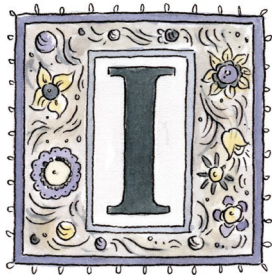


# A Vanguard of Rabbinic Unicorns



IMAGINE you're the rabbi of a synagogue on the more traditional end of the Conservative spectrum. As the synagogue prepares to recruit a new rabbinic intern, the Search Committee informs you that the leading candidate is a fiercely anti-Zionist rabbinical student, a signatory to the recent letter denouncing Israel as an apartheid state guilty of ethnic cleansing. You know this is morally twisted and want nothing to do with it. But the Search Committee is populated with a couple of powerful people in the congregation and is backed by several more.

So now you have a choice: You can object, putting your job and family's well-being at risk. At a minimum you'll have made lifelong enemies out of lay leaders whose support you will probably need to do an effective job. And who knows if your protest will even move the needle? Or you can begrudgingly capitulate to the hire, hoping that at least you'll have retained your job security. And, of course, you may still end up alienating the other members and leaders of your congregation who share your feelings about Israel.

I wish this were a hypothetical example, or at least a rare one. It's neither. In fact it's only one example of the many ways that the structure of Jewish communal life is binding the hands of our rabbis—the very people who are supposed to lead the Jewish people courageously and boldly through our time of profound challenge and immense opportunity.

It's become common to lament that the Jewish community has had a tough track record producing rabbinic visionaries who can serve as distinctive Jewish voices in great moral conversations, both national and global. If the 20th century yielded leaders, thinkers and scholars such as the Lubavitcher Rebbe, or Rabbis Norman Lamm, Abraham Joshua Heschel, Jonathan Sacks, and Judith Hauptman—just to name some prominent figures from the Diaspora—what have we got to show for ourselves since then?

Few are willing to recognize that the problem is self-inflicted. It begins with the incentives we've created through our communal institutions, which virtually guarantee that the leaders we seek—the ones that Western society desperately needs us to produce—will see their careers wither and their visions dim from a thousand seemingly minor cuts like the one above.

“In early modern times,” writes historian David Ruderman, “the rabbinic office was more clearly defined, more professionalized, and more circumscribed by the lay leadership than ever before.” In the American context, being a rabbi is a vocation—rabbis are members of a professional class, the “rabbinate.” They serve in well-defined institutions and carry out well-defined functions. Becoming a rabbi, like choosing any career path, means enrolling in a school and earning a degree. Having graduated, it means competing for a very small number of open pulpits.

In such a market, even the most creative, brilliant, capable rabbis will be much more risk-averse than they'd otherwise be. If you're one of the lucky few to secure a pulpit, your incentives are clear: Be as inoffensive as possible. Keep your board, your donors, and various committee members happy. And try to stay as far away as

possible from anything resembling controversy. Forget articulating great Jewish ideas for the wider society — rabbis who want to keep putting food on the table will have little reason to stand up for basic truths in their own backyard.

Notably, the constraining factor is not the quality of the overall talent pool. Anyone who has spent even a modicum of time with younger rabbinic cohorts, from Gen X to Millennials, will be struck by their brilliance and vision. The problem is rooted in incentives.

How do we realign rabbis' incentives with the pursuit of world-class excellence in the realm of global moral vision? It won't be enough to create yet another fellowship with an annual stipend. Recipients would know that as soon as the fellowship runs out, they'd go back to being at the mercy of their institution, with dozens of people willing to step into their job if they refused to conform to expectations for blandness.

If we wish to inaugurate a new golden age of Jewish intellectual and social leadership, the path forward is not to temporarily change a rabbi's checking account. It's to fundamentally transform his sense of what is possible and to give him the training, tools, and back-end support to execute that vision. Consider a business analogy: Instead of incentivizing rabbis only to create small-scale mom-and-pop shops (where they can be independent), or to serve as middle managers at legacy companies (where their vision will be constrained), we should also work to create rabbinic unicorns. The strategy for doing so should proceed in three stages: catalysis, growth, and support.

Our first task is to catalyze new talent by placing high-upside bets on emerging rabbinic talent. The ideal cohort would comprise figures with enough of a track record to justify confidence in their future potential, but early enough to not have been captured by the existing communal incentives. With initiatives like the MacArthur Fellows Program or the Templeton Prize as models, the goal in this first stage would be to convey to rabbis, synagogues, and world Jewry at large that the Jewish community is serious about

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cultivating intellectual excellence coupled with the ability to articulate great Jewish ideas.

Executing this through a prize with a considerable award amount would have several benefits. First, like the MacArthur "genius" program, it would directly support individuals, rather than institutions. This will demonstrate that we value singular creativity and vision. And it will encourage rabbis to begin thinking big about what they can accomplish outside the standard, stultifying institutional frameworks that currently exist. Second, a large enough award would be newsworthy, thereby calling serious attention to the recipients, boosting their creative efforts and putting them in the public eye both within and beyond the Jewish community. Finally, these effects would give recipients the financial breathing room to develop their intellectual horizons and social vision outside the confines of the institutional world.

But such catalysis would be only the first stage. After all, no prize amount could feasibly be large enough to free awardees from institutional shackles for an entire career. At a certain point, as recipients will foresee, the funds will run out. Without a plan to capitalize on the prize's momentum, we'll simply have purchased an expensive ticket right back to square one.

Instead, we should look at the prize as creating a runway. From the moment the award kicks in, the objective must be to help recipients grow as much as possible before they return to the Jewish communal marketplace.

What would this look like? We'll need to create a first-class

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network of mentors, teachers, and amplifiers. Rabbis in the early stages of their career will need role models: other rabbis, public intellectuals, or personal exemplars. Every Joshua needs a Moses, every Rabbi Meir a Rabbi Akiva. Young rabbis will need people of this nature they can reliably spend time with on a regular basis, not necessarily for the purpose of learning anything specific, but rather to absorb wisdom through watching. As the Talmud teaches, “attending the wise is greater even than studying with them.”

Study is important as well. Younger rabbis will have enough experience in Jewish educational settings to make smart, informed choices about what and with whom to study if given sufficient opportunity. We will need to connect them with the best in the business on everything from the study of Middle Eastern history to the influence of Jewish wisdom on the American republic. This study phase will also include experts on the procedural, technical, and operational sides, including coaching from the best public writers, podcasters, and organizational leaders. These ongoing opportunities will give young rabbis the knowledge and skills they can use to further bolster their teaching portfolio, leadership capacities, and public profile.

But content means nothing without distribution. The last component of the growth phase, therefore, will be to connect prize recipients with those who can amplify their work, from newspaper, magazine, and journal editors, to TV and podcast bookers, to

communal or institutional venues looking for speakers. This will get rabbis used to teaching and writing publicly for broader audiences — from the global Jewish community to Western society at large — and get larger audiences used to engaging with them.

The objective of the growth phase is to ensure that when members of this cadre of rabbis take their next steps, they will be able to stay laser-focused on excellence. If they choose to reenter the Jewish communal market, they will be able to take the kind of risks essential for leading with moral clarity in the coming generation. After all, with a very limited number of communal positions open, the difficulty of standing out usually means that even the most suitable candidates for global Jewish leadership are entirely at the mercy of boards and committees. But if we seize the post-prize window of opportunity, we can put awardees in a much more favorable position. They will be highly sought after by prospective communities and institutions, rather than vice versa, and those who bring them aboard will be far more likely to encourage them to speak their mind and to lead with ideas — which is what made them so attractive in the first place.

The growth phase will also encourage out-of-the-box thinking about next steps. The breathing room afforded by the prize will already have planted the question of whether great Jewish intellectual and spiritual leadership in the future needs to tether itself to the legacy institutions of today. For recipients who wish to pursue leadership *outside* the existing institutional landscape — by building something new on their own — the activity undertaken during the growth stage will help generate some escape velocity. Given the right incentives, mentors, and network, what new initiatives for serving the Jewish people and wider society could some of our most superlative young rabbis dream up that will allow them to make it on their own? If run well, this phase could unleash a new golden age of rabbinic entrepreneurship.

Once awardees are in long-term positions — whether existing or newly created — the time will have come to support the exponential

growth of their creativity. Reaching world Jewry or global audiences requires a great deal of work that their jobs will not always allow them time to do. Even the most prolific writers, speakers, and creators need technical help. With a small but dedicated staff, the prize administrators will be able to provide critical back-end support to our growing cadre of rabbinic leaders. This could range from specialists in audio and video engineering to Web design and social-media management.

This kind of support will encourage and support rabbis in launching true “zero to one” ideas, a term coined by venture capitalist Peter Thiel to describe the process by which we create something wholly new. And though Ecclesiastes reminds us that there’s nothing new under the sun, our goal is to create a cadre of rabbis who think entrepreneurially. You can already see signs of this in the wild—from Zohar Atkins’s multiple Substacks revolutionizing Torah study, to Rabbi Noa Kushner’s synagogue start-up The Kitchen, to Dovid Bashevkin’s rethinking of Jewish education at 18forty.org. We need to help make these sorts of endeavors *de rigueur* in a field that tends to discourage them. That means making it a priority to facilitate as much entrepreneurial experimentation in different media as possible.

If we want more out of our rabbis, let’s do everything we can to bet on their creativity. Let’s show and not just tell aspiring rabbis that we value grand vision, risk-taking, and independence, and that we will support them as they go out into the world. Let’s send a clear message to our leadership that, in the words of King Solomon, it’s time to build. \*