost along the way, either.
2. *A great guide doesn't provide just facts and information, but passion for the journey and compassion for the people on it.* Reflect on those times when you had an amazing tour somewhere. What made it memorable? Even though guides receive the same training, it is their own excitement that distinguishes the good ones from the great ones. Great guides are passionate about the information they impart because they are in love with the subject matter. Gifted guides also provide empathy when the journey is hard, a helping hand when people stumble, a little nourishment when they are hungry, and enough of a challenge to spur people on when they are tired.
3. *A sensitive guide understands that people move along the same path at a different pace and need different kinds of equipment to traverse it, depending upon experience, age, ability, and desire.* Clearly, we have to know our maps well to succeed at being guides. Equally important, we have to know our people well. What prior positive and negative experiences do they bring to their journey? Are they interested in meandering or moving rapidly? How much time are they realistically prepared to give now to their journey and might they come back later for a longer visit? Like influential teachers, the wise guides focus first on the person.
4. *Great guides help people think on their own.* No matter how good we are, we will have direct contact with the people who come to us for guidance for a mere fraction of the total time that they are alive. Therefore, while we naturally want to impart a certain amount of information to them, more importantly we want to teach them how to think, question, and access relevant information on their own. The thinking behind the questions is the best indicator about the likelihood of indi-

- viduals continuing on the journey after their contact with us is over.
5. *Skillful guides make sure that people learn from others on the journey.* The outstanding guide knows when to refer someone on a journey to another person who has been there before. The guide does not have to personally supply all the answers, but may sometimes prefer to have someone else on a parallel journey, or someone from a past journey offer the explanations. Peer-to-peer sharing of insights can sometimes have even greater impact than guide-to-seeker learning.
 6. *Thoughtful guides help people on the journey realize how vast the terrain is and how much they have to cover.* A part of guiding people is helping them both see their particular path and glimpse the entire vista. Doing so allows the person on the journey to gain mastery on a small scale, while having his or her appetite increased for other available routes. The idea is not to embarrass people on the journey with how little they may have accomplished, but to help them feel the gap between the ground they have covered and the way that there is to go, so that they won't want to stop. Shame comes from belittling small steps; encouragement happens when even small steps are celebrated so that people gain confidence and increase their desire to continue.
 7. *Expert guides communicate clearly.* Our training, which is still primarily academic in nature, often distorts our natural ability to speak simply. But, we have models of those who have succeeded in communicating big ideas in simple terms.⁹ Going further back, we can look at the words of Torah, which contain profound ideas that are accessible to all.
 8. *An outstanding guide has a natural, unquenchable curiosity, explores new pathways, and revisits old ones with new eyes.* These kinds of guides model curiosity. They share stories about prior journeys. They also share the questions that stimulated their journeys. They enjoy returning to a path previously taken but bring new questions and look for new insights. Their own quest for exploration is insatiable.
 9. *Skillful guides put an individual's journey in context.* When people embark on a journey for the first time, it's easy to forget that others have trodden their path before. Time has

erased the footprints of those who preceded them. As rabbis, we can remind novices that they walk with others who are motivated by similar feelings that have put them on a journey—people living today and people who lived centuries ago. We can help seekers understand that while the journey is sometimes solitary, they do not take it alone.

But What about the Title “*Rav*”?

Some of you may be asking, “Are we merely spiritual guides and repositories of Jewish information?” Is there nothing left of the term *rav* that we can or should claim? It would indeed be a serious error to relinquish this dimension of the rabbinate. We do carry some of the responsibilities of our rabbinic predecessors of several generations ago. We find continuity with them when we speak using the voice of religious authority. People look to us for moral guidance. They expect and need to hear a moral critique of society from a religious perspective. They know that we embody a tradition that emphasizes a set of values and attendant practices (although it is often confusing for them because we no longer agree even on some fundamental beliefs and laws). They may come to us for guidance on critical, ambiguous, life-defining issues because they want to hear a clear legal opinion from the Jewish tradition.

Though *rav* and *mara d’atra* are broken terms, they are not wholly obsolete. We bear the privilege of interpreting and applying the Jewish religious tradition to our day as our predecessors did in theirs. *Dibru chachamim lashon havai*:¹⁰ our distinct task, as we learned in our programs of study, is to help the eternal values of Torah speak in a contemporary idiom. What I am suggesting is the value of conceptualizing our work in ways that complement the titles *rav* or *mara d’atra*. These conceptions are often too hierarchical for today and may convey an unintended attitude of superiority that is off-putting to congregants. Paradoxically, we live in an age in which expertise is both valued and challenged. Individuals seek out experts for critical life choices but come prepared to discuss them based on their own research. In this kind of environment, we need to develop new but still authentic ways to relate to members of our community and the many seekers who will approach a guide but avoid a master-*rav*. *Morei derech chayim* may serve as one such complementary phrase.

Conclusion

The word that perhaps best describes the experience of a person on a tour appears to raise some doubts about the value of this metaphor. We associate the word “guide” with “tourist” or “visitor.” Those words point to the reality of a relationship that is limited in time. Admittedly, a risk in conceptualizing our role as *morei derech chayim* is that we think in terms of developing limited relationships; or perhaps, it is no risk at all but merely the reality in which we operate.

But, we also know that the really good guides make people want to return for the unexplored parts of the journey. They recognize that while they do not own their visitors, they can exercise significant influence on the choices of future journeys they may take. And, if they are really fortunate, they may succeed in turning a visitor into a permanent resident.

So, the next time someone asks, “Rabbi, what is it exactly that you do,” we might try and respond by saying: “I guide people through life’s journeys, sometimes by sharing my presence, sometimes by sharing my silence and always by drawing upon the wisdom of the Jewish tradition that I love and hope others will come to love as well.” For those of us who take our calling seriously, we know that there is nothing as simple and profound as assuming the role of *morei derech chayim*.

Notes

1. Throughout I use the plural of *moreh* in order to include all genders.
2. I use “liberal” as shorthand for non-Orthodox rabbis: Conservative, Reconstructionist, Reform, Renewal, and other non-Orthodox rabbis.
3. Jack Wertheimer, *Conservative Synagogues and Their Members: Highlights of the North American Survey of 1995–96* (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary, 1996), pp. 9–10.
4. In a recent publication, I suggested that we look to changes that have occurred in the practice of medicine to better inform our work. See H. Herring, “Peering into the Future: Considerations for Reconstructing the Synagogue,” *The Reconstructionist* 67 (2003), pp. 42–46.
5. Dr. Jack Bloom’s “symbolic-exemplar” concept provides key insights for congregational rabbis to use to reflect on how they conceive of their work. However, I wanted to find a Hebrew term that would provide rabbis both with personal insights into their work and a clearer public explanation of what they do. Additionally, a Hebrew term has the advantage of evoking other values that may be applicable to the congregational rabbinate.

6. Berachot 64a.
7. Rabbinical school education and continuing education need to be reoriented to make us more helpful guides and several schools have or are undergoing fundamental revision in this direction. Also, some positive efforts are being made as well in new organizations that offer continuing education and training.
8. See Chuck Salter, "Attention, Class!!! 16 Ways to Be a Smarter Teacher," (March 3, 2004, online). Available: <http://www.fastcompany.com/magazine/53/teaching.html>. I have adapted some of these tips from this article.
9. Two models of clear communication that I prefer are Rabbis Harold Kushner and Harold Schulweis. They offer profound insights in simple language. We can learn also from experts in our own communities who are known as clear communicators, in professions such as broadcast media, law, and teaching.
10. Chullin 90b.