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Journeys to the Rabbinate:

Understanding Who Becomes a Rabbi and Who Helps Them Get There

Daniel S. Ross

Demonstration Project

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Advisors:

Rabbi Richard Address, D.Min.

Reverend Ann M. Akers, MDiv, LP, NcPsyA

Wynd Harris, Ph.D., D. Min.

Abstract

This demonstration project examines the critical factors that influence individuals' journeys to the rabbinate and the characteristics of successful rabbinic mentors, addressing the urgent crisis in rabbinic recruitment facing Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion and the American Reform rabbinate. Through qualitative interviews with 12 recent HUC-JIR alumni and 10 exceptionally prolific rabbinic mentors, the research identifies six distinct "rabbinic personae" that manifest in future rabbis: the performer, teacher, scholar, activist, pastor, and community builder. The findings highlight the essential roles of family engagement, Jewish institutional involvement, and meaningful rabbinic mentorship in guiding individuals toward rabbinical school. Particularly significant is the concept of "passive mentorship," wherein rabbis who publicly demonstrate authentic fulfillment in their work inspire others to follow their path. The study reveals that successful rabbinic mentors exhibit high levels of professional satisfaction, create leadership opportunities for potential rabbis, and maintain deep relational connections. This research offers practical recommendations for addressing the current recruitment crisis, including targeted approaches for different rabbinic personae, emphasizing relationship-centered rabbinates, and educating rabbis about their power as role models. By understanding these dynamics, HUC can better sustain the chain of rabbinic transmission vital to Jewish continuity and leadership.

Acknowledgments

In many ways, this demonstration project has been a decade in the making. Ten years ago, when I was a rabbinical student at HUC, I was given the opportunity to pursue an independent study in which I interviewed 15 classmates on their own journeys to rabbinical school. The findings from that study greatly informed and ultimately inspired this project, and I am grateful to the mentors and faculty members who supervised and guided those efforts.

Ten years ago, was also the first time I was blessed to learn with Rabbi Nancy Wiener, D.Min., whose courses in pastoral care have been foundational to my rabbinate. Rabbi Wiener has played such an important role in my journey both personally and professionally. Personally, she has counseled me through many a jam, and she was one of the co-officiants at my wedding (which was jamming but not a jam). Professionally, her leadership of the rabbinic fieldwork program gave me the chance to *become* a rabbi, she was the advisor for my senior sermon, and her mentorship has been consistently impeccable and invaluable. I was planning to pursue an advanced degree for many years, and had my sights set on a Ph.D. It was at the end of a well-timed catch-up about my career with Rabbi Wiener that I realized that D.Min. was the way to go, because it would make me a better rabbi no matter which path I ultimately decided to pursue.

Back in spring semester 2016, I took *Parshanut* with Dr. Jason Kalman a professor at HUC's Cincinnati campus. On a visit to New York, Dr. Kalman took me out for coffee, and when I shared with him that I was interested in pursuing a doctorate, he tried to convince me to come join him in Cincinnati. While that idea ultimately did not pan out, one thing he said during that conversation that stuck with me so much that it evolved into one of the central questions of

this project. He observed that there were over 2000 members of the CCAR, and “if every one of them sent me one student, I wouldn’t have a recruitment problem.” I hope that Dr. Kalman is pleased a doctorate did eventually come out of our conversation.

For five years, I was blessed to serve on the clergy team at Central Synagogue. I am so grateful to Central for providing financial support for my studies during the first two years of my participation in the D.Min. program. I am also eternally grateful to Rabbi Ari Lorge and Rabbi Angela Buchdahl for their giving me the chance to pursue this goal and for supporting me along the way. And to Alef Davis, for her wit and her willingness to print out and organize several semesters’ worth of readings.

As I transitioned from Central to HUC, I am grateful to both HUC’s President, Dr. Andrew Rehfeld, and its Vice President for Institutional Advancement, my boss Melissa Greenberg, for supporting my efforts to finish this program during my first year on the job. I am also thankful to Rabbi Dr. Andrea Weiss for pushing me to finish this project this year, and to Rabbi Dr. Karen Reiss Medwed for a well-timed, impromptu brainstorming session that helped make that proposition a real possibility. Gratitude is also owed to my colleagues in HUC’s Office of Recruitment and Admissions–Rabbi Adam Allenberg, Rabbi Rachel Gross-Prinz, and Rabbi Rachel Maimin–who helped me identify interview candidates for both portions of the study. My dear friend Rabbi Sarah Parris also made some excellent suggestions for interviewees.

I am deeply indebted to the 12 recent rabbinical school alumni and 10 exemplary rabbinic mentors who generously shared their time, stories, and wisdom with me. Their thoughtful reflections form the heart of this research. Their commitment to Jewish continuity and leadership is evident not only in their words but in the lives they lead and the communities

they serve. This work would not have been possible without their participation and, more importantly, their ongoing dedication to the great chain of rabbinic transmission.

To my D.Min. classmates–Michelle Carr, Reverend Jen Dant, Dr. Anne Lifflander, and Rabbi Debra Landsberg–the last ever cohort of this constellation of HUC's interfaith Doctor of Ministry program, thank you for sharing your lives, your spirits, and your wisdom these past three years. I have learned so much from each of you.

To the D.Min. faculty, thank you for the richness of your wisdom and the generosity of your spirits these past three years–it has been a blessing and a pleasure to learn with. I offer special gratitude to program director Jennifer Harper, for graciously leading us through the challenging times of a teach-out. And to the advisors for this demonstration project–Rabbi Richie Address, D.Min., Reverend Ann Akers, and Dr. Wynd Harris–who so generously guided and shaped this work. I could not have gotten over the finish line without your support.

To my chevrutas–Alix, Jon, Ranana, and Sam–thank you for letting me have a little break from our precious learning to finish this project, and for patiently listening to me blab on about it for so many hours. I could not feel more blessed by your friendship, and I promise to come back stronger than ever.

As my mom likes to say I have perpetual student syndrome. This project is (hopefully) the conclusion of a preposterous amount of school, through which I have been supported through thick and thin by my parents. Y'all, I really think I'm done this time. And guess what: I've still never missed a deadline yet. I love you both. Thank you to the moon and back.

To my dearest sweet peas, Adina and Bella, given all that I learned in this program about developmental psychology, I hope that the first year and three years of your lives were not too

disrupted by my studies. All signs so far seem to point to you both having secure attachment styles–thank God. There's no greater blessing in my life than being your dad.

Finally, to my lifelong chevruta, my rabbi, my best friend, Jade: "Our mouths shall be filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy." Laughing and singing and dancing with you and our girls–there's no greater light in my life. Our dreams are unfolding before our eyes. We have sown in tears, and we have reaped in joy. Thank you for giving me the space and support to finish this work. I know you're even more excited than I am that I'm done.

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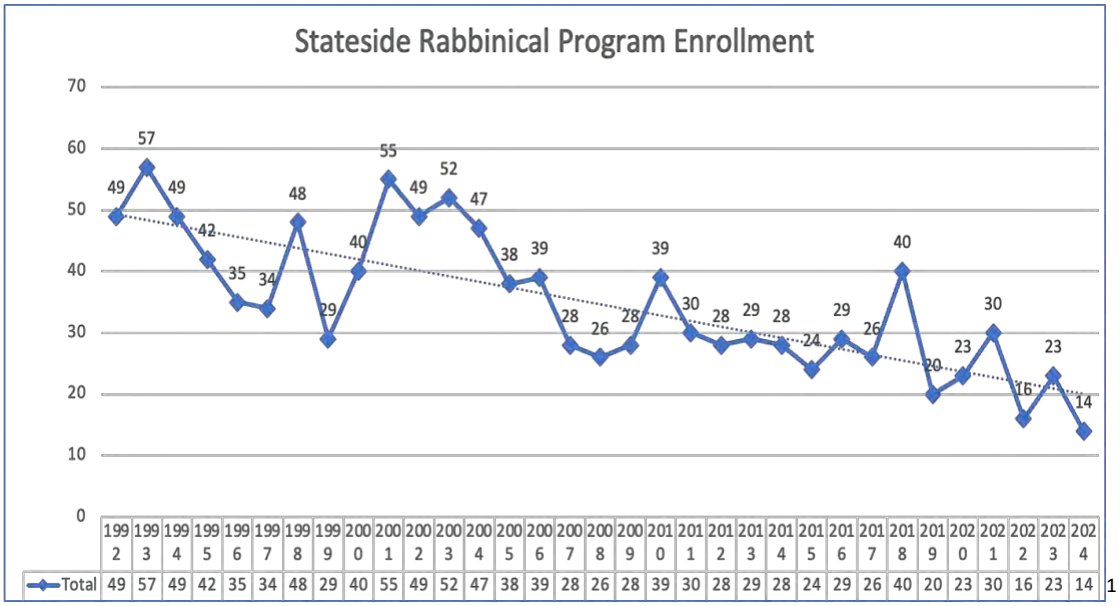
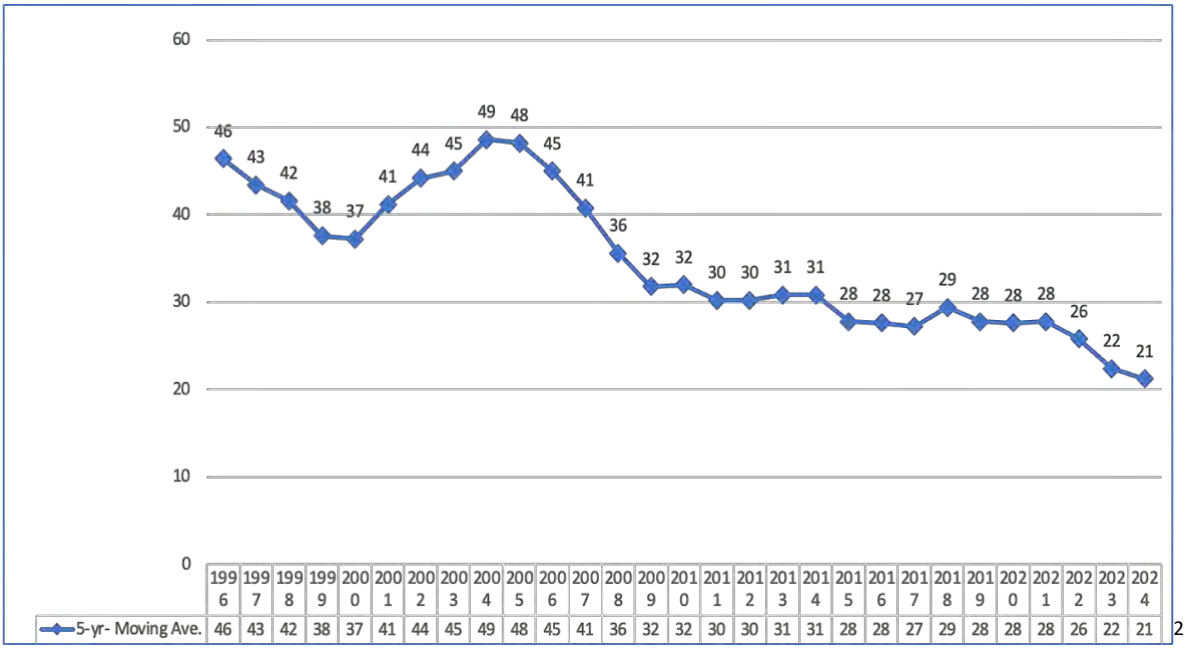
Explanation of the Need

In his classic 1990 essay "The Special Tensions of Being 'the Rabbi'", Rabbi Jack Bloom opens with a "tired old joke": "Rabbi? That's not a job for a nice Jewish kid." Unfortunately, in the three decades that have passed since that piece was published, Bloom's punchline has proven to be prophetic. As of this writing, enrollment in the rabbinical program at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, the 150-year-old seminary of the American Reform Movement, has plummeted to crisis levels. The chart below shows the total enrollment across HUC-JIR's three stateside campuses (Cincinnati, New York, and Los Angeles) from 1992 to 2024.



With the exception of a few outlier classes, the general trend, especially in recent years, has been a decline in matriculation. This downtown d is further illustrated in the next chart, which shows the downward shift in the five-year moving average of enrolled students.

[1] This chart was retrieved from a September 2024 presentation on the state of the College-Institute prepared by HUC-JIR's president, Dr. Andrew Rehfeld.



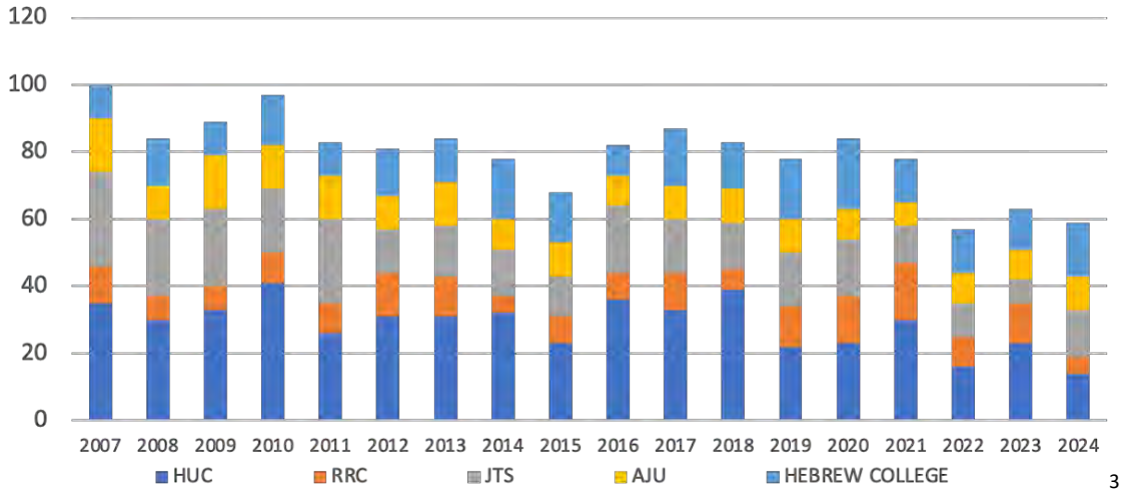
[2]

The decrease from the peak average of 49 students in 2004 to the nadir average of 21 in 2024 is a devastating 57 percent.

This decline in enrollment in the rabbinical program at HUC-JIR is not unique within the context of seminary education in the United States. Indeed, it is a fractal phenomenon. A 2023 report from the Association of Theological Schools revealed that in all but two years since 2005, a majority of its schools have suffered a decline in student population. In addition to the broader environmental realities, HUC-JIR is facing expanding competition from America's other liberal Jewish seminaries: the Jewish Theological Seminary and the American Jewish University (both of which ordain Conservative rabbis), Reconstructionist Rabbinical College (which ordains Reconstructionist rabbis), and Hebrew College (which is non-denominational). Further exacerbating the effects of this competition is these institutions are vying for a shrinking pie of

[2] This chart was retrieved from a September 2024 presentation on the state of the College-Institute prepared by HUC-JIR's president, Dr. Andrew Rehfeld.

students. As the chart below shows, there has been a 41 percent decline in matriculation across all five seminaries since 2007.



[3]

And the downstream effects of this declining enrollment have only begun to be catastrophic for the American Jewish community, as the rate of retiring Baby Boomer rabbis far exceeds the pace of the ordination of their prospective replacements (Elia-Shalev, 2022; Nathan, 2015; Telushkin, 2024; Wertheimer, 2003).

What is to be done?

While many roles in the Jewish world present dynamic and substantial opportunities for Jewish self-expression—from federation leadership, to Jewish education, to synagogue board membership, to parenting, and beyond—no title bears a more significant and dramatic declaration of one's Jewish identity than "rabbi". When that title appears before your name, like it or not, you have openly identified yourself as a representative of Judaism and of the

[3] This chart was retrieved from a September 2024 presentation on the state of the College-Institute prepared by HUC-JIR's president, Dr. Andrew Rehfeld.

Jewish people. You have elected to become, in the Bloom's (1990) words, "a Symbolic Exemplar who stands for something other than oneself," namely the apotheosis of commitment to God and to Jewish peoplehood. Yet surprisingly little attention has been given to the factors that lead a person to elect to serve the Jewish people in this most public and profound of ways.

In a 1968 study on rabbinic education in America, focusing on HUC-JIR, JTS, and the orthodox seminary Yeshiva University, Liebman found that a primary motivation for the majority of students at HUC-JIR was professional: they wanted to become rabbis. In particular pulpit rabbis, serving as community leaders with the opportunity to support those in need. Liebman also found that most students grew up in Reform Jewish homes with more limited formal Jewish education, mostly from supplementary religious school. Of course, there is a massive limitation in the current relevance of Liebman's research: the only pronoun his paper uses for rabbinical students and rabbis is "he", because it was conducted prior to the HUC-JIR's decision to open its rabbinic program to women.

Research concerning rabbinical students' involvement in Jewish institutions growing up is similarly impoverished. A 2010 general study by Wertheimer of Jewish leaders (professional and lay) in their 20's and 30's, found that 40 percent of them had attended Jewish day school, two thirds had attended Jewish summer camps, and more than half had spent four or more months studying or working in Israel. A 2011 study by Cohen which focused specifically on Jewish communal professionals (including rabbis), also found more pronounced levels of participation in various streams of Jewish education, in particular in day school, camp, youth group, and travel to Israel. In the more specific case of rabbis, a 1987 study of students at the Conservative Movement's Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) conducted by Davidson and

Wertheimer found that an additional important Jewish educational experience for future rabbis was engagement in Jewish studies at the collegiate level. A 1995 study by Cohen of applicants for the Wexner Graduate Fellowship between 1988 and 1992 found that 67 percent of those students applying to HUC-JIR had working in Jewish education, 66 percent had participated in youth groups, 60 percent had attended Jewish summer camp, 42 percent had worked in Jewish youth, 34 percent had been college campus activists, and 19 percent had gone on teen Israel trips. A 2003 survey on the roles of rabbis within the Conservative movement conducted by Cohen, Davidson, and Kress found that Conservative rabbis exhibited above-average participation rates in Jewish education during their childhood. Finally, a 2005 survey of HUC-JIR alumni conducted by Cohen found that in addition to widespread exposure to pre-collegiate Jewish educational experiences, over 60 percent of Reform rabbis had participated in Hillel while in college.

There is also a substantial gap in recent literature on the skills, interests, and motivations of those who choose to pursue careers in the rabbinate, and how these manifest themselves in behaviors during the future rabbi's Jewish identity formation. Most of the research that has been done in this area has surrounded the rabbinate in the Conservative movement. In Davidson and Wertheimer's 1987 study of JTS students, analysis of the data revealed three "underlying constructs" for the roles of the rabbi as understood those in training to enter those roles: "a religious and public leader," an "educator and counselor," and a "*talmid hakham*." While the first two of these are fairly self-explanatory, the last one, "*talmid hakham*," refers to those rabbis primarily concerned with "study, spirituality, and Jewish law." The JTS students were also asked to assess the importance of various skills for rabbinic work,

with the most essential being teaching (with 86 percent rating it as “extremely important), counseling (77 percent), living as a religious person (67 percent), and serving as a model of spirituality (66 percent). Based on these findings, we can assume that the majority of Conservative rabbinical students of 30 years ago felt that they could self-actualize in one or more of these areas. Davidson, Kress, and Cohen’s more recent (2003) study of Conservative rabbis in the field found that over time, the ideal conception of the rabbi for by Conservative rabbis and lay leadership has evolved into a more highly nuanced, itemized list of roles, of which the five most broadly endorsed are pastor, Jewish educator, model of religiosity, spiritual guide, and authority in Jewish law. Cohen’s 2005 survey of HUC-JIR alumni found five skills that rabbis in the field considered to be the most important to their being successful and effective: “people skills,” communication skills, emotional intelligence, teaching skills, and leadership skills. But importantly these are ex post facto reflections on the skills their profession demands after ordination, not a list of the skills that drove them to consider the rabbinate in the first place.

Also, notably missing from the available research are explorations of one other potential sources of influence that shape individual’s journeys to rabbinical school: the role of rabbinic mentors. This demonstration project will give special attention to this gap in the literature.

First, we will ask recent alumni of HUC-JIR how the pillars of Jewish life—family, Jewish institutions, and Jewish professional mentors—supported their road to rabbinical school. And we will map the major milestones along the path of a person whose Jewish journey leads to rabbinical school. Second, we will ask what are the various traits of the rabbinic personality that we can see manifesting in future rabbis as they grow up? How do future rabbis self-actualize—

both in Jewish and non-Jewish settings—in ways that indicate to them and to others that a career in the rabbinate is a serious option for them? Finally, we will develop a profile of the knowledge, skills, and mindsets that characterize the most successful rabbinic mentors, those rabbis who have sent more than their fair share of students to their alma mater. By better understanding the narratives of those who choose to become rabbis and those who guide them along the way, the hope is that the findings of this demonstration project will support HUC-JIR's recruitment efforts in the face of the challenging environmental headwinds the institution is facing.

This demonstration project builds on research I previously conducted as an independent study during my time as a student in the rabbinical program at HUC-JIR. Between 2015 and 2016, I conducted 15 interviews of my fellow rabbinical students in a convenience sample, focusing on their narratives of their journeys to HUC-JIR. Core findings of that study were that among the most important throughlines were the importance of meaningful and memorable Jewish life in the home, "star" participation in supplementary religious school, and a relationship with a Jewish professional mentor. In addition, the study surfaced five types of "rabbinic personae" that manifested in various ways throughout their growth and development:

1. Performer: These students exhibited strong backgrounds in the performing arts, including musical theater, drama, singing, and guitar-playing.
2. Teacher: These students committed to working Jewish education from a young age, and exhibit a passion for youth work

3. Scholar: These students demonstrated broader intellectual curiosity, appreciated Judaism for its cerebral elements, and saw Jewish life as a play to excel academically.
4. Activist: These students view their commitments to and passion for politics and social justice through a Jewish lens.
5. Pastor: These students find meaning in being present with others during life's critical moments.

Importantly, these personae were not mutually exclusive, and many of the students blended characteristics of several of these traits (Ross, 2016). A goal of this demonstration project will be to see if these findings hold in a new sample of recent alumni.

Finally, an additional striking finding from this independent study inspired the second half of this demonstration project: three of the fifteen of the students shared the same rabbinic mentor. I reflected on this finding in light of a conversation that I once had with an HUC-JIR professor about the rabbinic recruitment crisis. He said: "There are 2200 members of the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR). If every one of them sent me one student, I wouldn't have a problem." We do not even need to do arithmetic to arrive at the conclusion that the vast majority of Reform rabbis never mentor a single student to follow in their footsteps. But many of our colleagues are veritable rabbi factories.[4] Hence the second aim of this project: to understand what characterizes the most successful rabbinic mentors.

[4] If permitted a little immodesty, I count myself among them, having mentored four students to rabbinical school, two to HUC-JIR, one to Hebrew College, and one to JTS.

By peering through the rabbinic pipeline from both ends, both the funnel of fresh students and those who have come out the other side and inspired others to follow in their footsteps, this project hopes to surface lessons that leaders can take to support the sacred work of replenishing the ranks of America's rabbis.

Theological Reflections and Literature Review

A Different Kind of Calling

Is the rabbinate a "calling"?

The theological concept of "calling" is deeply rooted in Christianity, and even extends beyond its primary ecclesiastical sense to a more holistic divine vision of human purpose (Kristanto et al., 2024). And because of these Christian connotations, its usage has often caused discomfort in Jewish circles, including among rabbinical school applicants and application readers (Sarna, 1995). That said, the concept's origins are biblical (McFarland et al., 2012), which means that though the term itself might be more common in Christian parlance, it has a place in Jewish theology as well. Indeed, the Hebrew Bible is bountiful with "calling" narratives, in which an individual receives a divine push or pull that reshapes the course of their life and its purpose. The story of the Jewish people famously begins with the mysterious call of Abraham: "GOD said to Abram, 'Go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you'" (JPS, 2023, Gen. 12:1). Moses encounters God at the burning bush. Samuel hears God's voice calling to him through the holy ark. Jonah tries to flee God's command to preach in Nineveh. Jeremiah feels God's word as a "raging fire in [his] heart" (JPS, 2023, Jer. 20.9). And Esther, though she doesn't directly hear the word of God, finds herself in the right place at the right time with the right skills to save the Jewish people. Each of these monumental figures in the Jewish story experiences some critical moment of encounter and transformation, and from there they set forth on their path to leadership.

"Calling" narratives also appear in rabbinic literature, with a particular focus on the transformational power of Torah study. *Avot DeRabbi Natan*, a commentary on *Pirkei Avot*, tells

the story of Rabbi Akiva, who at the age of 40 decided to study to become a rabbi after a moment of epiphany at a well. After observing that a steady drip of water had carved a hole in a stone, he thought to himself: "If something soft can carve something hard, then all the more so, the words of Torah, which are like steel, can engrave themselves on my heart, which is but flesh and blood" (*The William Davidson Talmud: Avot DeRabbi Natan*, 2019, 6:1). In addition, in the midrashic collection *Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer,* we learn the origins of Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus, who left his father's farm despite his protestations because of his deep desire to study Torah. The throughline of these tales–the transformational power of sacred literature–is beautifully conceptualized by Nouwen (2015) in his theory of "spiritual reading":

> Spiritual reading is food for our souls...Reading often means gathering information, acquiring new insight and knowledge, and mastering a new field. It can lead us to degrees, diplomas, and certificates. Spiritual reading, however, is different. It means not simply reading about spiritual things but also reading about spiritual things in a spiritual way. That requires a willingness not just to read but to be read, not just to master but to be mastered by words...Spiritual reading is far from easy in our modern, intellectual world, where we tend to make anything and everything we read subject to analysis and discussion. Instead of taking the words apart, we should bring them together in our innermost being; instead of wondering if we agree or disagree with what we have read, we should wonder which words are spoken directly to us and connect directly with our most personal story. Instead of thinking about the words as potential subjects for an interesting dialogue or paper, we should be willing to let them penetrate into the most hidden corners of our heart, even to those places where no other word has yet found

> entrance. Then and only then can the word bear fruit as seed sown in rich soil...As we slowly let the written words enter into our minds and descend into our hearts, we become different people… (pp. 91-93)

In short, we become rabbis.

In this study, we will ask in particular how the most recent crop of rabbis responds to the language of "calling" and how their understanding of it maps onto historic understandings of the term.

The Evolving Role of The Rabbi

The second century repository of Rabbinic wisdom *Pirkei Avot*[5] famously begins with the delineation of the great chain of transmission of the Torah through the earliest generations of Jewish leaders:

> Moses received the Torah at Sinai and transmitted it to Joshua, Joshua to the elders, and the elders to the prophets, and the prophets to the Men of the Great Assembly. They said three things: Be patient in [the administration of] justice, raise many disciples, and make a fence round the Torah. (*Pirkei Avot*, 1:1)

This teaching establishes in many ways the locus classicus conception of the rabbi in Jewish tradition: to serve as an adjudicator of Jewish law as revealed through the Torah, and to teach future leaders to do the same. Upon ordination, each new rabbi attaches themselves as a link in the chain.

Our contemporary conception of the rabbinic role incorporates the enduring importance of mastery of traditional Jewish knowledge, while adding to the ideal rabbinic skill

[5] Translated as "Ethics of the Ancestors"

set the cultivation of spiritual and community leadership capacities (Adelson & Ross, 2024). This expansion of the instruments necessary for the rabbinic toolbox corresponds to the most common role historically and currently held by American Reform rabbis: congregational leadership. Importantly, rabbis today also increasingly serve in a broad variety of professional capacities. According to a 2019 survey of the members of the CCAR, the professional organization of the Reform rabbinate, 72 percent of respondents were currently employed in synagogue settings, while 28 percent were employed in "diverse rabbinates". An interesting question then, revisiting Bloom's (1990) conception of the rabbi as a "Symbolic Exemplar", is whether such an image of the rabbinate is still relevant to more recent entrants into the field. And, from the other side of the pipeline, what aspects of the rabbinic role do the most successful rabbinic mentors find fulfilling?

A Theology of Mentorship

Shifting from theological questions concerning personal transformation, Jewish tradition also lifts up the importance of individual mentoring relationships along the leadership journey. The Torah records the tales of both Moses passing his mantle to Joshua and Aaron passing the priesthood to his sons. Tellingly, the word *semicha*, the Hebrew term for rabbinic ordination, comes from the root *samech-mem-caf*, which literally means "to lay hands", as we read that Moses "lay his hands upon [Joshua]" to symbolize the leadership transition between them (JPS, 2023, Numbers 27:23). The chain of transmission established in *Pirkei Avot* passes from one set of hands to another, from individual link to individual link, which is to say that the road to the rabbinate is fundamentally relational.

The cultivation of these kinds of mentoring relationships is also a fundamental rabbinic obligation, as *Pirkei Avot* charges those who join the chain of transmission "raise many disciples" themselves. In fact, Deuteronomy (4:9, 6:7) commands all Jews–not just rabbis–to teach Torah to their children. For this reason, Jewish tradition holds that one's reverence for mentors and teachers should be understood to be akin to reverence for one's parent, as we read in *Sanhedrin* 19b: "Whoever teaches Torah to the child of another, Scripture regards it as if [the student was his own child]."[6] And indeed in *Avot DeRabbi Natan* (4:5), we find an example of Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai referring to his student Rabbi Yehoshua as "my child."

In addition to the parental picture of rabbinic mentors, we also find instances in Jewish tradition of individuals who see the spark of spiritual leadership in others and encourage them to follow that path. A notable biblical example comes in I Samuel. When the young Samuel is sleeping, he hears the voice of God calling to him from the Holy Ark. Confused, he runs to his mentor Eli the Priest, thinking the voice was his. Eli shoos him back to sleep twice, but the third time Samuel awakens to God's call, we read that "Eli understood that ADONAI was calling the boy. And Eli said to Samuel, "Go lie down. If you are called again, say, 'Speak, ADONAI, for Your servant is listening'" (JPS, 2023, I Samuel 3:8-9). Eli's insight as and consequent direction Samuel's mentor proved essential steps on Samuel's leadership journey. Later, in the Talmud, we find the famous tale of Rabbi Yochanan and Reish Lakish. In *Bava Metzia* (84a), we read the famous tale of Rabbi Yochanan and Reish Lakish. Then a bandit, Reish Lakish sees Rabbi Yochanan bathing in the Jordan River and pursues. Impressed by Reish Lakish's vigor, Rabbi Yochanan tells him: "Your strength is fit for Torah" (*The William Davidson Talmud*, 2017, *Bava*

[6] Translation my own.

Metzia, 84a). Reish Lakish accepts Rabbi Yochanan's challenge to learn, and ultimately the two become legendary study partners. Though more proximate to a peer or fraternal relationship than a parental one, Rabbi Yochanan's perception of Reish Lakish's potential similarly proved pivotal on his path.

A final feature worthy of inclusion into a theology of Jewish mentorship is an acknowledgement of the benefit the mentor receives from the relationship themselves–beyond the fulfillment of a fundamental religious obligation. In the Talmud, we read that Rabbi Chanina taught that "I have learned much from my teachers and even more from my friends, but from my students I have learned more than from all of them" (*The William Davidson Talmud*, 2017, *Ta'anit*, 7a). We learn from this teaching that the strength of the bonds of the chain of transmission is sustained, not just by the strength of the rabbis' own ability to pass on Torah to their disciples, but also by the rabbis' ability to receive their disciples' Torah in return.

Clinical Reflections and Literature Review

The Psychology of Career Selection

It is important to note that in addition to the theological and spiritual aspirations a person might have in deciding to pursue a career in the rabbinate, the rabbinate is nonetheless a career. Thus, it is important to contextualize the choice to become a rabbi within the broader psychological field of career selection. We will consider three frameworks, one put forth by Krumboltz, Mitchell, and Jones (1976), one by Lent, Brown, and Hackett (1994), and one by Holland (1997). Krumboltz, Mitchell, and Jones (1976) posit the career selection is influenced by four primary factors: an individual's genetic endowments and special abilities, environmental conditions and events, learning experiences, and task approach skills. This theory suggests that these factors continuously interact in a dynamic process that shapes the course of a person's career. Lent, Brown, and Hackett (1994) build on Bandura's (1986) work on self-efficacy to proffer a social cognitive career theory, which argues that career development is the result of continuous feedback loops between a person's belief in their capacity to succeed in a profession, the outcomes of their efforts, and their personal goals. Finally, Holland's (1997) theory of vocational personalities is structured around a model that categorizes six personality types: realistic, investigative, artistic, social, enterprising, and conventional. Holland argues that work environments can be similarly categorized according to these types, and that an individual's fitness and satisfaction in a given role is predicted by the alignment between the vocational personality and their work environment. A common Holland code associated with the clergy profession is "social" (Drenth).

Applying these theories to an individual's decision to pursue a career in the rabbinate, Krumboltz, Mitchell, and Jones suggest that our research should consider the various ways opportunities to explore the rabbinic path appear over the course of a budding rabbi's journey. Lent, Brown, and Hackett's SCCT model pushes us to investigate how future rabbis and the rabbis they become might understand themselves to be successful and fulfilled in their roles. Finally, Holland's approach calls us to consider how the six vocational personality types and work environments map onto the rabbinic profession.

Regarding the specific case of choosing a career in the clergy, Miloni (2023) identified and described four environmental influences that impact an individual's decision to enter full-time ministry: "Godly Family and Home Environment, Church is the Center of Family Culture, Mentors that Show Interest and Give Encouragement Toward Ministry, and Significant Spiritual Experiences" (p. iii). As discussed, the decline in professional interest in the rabbinate is a fractal trend of the overall situation in the field of American ministry–of interest for the present study is the extent to which the factors Miloni identified as influencing prospective rabbis' Christian colleagues to consider the path applies to their own.

The Role of Role Models

The question so often asked of children, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" might be better asked as "Who do you want to be when you grow up?" Who are the figures in your life who inspire you, who you might aspire to become yourself? We call these figures "role models". Gibson (2004, abstract) proposed that we define role models as "cognitive constructions based on an individual's needs, wants, and ambitions". From that theoretical perspective, in the present study we are called to ask how rabbis describe the rabbis who

motivated them to follow in their footsteps. How do they construct their conception of the role of the rabbi from the rabbis in their lives?

An important sub-question within this broader area of inquiry concerns the role of gender. Quimby and De Santis (2006) found that women in particular benefit from seeing a role model in a "non-traditional" career path–as was the case for the rabbinate until 50 years ago.

"The Wounded Healer"

In light of Nouwen's (1979) theory of ministry as the vocation of "the wounded healer", another area of interest that bridges the clinical and theological questions is the role of trauma in an individual's journey to the rabbinate. Nouwen recognized that a minister's own history of suffering could be the source of their capacity to heal the suffering of others. Given the sensitive nature of trauma narratives, it would be unethical to ask study participants about their trauma histories directly; however, in asking about moments along a person's career journey, particular attention will be paid to stories of a traumatic nature. Of course, trauma doesn't necessarily have to be a result of personal experience. Stamm et al. (2004) have argued for a cultural theory of trauma and loss that is triggered by current events. This suggests that we should also be attentive to how external forces shape their calling narrative.

Identity Development

While the rabbinate is a career, it is also undeniably an identity. Thus, an individual's path to the rabbinate should be examined within the broader context of their identity formation. Erikson's (1980) theory of psychosocial development provides a useful framework for exploring how life stages influence an individual's rabbinic journey. Erikson outlined eight

developmental phases, each of which is defined by a core psychosocial conflict that an individual must resolve as they mature from childhood to adulthood:

1. Trust versus mistrust (birth to 18 months): In this phase, infants discover if they can rely on their caregivers to provide consistent care and emotional support. Trust developed at this stage can influence one's openness to relationships and mentorship later in life.
2. Autonomy versus shame and doubt (18 months to three years): Toddlers develop a sense of independence and personal control. Successfully navigating this stage leads to confidence and autonomy.
3. Initiative versus guilt (three to five years): Children in this phase begin to assert their power and control over their environment through initiating play and other social interactions.
4. Industry versus inferiority (six to 11 years): School-age children focus on building competence and skills. Mastery of tasks and confidence in one's abilities formed in this stage could significantly impact their future self-concept.
5. Identity versus confusion (12 to 18 years): Adolescents explore their independence and develop a sense of personal identity. This critical period may significantly influence whether an individual develops an enduring sense of religious identity and begins contemplating a path toward rabbinic leadership.
6. Intimacy versus isolation (18 to 40 years): Young adults seek meaningful relationships and partnerships. Success in this stage can affect a person's ability to form deep mentor-mentee relationships and supportive community connections vital to rabbinical formation.

7. Generativity versus stagnation (40 to 65 years): Individuals seek to create or nurture things that will outlast them, typically through parenting, teaching, mentoring, or other meaningful contributions. This stage particularly could particularly resonate with rabbinical mentors committed to shaping the next generation of clergy.
8. Integrity versus despair (65 years and older): Older adults reflect on their lives, seeking to feel a sense of fulfillment and integrity. Rabbis who mentor in their later years might particularly engage deeply in mentorship to foster a sense of legacy and fulfillment.

Considering participants' journeys to the rabbinate, these developmental stages offer valuable insight into when individuals might feel particularly inspired or motivated towards rabbinical study and how mentors engage at various points of their mentees' development.

Complementing Erikson's theory, Fowler's (1995) stages of faith development provide another perspective specifically oriented toward spiritual identity:

1. Primal undifferentiated faith (birth to 2 years): The formation of basic trust and relational experiences establishes a fundamental sense of safety and trust, which can be the basis for future spiritual exploration.
2. Intuitive–projective faith (three to seven years): The beliefs and values of parents and their community are passed on to their children through religious stories and symbols. These early experiences can foster a lifelong sense of spiritual curiosity.
3. Mythic-literal faith (seven to 12 years): Young children often interpret religious concepts in a literal and concrete way, depending on stories and narratives to shape their religious perspective and moral compass.

4. Synthetic-conventional faith (adolescence): During adolescence, community expectations play a significant role in shaping a more coherent belief system. Mentors encountered during this time can have a substantial influence, possibly leading individuals toward a career in spiritual leadership.
5. Individuative-reflective faith (young adulthood): Religious commitment is often pursued or reaffirmed after a period of critical examination and personal reflection leads an individual to claim their beliefs.
6. Conjunctive faith (middle adulthood): The ability to recognize the complexities and contradictions inherent in religious beliefs fosters empathy and openness to diverse perspectives, which are essential qualities for spiritual leaders.
7. Universalizing faith (rarely attained): This final stage is characterized by a deep spiritual understanding and an open-minded perspective, which could inspire a thoughtful, community-centered approach to rabbinical leadership.

Applying Fowler's framework to participants in this study, we may gain deeper insights into how faith formation intersects with rabbinical aspirations, including the pivotal role of mentorship at critical stages of spiritual development.

Mentoring Relationships as Attachment Relationships

Attachment theory seeks to explain how foundational relationships shape a person's developmental trajectory (Wallin, 2007). Though it is beyond the scope of this study to subject all participants to George, Kaplan, and Main's (1985) Adult Attachment Interview, a core feature of our exploration of both the rabbis who are sharing their own journeys and the mentors who shaped them will be the security of their mentoring relationships. Based on how

these relationships are described, we may be able to speculate, with humility, as to the participants' attachment styles, and how those attachment styles may have influenced journeys to the rabbinate and their mentoring of others on those journeys.

The Toll of the Rabbinic Role

Sadly, the rabbinic profession is an increasingly unhappy one. In a fall 2023 study of clergy in discontentment, over half of all clergy surveyed reported that they had seriously considered leaving the pastoral ministry altogether (Hartford Institute for Religion Research, 2023). Reasons for their discontentment included conflict and relational strain, lack of fit or poor support, and burnout (Hartford Institute for Religion Research, 2023). Kamrass (2021) observed the same trends in the fractal context of the rabbinate, noting that many rabbis in the middle of their careers have been "asking themselves, 'Can I continue doing this for 20 more years?'" And the 2019 CCAR member survey found that "a sense of isolation" was the most highly reported need among its rabbis, followed closely by "inattention to personal wellness" and "personal theological or spiritual struggles." For the purposes of the present study, we are called to pay special attention to the extent to which early career rabbis perceived these challenges as they considered the rabbinate, and also the extent to which the rabbinic mentors felt these challenges themselves.

Methodology: The Recent Alumni Study

The portion of the study focusing on the journeys to rabbinical school of the recent alumni was conducted through interviews with a convenience sample of 12 rabbis who were ordained from HUC within the past five years. Six participants identified as female and six as male. Participants ranged in age from 27 to 57, with most in their 30s. Modest attention was given to the diversity of HUC campuses participants attended, with seven attending New York, three attending Los Angeles, and two attending Cincinnati.

All participants provided informed consent to be interviewed for the study (see Appendix A for the consent form). Participants' confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed in the consent form. Interviews were conducted over Zoom in a semi structured format following the discussion guide below.

Recent Alumni Discussion Guide

1. Basic Demographic Information
    a. Name
    b. Age
    c. Gender Identity
    d. Start and end of studies at HUC-JIR
    e. Where did you grow up?
    f. Religious identity of parents?
    g. Parents' educational background and professions?
    h. Undergraduate major?

i. Any other graduate studies prior to rabbinical school?

j. Any prior careers?

2. What were the factors that led you to consider pursuing the rabbinate?
3. Describe your Jewish upbringing, especially your family's involvement in the development of your Jewish identity.
4. Describe any extracurricular interests outside of Judaism that you had growing up.
5. Describe your involvement with Jewish institutions such as synagogues, camps, and youth groups, Israel, Jewish organizations in college, and post-college? Which of these Jewish institutions was the most influential in the development of your Jewish identity?
6. Describe your relationship with any important Jewish professional mentors. Did any of these mentors tell you unprompted that you should become a rabbi?
7. Were there other professions you considered besides the rabbinate?
8. Describe your path to rabbinical school from the moment you first considered becoming a rabbi. What were the key moments along the way? Did you consider other rabbinical schools?
9. Would you say you felt called? Why or why not? What does that mean to you?

Both the audio and video components of these interviews were recorded using Zoom, with a back-up recording captured using the Voice Memo application on the researcher's cellphone. Zoom's artificial intelligence was used to prepare a transcript of each interview that was manually checked for accuracy, in addition to a brief summary of the interview's contents.

Analysis of the interview transcripts was conducted using two qualitative data analysis software tools: Atlas.ti and Delve. Applying a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarle, 2006), research questions were generated followed by initial codes, which were then assigned to excerpts of the interview transcripts using the artificial intelligence capabilities of the software. The coded data was then manually reviewed and assessed for reliability and accuracy, with adjustment and refinement of AI coding applied based on the researcher's judgment. Codes were synthesized into broader themes reflecting key mentoring experiences and approaches. These themes will be analyzed in depth in the results section, illustrating patterns across participants' narratives.

Findings: The Recent Alumni Study

Six Rabbinic Personae

In prior research (Ross, 2016), five rabbinic personae were identified as having manifested in participants' lives prior to rabbinical school: the performer, the teacher, the scholar, the activist, and the pastor. These personae were also present in the participants in the current study. Importantly, these personae are not mutually exclusive, rather they manifest as magnets that draw individuals towards the rabbinic path. In addition to these five personae, evidence from the current study pointed to the characterization of a sixth persona: the community builder.

The Performer

The performer rabbinic persona–characterized by participation in the performing arts, including theater and music, as well as a general expressed comfort with public presentations–was once again predominant among the participants in this study (Ross, 2016). Indeed, two participants were involved in theater professionally prior to rabbinical school. One started working professionally at such a young age that he largely discontinued Jewish activities after he became bar mitzvah:

> I didn't get as involved in Jewish extracurriculars because theater was so all consuming. So, I started doing theater outside of school when I was 10, with a youth theater program. And then I started doing professional theater…when I was maybe 12, and then I was acting until 2014 like, pretty consistently, either professionally or at school, and so that, you know, that meant that was what I did.

In reflecting on the impact of his theater background on his journey to the rabbinate, he

observed: “My background is in the arts. So, I also felt really drawn to something where I could sing and I felt very at home in front, standing in front of people and like being a frontal figure.” The second participant who was started his career in theater worked on the business side, but nonetheless reflected that his time in that world had a played a substantial role in his journey to the rabbinate: “I like creating experiences for people; that part was from the theater world…I just loved creating show, festivals, then events and programs and Israel trips, and just like experiences for people to change in some way or that, like, had a big impact on them.”

Unsurprisingly, other participants shared that their paths to rabbinical school began when they were invited to be on the bimah at a young age. One recalled a transformative invitation to sing:

> My cantor was the one when I was 9 to say, “Come, sing with me on the bimah.” I was so small, and she just fully trusted me and wanted me there, and the love and support that she gave was so, so important. For somebody that young to just be able to explore and make a mistake, and play, and have fun and sing and smile and laugh on the bimah huge for a [child]...

Another shared this story about her own primetime bimah moment:

> We traveled to Israel with [our synagogue]. That was a really significant experience. [The rabbi] allowed me to read Torah on Masada at age 11, and then, when we got back, he invited me to speak to the congregation like that Friday night about what it was like, and so like, from a very young age I was on the bimah, and I loved the feedback I got. Whether people said I was so mature, they loved my smile, or, you know, you're going to be a rabbi one day.

This participant also revealed that her childhood ambition was to be either a rabbi or a TV news anchor because they “just love talking in front of people”.

The Teacher

A second rabbinic persona is “the teacher”, manifesting as an early interest in Jewish education and working with youth (Ross, 2016). Several participants worked as Jewish educators or youth professionals prior to attending rabbinical school. One shared that it was a surprise invitation to teach Hebrew school after college that put him on the path to the rabbinate:

> The cantor called me…that summer [after I graduated from college] and asked if I would teach in the Hebrew school…And that was a big moment. I remember first, I was like, you know, I'm not your guy. Like, I don't really remember the Hebrew letters, let alone anything Jewish…But she said she'd help me along, and she offered to, like, hire me a Hebrew tutor. And I sort of thought you know, what the heck? I'll give it a try. And that was a super formative experience…I mean, up to this point I was getting involved more in Jewish community as a participant. This is my first time leading something. In the process of, like, learning throughout the week, whatever I would teach, and then teaching on Sunday. And like seeing moments of like shared passion or connection in these 4th grade students was, that was a moment when I was like, well, if I could do this with the rest of my life. I think that would be a, you know, a really fulfilling connected kind of life.

Another participant who spent time working in both public education and Jewish education reflected that while she was in public schools, she realized that she "really [missed] the Jewish stuff," and that it was "those weeks of teaching where I was in a Jewish space and a non-Jewish space [that] I was, like, very aware of how excited I was in the Jewish space."

The Scholar

A third rabbinic persona is "the scholar". These individuals appreciated Judaism and the rabbinate as a place to unleash their intellectual curiosity (Ross, 2016). For example, when asked about the passions and interests that drew them to the rabbinate, one participant shared the following story about her voracious love of learning:

> I've been obsessed with history and literature for as long as I can remember. I spent what felt like half my childhood on airplanes, and every summer we would go to the… [book] fair, and get crates of books…I pretty much read every book in my school before I was 9 years old, and when I was a child, my mother's best friend who we call my Jewish mother, was very concerned about my lack of religious education, and so every year for my birthday on Chanukah, she would give me some sort of deeply disturbing Jewish book to read like *Letters from Rifka* about a girl who gets stopped at Ellis Island because of ringworm while she's fleeing pogroms, and *Mila 18* by Leon Yuris, when I was like 12 years old about the Warsaw Ghetto uprising and *The Red Tent*. When I was about 11, I just fell madly in love with these books, for which I had no context, and was deeply interested in Jewish history, and went to college, knowing very little about lived Judaism and a lot about historical Judaism.

> …And I think once I realized that it was a tradition that I could argue with and be skeptical of, it felt like it fit really well into everything I loved about history. And so I think that's the first factor that made me consider the rabbinate was loving history.

The Activist

A fourth rabbinic persona is "the activist". These individuals were often drawn to politics and social justice as ways to express their Jewish values (Ross, 2016). As one participant reflected on her motivations for pursuing the rabbinate: "I was so aware of myself as a Jew and as a Jew in a world that is broken... How are we fixing the world through our Jewish values? And how are we improving the world?" Others saw the rabbinate as a way to claim moral authority: "I can say things and think things as a rabbi that you can't if you work in politics... there's a moral voice and an opportunity for a kind of values-based pushing." Often "activists" worked on political campaigns, knocking doors for candidates. Another common point on their path was the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, as multiple participants in the study served in its legislative assistants program, a fellowship for recent college graduates to serve as advocates and educators in Washington, DC.

The Pastor

A fifth rabbinic persona is "the pastor", manifesting as a drive to support other people and a deep appreciation for the opportunity to be present at significant moments in their lives (Ross, 2016). One participant, who worked as a social worker prior to rabbinical school, shared that he felt called to the rabbinate because: "I realized that experiences that I've had, and my response to those pastorally is not so common, and is valuable and appreciated and helpful to people." Another shared her desire to support others on their own journeys:

> I always wanted to help people, and I wanted to help people access. I wanted to help people become the best versions of themselves. I mean, I still do, and I also wanted to engage, I think once again, with, like, the complexity of what it means to be a human being, and all the complications that come with that.

Often participants also found themselves inspired by the rabbis in their own lives who they saw as having this privilege of shepherding people through sacred moments, as one said:

> In all of the sad times in our lives, you know, after a loss or an illness or the happy times, a wedding, B'nai Mitzvah, etc., that, like, a rabbi, gets to be a witness to and accompany people in all of those, and I just felt like, you know, you only get this one life, and I want to really live it and like experience, both the highs and the lows, and I want to really live it and like experience, both the highs and the lows, and it seemed like the rabbinate was a means to do that.

The Community Builder

In addition to validating the findings characterizing these five rabbinic personae from prior research, a sixth persona was observed and characterized in many of the participants in the present study: the community builder. These individuals were drawn to the rabbinate as a role that would allow them to convene other people and foster connections between them. One participant reflected on how fulfilling he found it to build community on the six Birthright trips he staffed prior to rabbinical school:

> Leading Birthright was probably the most transformative piece for me to then become a rabbi, because it was leading Birthright where I saw myself as a leader for Jews, and that

> there was a lot of power that younger people could find in Jewish life and Israel and spirituality.

Another was tapped as a volunteer to lead a fellowship for Jewish young adults in his hometown, and discovered that the work was so meaningful that he wanted to pursue it full-time:

> We partnered with about 60 companies and nonprofits to provide internships in every industry, from architecture to law, to arts, to marketing. All that kind of stuff. We raised money to pay them stipends, and we put them up in housing in cool parts of [town]. We did all this like Jewish community building. They had to cook and run Shabbat dinners, and a couple years later I started this thing called Underground Shabbat, which was like a twenties and thirties minyan in people's homes, and it actually was underground at first, which was in this cool basement. But we had them take part in all of these Jewish things to help them know, like this is a place not only where you can have an enriching social life, but you can build. You can be part of building a Jewish community that you want, and after starting that fellowship, and after starting Underground Shabbat, another young rabbi had moved here and [we] became friends, and I kind of realized that all the things she was doing for work and getting paid for were the things I was doing as a volunteer that were meaningful to me… [And] I made that connection in my brain like, oh, if you're a rabbi, you get to do all these things I love to do.

One last participant offered this succinct description of the community builder persona: “I always felt most comfortable in community with other people and community that I built with other people and specifically in Jewish community.”

The Role of Family

Most participants grew up in families where both parents were practicing Jews who grew up Jewish themselves, if not necessarily in the Reform movement. Jewish ritual was often alive in their homes, including Shabbat dinners and holiday celebrations, with synagogue attendance varying from minimal to occasional to consistent. Frequently, but not universally, participants came from families who were extremely active in Jewish life. Of course there were those whose parents were Jewish professionals, including Reform rabbis. But many participants had parents and grandparents who were lay leaders in their synagogues or other Jewish institutions, and they shared that the high levels of familial commitment to Jewish community they witnessed in their own families cultivated in them their own sense of the importance of Judaism. Other participants simply noted that their families were deeply drawn to Jewish life, if not Jewish leadership. As one put it: “My parents are community Jews committed to Jewish community... They mostly hang out with other Jews from the synagogue.”

Participants also described the ways their families shaped their beliefs and values. Unsurprisingly, Jewish pride was among them. As one participant shared, “My parents wanted kids that loved being Jewish. They wanted kids that were proud to be Jewish.” But that wasn’t all. One participant recalled that when his parents were synagogue shopping, they would call congregations to ask about their policies on LGBTQ inclusion. To be sure, some participants noted that at least one family member was alienated from Jewish life, but often participants shared that their adjacency to this alienation shaped their perspectives on Judaism and Jewish community in powerful ways, pushing them to think more deeply about theological, philosophical, and communal questions.

None of the participants reported that their families actively discouraged them from pursuing the rabbinic path. Indeed, a few reported that the genesis moment of their journey came from conversations with family members. One participant, who converted to Judaism, shared that when he was a teenager, his grandmother took him out to lunch and asked him if he had ever considered becoming a priest. Another recalled:

> It was always something that was in the back of my head because…I think maybe…it was my dad who mentioned it to me when I was younger. Oh, this might be something that you would enjoy doing. And at the time I was like no! Why would I do that?

The Role of Jewish Institutions

Participants were asked to reflect on the role that a variety of Jewish institutions played on their journeys to the rabbinate, including synagogues, camps, youth groups, Israel, collegiate Jewish organizations, and post-college. While participation levels in each of these types of institutions varied, each participant pointed to at least one that was particularly influential for their personal path.

The Usual Suspects: Synagogue and Camp

Given typical patterns of affiliation and behavior among Jews who grow up in the Reform movement, it is unsurprising that synagogue involvement and camp attendance were among the institutions in this sample to be most commonly identified as central. The centrality of the synagogue to the participant's path often corresponded with the centrality of the synagogue to their family life; for example, Shabbat dinner and Shabbat service attendance often went hand in hand. Camp, on the other hand, gave participants the space to build their own Jewish communities in an immersive, peer-centered context.

Typecasting

Across their involvement in all Jewish institutions, participants often reported that they were perceived as "the rabbinic type". As one participant described it: "I think that I fall into a specific category of person who was always told that I would make a good rabbi, and who always considered the rabbinate as a potential career." Imagine the b'nai mitzvah students who found themselves swarmed by adoring fans when they descend from the bimah, or the campers who were especially passionate about prayer or especially interested in Jewish learning, or the former Religious and Cultural Vice Presidents of the North American Federation of Temple Youth. Where are they now? Many of them are rabbis.

Open Doors

Another common narrative among participants, particularly as they transitioned from their homelife to college or from college to post-college, was the discovery of a new Jewish institution that led to a period of rapid self-discovery in the development of their Jewish journey. One participant, who had a less robust Jewish upbringing, found that her Jewish life exploded when she arrived on campus:

> I got to college, and I checked the little Jewish box, and got very sucked into social justice work at Hillel…Exactly my freshman year…Challah for Hunger came to [campus], the social justice organization that bakes bread for a difference, and I signed up for the first meeting, and by my sophomore year I was directing Challah for Hunger, and so I…started going to Hillel dinners to promote Challah for Hunger and started going to Shabbat services to promote Challah for Hunger and started leading Shabbat services. It was a very easy slide for me into just getting deeply involved in all things Hillel.

Other participants found themselves in the right place at the right time to prompt a transformative experience in the context of an institution. One was at a transitional moment in his career, and learned that a local synagogue was hiring:

> The rabbi was hiring someone to do social justice organizing and young adult engagement to work with him on both of those things. I liked [the rabbi], I liked the community, and I had no idea what rabbis did all day. He said, "If you work here, you'll get a sense of what rabbis do all day." So, I started working here and saw the inner workings of a large Reform synagogue and the million different things that rabbis can do. I had never known.

In these situations, participants learned things about Judaism and about themselves that they did not previously know, opening the door for them to consider the rabbinic path.

The Role of Mentors

Rabbis are Real People

Jewish mentors proved an essential throughline for the recent rabbinic alumni in the study. Participants spoke glowingly of the professionals who shaped their journeys, looking to them pivotal figures on their paths to rabbinical school. One rabbi shared that when she was five years-old, she thought two of the rabbis in her congregation were "superheroes". However, many participants spoke of rabbis they admired who they met later in life as well. One participant, who began working at a synagogue during a career transition, shared the excitement he felt when he had the opportunity to see rabbinic work up close:

> I never would have thought to set up a one-on-one with a rabbi to talk about something personal in my life—I literally didn't know people even did that. Then I saw people doing

> that and thought, “Wow, that's really meaningful.” I didn’t know that rabbis went to the State House to lobby on issues of legislation. That wasn’t a part of my life growing up. But then I went to the State House as part of my job with the rabbis and…I saw how different faith communities work together around issues of social justice. I saw the vibrancy of living this kind of life.

Others spoke of rabbis being a constant presence in their lives and the lives of their families, especially pastorally. One participant shared that her childhood was marked by many health challenges, and that her clergy made a huge difference in her experience simply by showing up:

> When I was sick in the hospital, when I had a really significant doctor appointment, my rabbi was always there, visiting, being a part of it. When I was 12 and I was diagnosed with Crohn's, I was in the hospital for a week. My rabbi was there every single day. Just there to just sit and keep me company, to hang out, to play, to talk, to laugh, to do nothing, watch TV, didn't matter. He was there.

To summarize, strong rabbinic role models, deep relationships, and direct access to the variety of roles rabbis play professionally, inspired participants to consider the rabbinic path and gave them an understanding of the diversity of directions that path could take them.

That said, a second common theme among the participants was relationships with rabbis that gave them familiarity with and visibility into their real lives. One of the participants shared that many of her family friends during her youth were rabbis, which normalized the profession for her:

> Growing up, we always just had a lot of rabbis around in my life...I think I had like 6 rabbis at my bar Mitzvah. So to me, rabbis were just normal people, which I think was

> hugely influential for me…All the rabbis who were mentors to me... I saw them all as normal people, and they all presented themselves that way to me, and that was always really important.

On the other hand, such familiarity did not always prove to be a positive, as one participant explained:

> Rabbis are always real people to me, and so like, I know a lot of people's journeys involve, like the demystification of the rabbi and the rabbinate... I kind of have the opposite problem: where, like, I got too familiar, too quickly with people and other rabbis.

Still, the norm among these early career rabbis was the sense, grounded in their relationships with rabbis in their lives, that rabbis are normal people.

Colleagues in Training

In addition to giving participants in the study a three-dimensional view of the rabbinic role and the rabbinic lifestyle, their rabbinic mentorship also often treated them like colleagues in training. A common narrative shared by many of the recent rabbinic alumni was that of being tapped for leadership opportunities under their rabbinic mentors' aegis: youth group leadership, participation in worship services, service on rabbinic search committees, and more. Notably, these taps to take on these leadership opportunities did not necessarily lead to proverbial "shoulder taps" to consider the rabbinic profession. An actual rabbinic shoulder tap was a fairly infrequent experience among study participants; however, substantial rabbinic investment in their Jewish identity development, regardless of the intended outcome, played an essential influential role in their pursuit of the rabbinic path themselves. In addition,

participants often shared that just as they felt they saw their rabbis as real people, they felt fully seen by their rabbis in ways that made them feel special. As one described her relationship with her childhood rabbi:

> I loved that he paid attention to me and thought I was wise... I remember my bat Mitzvah... I don't know if he told me I should be a rabbi then, but I think I was expecting him to. So, even if he didn't, in my memory, he did.

Without question, these kinds of moments, feeling as though someone sees their rabbinic potential, even if not explicitly stated, often proves pivotal on prospective rabbis' paths.

Is the Rabbinate a Calling?

Participants related to the language of "calling" with varying degrees of enthusiasm, and ambivalence about the Christian overtones of the term. Some fully embraced the concept, while offering nuanced perspectives on its meaning. For some, their "calling" flowed from their relationship with and understanding of God, as one said:

> I felt like I was supposed to be doing something more impactful in people's lives with the skills that I had acquired. And so it wasn't necessarily a call to the rabbinate, but it was a call to use what I had trained in and developed and been given by God and by my own training in a direction that would help other people find the same kind of spiritual meaning that I had found.
>
> And that I think calling language works for me because it feels like a call coming from the inside, like a voice that is so clearly telling me that even though this is the path that I've been on, you're close, but you've taken a turn. And there is something else that you should be doing.

Others more readily grounded their sense of "calling" in a desire to serve the Jewish people, but expressed more ambivalence about the notion of its divine origin. As one put it:

> I think that this is what I was meant to do with my life. I believe in the Jewish people and our future. And I see it as like my…calling to help bring, help people bring this into their lives.
>
> I do kind of feel like God wants me to, like God ordained me or, that's not really the right way to put it, but I do feel like, you know, there's this like Hasidic notion that we have some kind of mission in life. And I do feel that in terms of being a rabbi, but I don't believe that, like in my mind, in my rational mind, I don't believe that God works like that.
>
> I believe in a God that connects each thing, but I don't really believe in an active God. And so maybe they're not contradictory, but I don't do this day in, day out thinking about that God gave me this mission. I mean, it really never crossed my mind, but maybe I feel that in my *kishkes* if I'll allow myself to think about it, but it's not really, that feeling that I have doesn't align with what I believe about God.

Interestingly, a participant who resisted the language of "calling" shared a strikingly similar sense of the reasons the rabbinic role resonated with her:

> I haven't ever felt called to be a rabbi. For me, choosing to be a rabbi is an active choice I've made and I continue to choose how I serve the Jewish people. The idea of calling doesn't speak to me theologically—it's not how I understand how God works in the world. I definitely see my role as a rabbi as more than a job, because my work is also my

> spiritual home, and success isn't measured the way it's measured at Fortune 500 companies.

Lastly, regardless of their embrace of "calling" language, participants shared that a desire for personal fulfillment played an important role in their pursuit of the profession. As one participant who embraced the language of "calling" put it: "[Calling] means that there's never been any other option... this feels like the most authentic version of who I am and what I want to do." Yet for another who rejected it, he said:

> I don't think I felt called. For me the calling is an aha moment, an external voice, or a clear and definitive moment when you knew something. I do feel that this is the work I was meant to be doing, that I find incredible fulfillment and purpose in my work, and that what I do when I am not leading services is still holy and spiritual. But the language of a calling doesn't really resonate with me.

IIn summary, there was no universal approach to the concept of calling among participants in the study, though most shared that their desire to pursue the rabbinate emerged from feelings deeper than surface level.

Methodology: The Mentor Study

The portion of the study focusing on rabbinic mentorship was conducted through interviews with a convenience sample of 10 alumni of HUC's rabbinical program. These individuals were selected based on anecdotal accounts of their having mentored an unusually large number of individuals into the rabbinate over the course of their careers. During the interviews, participants were asked to self-report the number of future rabbinical students they had mentored, with estimates ranging from five to more than 25 individuals.

The sample had five participants identifying as female and five as male. Participants ranged in age from 51 to 88. Most were retired or nearing retirement, with three currently working in the field. The oversampling of retirees ensured that participants had careers of sufficient length to mentor a higher volume of future rabbinical students. The majority of participants spent their careers in the congregational rabbinate, while one primarily worked in a university setting. Among the congregational rabbis, synagogue sizes ranged from 500 to more than 2,500 families, with many participants having presided over periods of significant expansion in their communities. Modest attention was given to geographic diversity, with six participants from the East Coast, two from the central United States, and two from the West Coast.

All participants provided informed consent to be interviewed for the study (see Appendix A for the consent form). Participants' confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed in the consent form. Interviews were conducted over Zoom in a semi structured format following the discussion guide below.

Mentor Discussion Guide

1. Basic Demographic Information
    a. Name
    b. Age
    c. Gender Identity
    d. Jewish Background?
    e. Start and end of studies at HUC-JIR
    f. Undergraduate major?
    g. Any other graduate studies prior to rabbinical school?
    h. Any prior careers?
    i. Outline of rabbinic positions you have held since ordination?
2. What were the factors that led you to consider pursuing the rabbinate?
3. What do you like about being a rabbi?
4. What don't you like about being a rabbi?
5. Describe your relationship with any important Jewish professional mentors. Did any of these mentors tell you unprompted that you should become a rabbi?
6. Approximately how many students have you mentored into the rabbinate?
7. In what context did you meet these students? Did you approach them or did they approach you?
    a. Were there particular points in your career when you mentored more students?

b. How would you describe your relationship with your mentees?

8. What qualities do you look for in prospective rabbinical students?
9. Describe your approach to mentoring prospective rabbinical students.
    a. What advice or guidance do you give them?
    b. What questions do you ask them?
    c. What do you share with them about rabbinical life?
10. Have you ever discouraged anyone from applying to rabbinical school?
11. What role did you play in the application process of your students?
12. How have you maintained your relationships with your mentees?
13. How central is the mentoring of future rabbis to your rabbinate? Why or why not?
14. Most rabbis don't mentor a single student to rabbinical school. You've mentored #. What makes you different?
15. What advice would you give to your colleagues about how to approach mentoring prospective rabbinical students?

Both the audio and video components of these interviews were recorded using Zoom, with a back-up recording captured using the Voice Memo application on the researcher's cellphone. Zoom's artificial intelligence was used to prepare a transcript of each interview that was manually checked for accuracy, in addition to a brief summary of the interview's contents.

Analysis of the interview transcripts was conducted using two qualitative data analysis software tools: Atlas.ti and Delve. Applying a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarle, 2006), research questions were generated followed by initial codes, which were then assigned to

excerpts of the interview transcripts using the artificial intelligence capabilities of the software. The coded data was then manually reviewed and assessed for reliability and accuracy, with adjustment and refinement of AI coding applied based on the researcher's judgment. Codes were synthesized into broader themes reflecting key mentoring experiences and approaches. These themes will be analyzed in depth in the results section, illustrating patterns across participants' narratives.

Findings: The Mentor Study

What Rabbis Like–and Don't Like–About Being Rabbis

A universal feature of the mentors' narratives was high job satisfaction. Participants didn't just like being rabbis–they loved it. Everything about it. Indeed, one participant even said that asking her what she liked about being a rabbi was like asking her what she liked about herself. Another participant offered this comprehensive vision of his rabbinate:

> Other than keeping track of my colleagues' vacations, I love everything about being a rabbi. I'm a sort of indiscriminate lover of Rabbinic activity. I love working with children. I love working with adults. I love teaching children. I love teaching adults. I love the opportunity to be a regular part and leader of a deeply connected prayer community. And I love the opportunity to be a spokesperson, for, if not always a model for Judaism's pursuit of justice and doing my best to motivate my community to participate in that pursuit.

In particular, participants emphasized the rich opportunities for interpersonal connections and relationships they found in their rabbinic work. One said: "I like being involved in people's lives and the gratification of being present and knowing immediately that I have had some impact in some way in people's lives." Another found fulfillment in "being with people in moments when they're trying to understand more deeply who they are, what the moment is, and what's possible."

Another theme that emerged underlying the high degree of job satisfaction was the sense and depth of place participants felt within the broader context of Jewish history. As one rabbi explained, she loved "being a human being who represents the Jewish people in all of its

wonders and flaws, and using the learning of Judaism through the millennia to support myself and my people in that endeavor." Another described his feelings about the rabbinate as having "a lifelong love affair with Judaism and the Jewish tradition". One more said, "I love thinking about life through the panorama of the Jewish experience in history."

When the question was flipped to ask what participants did not like about their chosen profession, the primary themes pertained to the administrative aspects of the job and the demands it placed on themselves and their families. Regarding the career's administrative challenges, of course there was the rabbi quoted above who said he liked everything about the job except keeping track of his colleagues' vacations. Another said, "I used to say to people, I get paid to do the meetings and the phone calls." One more said, "It's like being on everybody's mailing list. There's no end to the emails. They just keep coming."

As for the difficulties that the role caused for themselves and their families, one retired rabbi said he didn't like "having such little control over my personal schedule and how it impacted my family's life. I didn't like the number of hours that I wound up working. I didn't like the relentlessness of the demands." Another shared: "I don't love the constant nervousness. I think rabbis live with a constant pressure that I feel acutely. The pressure is always being on call. You never know when the phone's gonna ring, whether it's gonna be an emergency." And still another shared that when she was at a synagogue function with her family, her children would have to call her "rabbi" to get her attention.

Who Mentored the Mentors

Mentors were asked to reflect upon the significance of their own Jewish professional mentors to the development and trajectory of their careers. Most offered gratitude for at least

one mentor who guided them on their professional path, representing a diverse array of roles from parent to professor to rabbi to camp staff. Some of the participants shared that they were told unprompted by mentors that they should consider becoming rabbis, though not necessarily by those advisers who were themselves rabbis. In fact, one received her "shoulder tap" from a Catholic professor in college. Interestingly, one participant lamented that "she never had a mentor" herself, and she shared that one particularly negative experience in a context in which she expected mentorship was for her "driving force for all mentorship of rabbis and students": "I saw what you shouldn't do, and I did the exact opposite."

The Role of Gender

Importantly, many of the female-identified participants in the study were among the first generation of women to attend HUC. Many of them shared that this reality meant that they often found a paucity of mentorship available to them, or that their experiences with mentors were complicated because of their gender. One participant shared that she had two rabbinic mentors from her childhood congregation who she approached when she was applying to rabbinical school:

> When I went to get a reference [from one of them] he said, "You don't want to be a rabbi. If you really want to be a rabbi…I don't like the idea. Just marry a rabbi. He was so sexist. I was just shocked. But I went to the other rabbi, the older guy who I love. And he jumped up and down with joy. He had always wanted one of his daughters to be a rabbi, and she didn't want to be a rabbi. So there we had it, you know. I knew who to go to, and he only wanted to support me. He was so, so supportive. When I got back from Israel, he invited me to visit and he invited me to be the first woman to preach from this pulpit,

> and he was so excited he called the newspaper, and they did an article, because I was the first woman from [the state] to become ordained. So he kind of took the slack, and the other guy, you know, just sort of fell by the wayside for me, which is an interesting learning that I took away as a rabbi.

Reflecting on how their own challenges with mentorship in turn affected their relationships with their own mentees, some of the female-identified mentors articulated that the students they had the most success guiding to rabbinical school were also female-identified.

Who Are Their Mentees

Mentors met their mentees in a variety of settings, though because most of the participants spent their careers in congregations, most of these settings were in various synagogue contexts. Often participants' relationships with their mentees began at young ages, either because they were b'nai mitzvah students, involved in youth groups, and or were otherwise present in the community's youth programs. A focus on youth engagement was a common if not universal feature of the participants' rabbinates. One participant proudly shared that he would often miss synagogue board meetings but never missed a youth group meeting.

In addition to the youth of their congregations, some participants found mentees among their synagogue staff members. One participant's congregation regularly created an entry-level position on its staff for a talented young professional, crafting the person's job description to suit their interests and to meet the current needs of the synagogue. This rotating role ultimately, if unintentionally, became a pipeline for future rabbis.

Finally, mentors were asked to reflect on the kinds of relationships they had with their mentees. Terms of "love" and "warmth" were quite common in the language of their

responses. Interestingly, many of the participants' mentees clustered around the ages of their own children. As such, it was unsurprising that the parent-child bond was a common paradigm for understanding their mentoring relationships. One participant even called their mentees "my kids." Still others resisted the precise application of the parental paradigm. One said his mentees feel like his kids, but really "They're people I hugely care about. They're people that I would say I love in a certain way. They're people that I feel a huge responsibility towards." Another familial paradigm was the sibling relationship, with one mentor describing a mentee as a "kid sibling". Others reflected on the way the mentoring relationship grows over time, describing their mentees as "peers in development". One explained the evolution of his relationship with mentees like this, embracing certain aspects of the familial metaphor while rejecting others:

> I would say it has the closeness of a familial relationship. But one of the beauties of it is that as time goes on, and sometimes very quickly, it becomes a peer relationship. So it has the warmth of a familial relationship. But I can't say it's…you know, it's always the person at the top of the hierarchy who always thinks things aren't hierarchical, right? So I think it's genuinely deep family friendships. These are people that I love.

One other metaphor of note highlighted the uniqueness of each of the participant's mentees, as one mentor said: "I guess the best image I have is, they are lights in the sky. I see them as extraordinary human beings who each have different ways in which they reveal the light." This last, deeply individualized conception of the mentor's relationship with her mentees anticipates the themes that will emerge in the next group of findings pertaining to the initiation, structure, and content of those relationships.

Approaches for Mentorship

First and foremost, it is essential to note that in the majority cases, participants shared that it was the future rabbinical students who approached them to initiate conversations about mentorship and guidance as they considered the rabbinic path. One participant went so far as to say that "everyone who said they wanted to be a rabbi was a total surprise" to him. Many participants observed that their mentees approached them tentatively, asking some variation on the question, "What's it like to be a rabbi?" In addition, participants shared that their mentees came to them at varying places along the path of discernment, and they were often seeking affirmation, yearning to know whether considering a rabbinic career was "crazy." To be sure, it was not uncommon for participants to sense rabbinic potential in their future mentees. But as one participant said, she generally waited until mentees "showed an interest" themselves.

That said, some participants did take a more active role in planting the seeds in their communities that blossomed into their future rabbis. One participant noted that when she encountered a particularly enthusiastic younger child in religious school, she might call them "Rabbi Shapiro". Another participant also shared that she would host a clergy career events for the youth of her congregation:

> I and or others in my clergy team would host an event where we just talk about our jobs. You know, like what do rabbis and cantors do? Don't you want to know, you know? Kind of come and sit with us, and we'll be at our house, and we'll have dessert, and we'll talk about it.

Yet in another case, a participant who did make a point of suggesting to young people in his community that they consider the rabbinate observed that those seeds didn't always grow; nonetheless he advocated for the importance of trying:

> At one point or another, with [every student] I've mentioned, I sat with that person, and said: "Have you ever thought about becoming a rabbi?" Or, you know the way in which you relate here? It's so evident that you seem very connected to this. And would you ever want to do this for a living? Because you really could. I've said that to many kids who don't go on to become rabbis.
>
> That's actually, I think it's the piece that is missing in our [rabbinic] recruitment strategy. I think rabbis should be much more evangelical, right? I don't think we're out there to, you know, I don't think we're trying to make proselytes. So we should not proselytize. But I think rabbis miss so many opportunities to come up to a high school or college kid, or even a middle schooler, and say you could be a rabbi. You could totally do this for a living. Have you ever thought about it? What do you have to lose?

In summary, those participants who reported that they did take a more active role in recruiting prospective future colleagues saw varying degrees of success in that pursuit.

Approaches to Mentorship

Once the mentoring relationship was initiated, participants took different approaches to guiding their mentees along the path to rabbinical school. A particular area of interest for this study was their willingness to be open about rabbinic life. Most participants shared that they were quite open about the richness and the difficulties a career in the rabbinate entails. One rabbi said that he regularly invited mentees to shadow him, and also made a point of sharing

the things he wished he had known before becoming a rabbi. Some participants also made sure to emphasize that the trajectory their own career had taken was not the only way to be rabbi, and that there were many rabbinates out there to explore and consider.

As the time for mentees to submit their applications to rabbinical school approached, mentors provided varying degrees of support through the process. If asked, they would give feedback on mentees' application essays. Unsurprisingly, it was also quite common for mentors to write recommendations for their mentees. One mentor emphasized that because of the length and depth of her relationships with many of her mentees, she felt an obligation to take the recommendation writing process very seriously:

> I know [the student] in a lot of ways better than anybody else. By the time I'm writing that recommendation. remember, I've probably already written them at least two recommendations in the course of their lives, you know, for an Israel trip or a Birthright trip, their college recommendation. I kept intense files which my…I had pictures that they drew in kindergarten, and I had every award they ever got, and I had everything they ever wrote. And I spent a lot of time writing recommendations, and I knew their strengths. And I knew their growth areas. And I think HUC appreciates when a recommendation has. These are the things that I'm hoping HUC will help my student grow. So yeah, recommendations took a really long…

In addition to his participation in the written portions of the application, one mentor also shared that he would sometimes help mentees prepare for their interviews–and not just role-playing mock questions and answers. In order to help the candidate present themselves well, he would on occasion send them shopping for an interview outfit with a member of his

congregation. In sum, in general, mentors were invested in ensuring their mentees' success through the application process.

More generally than transparency about rabbinic life and participation in the mentees' application process, one participant presented an instructive mentorship framework for us to consider as we continue our analysis of this theme: a distinction between "active" versus "passive mentorship". "Active" mentorship, she explained, constitutes the ways mentors directly guide their mentees: the content of the conversations they have, the exploratory or preparatory activities they recommend, the introductions and connections they make. "Passive" mentorship, on the other hand,

> is where most rabbis fail, and they fail because they're kvetches. And they focus on the negatives. And who would want a profession where somebody is kvetching all the time how hard they work and how underpaid they are, and how stressed they are. No one's going to want to join that profession. The passive mentorship, letting people see that you love what you do, that you're proud of what you do, that you love the fact that you're making a difference in the world when you wake up every single day and that you can weather, because of your faith and your training, you can weather whatever storm life puts before you. That passive mentorship that people see every single day on the bimah, in the classroom, in the meeting room, in the encounter in the supermarket…that makes a huge difference.

This conception of "passive mentorship" echoes the previously noted theme of the high level of job satisfaction among participants. Indeed, one rabbi shared that his "passive mentorship" shined through even to people who were not interested in the rabbinate at all:

> I actually had a guy come. It's very interesting. I was very flattered by this. A new member of the congregation, a guy in his early thirties, super accomplished, has a great job, is thinking of switching career paths. So currently he's on the faculty [at a major research university]. He's got a JD…or something…but he's thinking about a career change because…he's realizing that he doesn't want to be an academic…He's not interested in getting his name on a bunch of articles. He's trying to figure out what he wants to do next. I've met this guy once. Okay. I met him for 15 minutes outside of the young adult Rosh Hashanah service when I was just schmoozing people. He made an appointment to come in. Why? Because, he said, in 15 minutes with you I could tell how much you loved your job…He's not thinking of being a rabbi right. But he wanted to know: How do you, through dumb luck or design, end up aligning your passion with your work. And I think by dumb luck or design I have somehow succeeded in doing that. So…I think it's very clear that I love what I do…
>
> And I think that in our community rabbis…Congregants treat rabbis with *kavod*[7], and so they are not surrounded by examples of strife, of congregant disrespect for rabbis…I am fortunate enough to engage to work here they see me as a person, who loves what I do, and who receives respect, regard, and support for doing it.

The importance of this harmony between the rabbi and the community they serve to their productivity as a mentor cannot be overstated. One participant observed that he had served three communities throughout his career, two with great success and one that was not the right fit. While he sent several students to rabbinical school from his two productive

[7] Hebrew for “respect”.

placements, he sent none from the one where he was less happy with his role. Another attributed her success as a rabbinic mentor specifically to her success in shaping the community she led:

> Maybe it's this holistic system, right? That really, I feel like I'm so intentional about everything I do. And I also think I'm real. And maybe the atmosphere then and that is created is one that opens up people to a different way of thinking about their Judaism and about leadership. Also, too, you know, that sense of it's a rabbi is not a limited role. It's a vast role. It's an opportunity to incorporate so many aspects of who you are. My advice [to colleagues about mentoring future rabbis] would be about visioning for their congregation. It's not about guiding students to the rabbinate It's about the overall integrity and systems, understanding and vision of who you are as a leader.

Similarly, while he didn't attribute his success as a mentor to this, one participant described the depth of devotion and deference that his congregation had to him over the course of his career:

> I had a golden rabbinate! I started the congregation. I was adored by every member. People joined because of me. They didn't join because of some long standing, you know, deal. They went through hell to be members of my temple…When we had 300 families, you know, I'm thinking to myself, would I keep belonging to this temple? But people did, and I had, you know, board after board. They never said anything until they asked me. They never made a decision until they asked me. They never bought something or sold something unless it went by me. And I never laid down the law and said, it's got to go…I just said boys and girls act the way you gotta act, and everything's in the interest of the Temple. What's best for the temple, you know. It's not what's best for you. It's not

> what's best for me. It's what's best for the Temple, because the congregation has to outlive both, all of us.

To summarize, the village the rabbi serves and shapes plays a huge role in the raising of the rabbis who emerge from it.

Importance of Mentorship to Their Rabbinates

Participants were split on the question of the centrality of mentoring future rabbis to their own rabbinates. For some, mentorship was very much core to their calling. One shared that she believed it was “the best thing [she] could do for Judaism.” Another said she saw it as “one of the ways [her] contributions endures”. Another observed how significant it was to him personally because of what his success as a mentor suggested about the success of his rabbinate:

> It was affirming to know, know that there were others who observed this, and once they were embracing it themselves, it meant that I was giving off the positive image that I was hoping that I would…So to me, it was affirming that these students of mine saw me doing it, decided they wanted to do it, and it didn't scare them away. If anything, it encouraged them to want to consider it.

Other participants were enthusiastic about the prospect of mentoring future rabbis but noted that it was not a core part of their rabbinic identity. One described his success as a mentor as “fulfilling but not central” to his rabbinate. Another described his success as a mentor as “indirect”: "I don’t wake up each day and say, ‘How can I mentor people toward the rabbinate today?’ But I do wake up and say, ‘How can I create a rabbinate that people would want to emulate?’"

Finally, there were participants for whom inspiring future rabbis was not at all core to their rabbinates. One participant very much distanced himself from the idea of offering such guidance: “It's not my business to tell kids how they're gonna spend their life. It's their business to figure it out.” Another described her success as a mentor as “incidental”. She explained that instead, “was in guiding them to be Jews”:

> My primary focus was on: what does it mean to be a Jewish human being? And how do we, how can we be the best Jews? We can be so. And I also don't favor people. And I feel a little bit like focusing on people becoming rabbis. I don't know why I would do that.

Finally, one participant shared that despite her success as a mentor, she was “sorry [they] they didn’t make it more a part” of their rabbinate. Looking at both the trickling pipeline and individual relationships in their community, they wished they had been more proactive in guiding students along the rabbinic path.

Discussion

Having presented the findings from the interviews with both the recent alumni and the rabbinic mentors who participated in this study, this discussion will now analyze the two groups' testimony together in conversation with previous research and the clinical and theological literature reviewed. Examining these findings holistically will offer a variety of vantage points and different perspectives for understanding the dynamics and workings of the rabbinic pipeline. Then the practical implications and possible interventions suggested these findings will be considered, followed finally by an acknowledgement of the study's limitations as well as potential directions for future research.

The Second Life of the Symbolic Exemplar

Thirty-five years after Bloom (1990) coined the "symbolic exemplar" conception of the rabbinic role, it is not yet time to write its eulogy. Indeed, much recent literature on the subject (CCAR, 2019; Hartford Institute for Religion Research, 2023; Kamrass, 2021) attests to the fact that the concerns about the long-term sustainability and viability of the rabbinate as a career and lifestyle that Bloom described live on. However, it is important to observe that Bloom's argument largely emphasized the negative aspects of the rabbi's "symbolic exemplarhood"–exhaustion, burnout, loneliness–while failing to lift up the opportunities the position presents–in particular when it comes to inspiring others to follow in one's footsteps.

Gibson's (2004, abstract) conception of the role model as a "cognitive construction based on an individual's needs, wants, and ambitions" maps quite neatly onto the representational dimensions of the rabbis as "symbolic exemplar". And, weaving Bloom's and Gibson's conceptions together, it is no wonder that the most universal theme among the

rabbinic mentors who participated in the study was their exceptional job satisfaction. Who wouldn't want to be like someone who loves what they do? Who wouldn't be inspired by such passion and fulfillment? Especially when the person occupying that role represents so much more than just a profession–she represents a people, a tradition, a sacred history, and, dare I say it, God. As one of the recent alumni put it, the rabbis of her childhood were "superheroes". This celebration of the aspirational character of the rabbi as symbolic exemplar–and its potential to be an embodiment of the proverbial "person you want to be when you grow up"–is what is lacking in Bloom's thesis. In fact, Bloom anticipates rabbis' failures in, to use the language of one of the rabbinic mentors who participated in this study, the all-important area of "passive mentorship". Another way to describe "passive mentorship" would be as the presentation of a "positive symbolic exemplarhood". And such a positive presentation is likely far and away the most important role the most successful rabbinic mentors play. This is best encapsulated in a fascinating point of contrast between the two most fruitful mentors who participated in the study, both of whom have sent over 25 students to rabbinical school. One of the two proudly proclaimed that mentoring future rabbis was absolutely central to her rabbinate; the other, with perhaps a different kind of pride, shared that every prospective rabbinic student who approached him was a "shock". Still, what they have in common far outweighs the disparity between the intentionality they put into cultivating rabbinic mentees–that is their infectious zeal for the work they do.

Yet this overtly positive presentation of the rabbinic role as displayed by the most successful rabbinic mentors has not meant that the rabbinate's challenging realities were not perceived by those who chose to follow in their footsteps. To be sure, the recent alumni in the

study gushed with admiration for the rabbinic mentors who shaped them, but they also noted that they witnessed their mentors' underlying normalcy and humanity. Yes, their rabbis were "symbolic exemplars", but they were not as distant from the everyday world as that elevated terminology implies. They watched sports, TV shows, and movies. They went to the grocery store. They had friends and families. Even more mundane, when the rabbinic mentors in the study were asked what they disliked about being a rabbi, they often listed the quotidian elements of their roles that most readily overlap with the doldrums of other jobs: administrative tasks, emails, meetings, and phone calls. Many of the rabbinic mentors also shared that honesty about these less glamorous aspects of the rabbinate, and general transparency about the triumphs and travails of rabbinic life, was a salient feature of their mentoring relationships. In sum, there is a shared understanding that the rabbinate as a profession benefits when individuals enter it with a realistic portrait as opposed to a romantic illusion.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge the role of gender as it pertains to rabbinic role models. Interestingly, inconsistent with the findings of Quimby & De Santis (2006), in general the recent alumni interviewed did not describe gender matching with their mentors as an important element of their relationships. On the other hand, gender was a more pronounced theme in the narratives of the female-identified rabbinic mentors who participated in the study, with some sharing they found it difficult to find mentorship themselves, and with many reports of experiencing sexism. Sadly, given their generational proximity to the pioneer period of women in the rabbinate, this is unsurprising. (Schorr et al., 2016). In addition, in a notably divergent perspective from the recent alumni, some of the female-identified mentors said that

gender matching was important in their mentorship, as their most successful mentoring relationships were with female-identified mentees. If this is in fact a general phenomenon, the reasons underlying these differing viewpoints would be an interesting area for future inquiry.

A Jew of All Trades

The composers of *Pirkei Avot* could scarcely have imagined the multifarious nature of today's rabbinate. Furthermore, the expansiveness of the contemporary rabbinic role defies career categorization schema. While Drenth suggests that in general the most appropriate Holland (1997) code for clergy is "social", the diversity of the rabbinic personae described in this study (including the addition of the sixth persona, the "community builder" illustrates that this view is far too limited. Indeed, the rabbinic personae can easily be mapped on to several of Holland's personality types: performers are, of course, artistic; teachers and pastors are social; scholars are investigative; activists and community builders are enterprising. And many a rabbinate has been made for those whose personalities are conventional and realistic–indeed, those may be the ideal types for a kosher butcher. That said, it is also important to note that multiple rabbinic personae can and will manifest in the same individual–especially those drawn to the congregational rabbinate, which brings a notoriously diverse set of professional demands (Adelson & Ross, 2024).

The vast majority of the rabbinic mentors who participated in this study spent their careers in synagogues, and as such they presented with a variety of different rabbinic personae. Which begs the question: is there a specific rabbinic persona or set of personae that best characterizes rabbis who become the most successful mentors? While enthusiastic to varying degrees about leading worship, teaching, learning, and leading, the one element of the

rabbinate that mentors consistently identified as among the most fulfilling was the relationships their role afforded them the opportunity to foster. As one mentor put it, she delighted in "being with people in moments when they're trying to understand more deeply who they are, what the moment is, and what's possible." In short, she loved being a pastor.

This suggests, unsurprisingly, that strong pastors make strong mentors. Or at least that prospective rabbis often find a strong pastoral presence inspiring. It was notable that many of the recent alumni participants spoke as much about the smaller moments they spent with their rabbinic mentors as they did about their big public appearances. This finding is also consistent with Nouwen's (1979) theory of the ministry as the vocation of "the wounded healer". While participants were not asked to share their trauma histories, many opened up about losses and illnesses that they had suffered in their lives, and noted that a rabbi's presence at those moments made a tremendous difference in their ability to heal. This in turn inspired them to want to offer the same to others.

On Calling and Calling Others

Both the recent alumni and the rabbinic mentors reflected a notably diverse range of feelings about two of the study's core theological questions: the language of "calling" and the importance of mentoring future rabbis. In the case of the recent alumni, use of the language of "calling" to describe their draw to the rabbinate received mixed reviews. Some readily embraced the theological implications of the concept, even describing moments that resemble classic "calling" narratives. Others spoke more of their more general belief that they would find rabbinic work fulfilling. This is consistent with previous research, which found that the term's Christian connotations make its usage complicated in Jewish contexts (Sarna, 1995). In the case

of the rabbinic mentors, when asked about the centrality of mentoring future rabbis to their own rabbinates, some fully embraced a sense of obligation to sustain the chain of transmission by cultivating future spiritual leaders. Others saw their role as to inspire Jews more generally, and saw the emergence of future rabbis from their flocks as happy accidents.

Strikingly, the tension at the heart of the divergence between those participants who embraced the theological concepts of "calling" and obligation and those who eschewed them was the same: their preference between a focus on the specific versus the general. Recent alumni who adopted the language of calling readily spoke of specific experiences that formed their sense of "calling". Rabbinic mentors who felt an obligation to shepherd future colleagues readily spoke of their relationships with specific individuals in whom they saw and cultivated rabbinic potential. On the other hand, those in both samples who were less prepared to employ theological language were less comfortable with the notion of focusing on specific individuals, both themselves and others. In the case of recent alumni, these participants were uncomfortable with the idea that God chose them to be rabbis. In the case of the mentors, one of them even went so far as to say she didn't know why she would give special attention to students who were prospective rabbis. Instead, these participants gravitated towards more general approaches to potential personal fulfillment in the rabbinate and effective community leadership.

Those contrasts acknowledged, one unifying theme across all participants was the feeling of a call–if not a "calling"–to serve the Jewish people. Recent alumni and mentors alike felt drawn to the opportunities the rabbinate would afford them to infuse their communities and the lives of those within them with the richness of Jewish tradition. This shared motivation

towards Jewish communal service is obviously theological in nature, but as described above, the underlying narratives, vocabularies, and frameworks that inspire individuals to pursue its ends vary in significant ways. One more note: interestingly, this sense of a call to serve reflects some features of Fowler's (1995) sixth, and most advanced, "universalizing" stage of faith, which is unsurprising given that leaders who attain this level often serve the public good.

Cultivating Leaders: Hands-on and Hand-off's

One of the most interesting findings in both portions of the study was that the mythical "shoulder tap" moment is largely a myth. While some of the rabbinic mentors shared that they might occasionally call an enthusiastic nursery schooler "Rabbi Shapiro" or they might have a frank conversation with a star *b'nai mitzvah* student, most said that they were approached by their mentees for guidance on their paths to the rabbinate. In congruence with what the rabbinic mentors shared, most of the recent alumni did not offer a "shoulder tap" narrative–at least one received from a rabbinic mentor. All of this is to say, if we understand a "shoulder tap" to be a sort of *smicha* (a pre-ordination, if you will), most mentors leave the "hands-on" part to the actual moment of ordination.

That said, most mentors were still quite hands-on when it came to guiding their mentees to rabbinical school: making connections, reading essays, writing references, and preparing for interviews. But the most important things mentors offered their mentees–and another unifying theme across both sets of participants in the study–were "hand-offs" of leadership opportunities. Invitations to participate publicly in worship services, to lead youth groups, to found fellowships, even offers of employment, were regularly reported by the

rabbinic mentors and the recent alumni alike. On both sides of the coin, these invitations were seen as and understood to be investments in future Jewish leaders.

This is consistent with much of the prior literature on this subject. Referring back to two of our psychological frameworks for career selection, it affirms elements of both Krumboltz, Mitchell, and Jones (1976) and Lent, Brown, and Hackett (1994). In the case of Krumboltz, Mitchell, and Jones (1976), the leadership opportunities offered by rabbinic mentors presented both environmental conditions and learning experiences that allowed prospective rabbis to see themselves in rabbinic roles. This is also consistent with Miloni's (2023) identification of "Mentors that Show Interest and Give Encouragement Toward Ministry" as an important influence on clergy career selection. In the case of Lent, Brown, and Hackett's (1994) Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), which emphasizes self-efficacy and feedback loops between individuals' perceptions of their abilities and the outcomes they achieve, the positive feedback prospective rabbis received for taking on these leadership roles—such as being praised for their public speaking—proved critical in the development of their sense of self-efficacy in rabbinic roles.

Finally, the essential role of leadership opportunities in the paths of prospective rabbis also aligns well with the "typecasting" phenomenon described by many of the recent alumni–that they were perceived as "the rabbinic type". At many points along their journeys, they were afforded the opportunity to see themselves and to be seen by others as Jewish leaders. When they ultimately became rabbis, they accepted the casting call.

Rabbinic Relationships and Identity Development

From a theological perspective, Jewish tradition teaches that the teacher-student relationship is akin to the parent-child relationship. From a clinical perspective, attachment theory explains how the dynamics in the relationships between children and their earliest caregivers (especially their parents) influence their psychological development (Wallin, 2007). Weaving these two perspectives together, it is no wonder that for many of the rabbinic mentors in the study, their most prolific periods of mentorship clustered around students who were the same age as their own children. Though they hesitated to describe their mentees as "their children", they were comfortable using the language of "love" to characterize their relationships. Consistent with this finding, the recent alumni in the study also often spoke of their mentors in parental terms, especially noting their presence at critical moments in their youth. Importantly, the parent-child paradigm was not the only frame of reference of these mentor-mentee relationships. A sibling relationship paradigm also often appeared in several of the narratives, especially when mentors and mentees met in more informal settings like camp and youth groups.

Still, such age clustering between mentors and mentees was not a universal phenomenon–indeed, many of the rabbinic mentors noted that they guided a steady stream of future rabbis throughout their careers. Applying the framework of Erikson's (1980) stages of psychosocial development, rabbinic careers typically span from the latter end of the "intimacy versus isolation" phase through the "generativity versus stagnation" phase, and perhaps into the early portion of the "integrity versus despair" phase. As has been discussed, the most prolific rabbinic mentors center relationships in their rabbinates. This can often be to the

detriment of their most intimate relationships–with family and friends–but to the benefit of their careers. As the cycle continues into the most productive phase of their careers, those relational investments pay professional dividends in the form of the vibrant communities they lead and the future leaders they inspire. One final note: interestingly, as one of the rabbinic mentors, now in the "integrity versus despair" stage, looked back on her career, she shared that, despite her success, seeing the current state of the rabbinic pipeline as a whole, she wished she had spent more time cultivating potential future colleagues. One wonders how many other rabbis might say the same at the end of their careers.

Applying Erikson's (1980) framework to the recent alumni, most reported that they found themselves first drawn to the rabbinate in their youth, in particular during the "identity versus role confusion" stage of their teenage years. It is unsurprising that achieving early clarity on one's role–particularly a role as unique as the rabbinate–would be an important step towards the resolution of that core identity conflict. It is also notable that many of the rabbinic mentors articulated a particular passion for youth work–recall the mentor who said he skipped board meetings, but never youth group gatherings–illustrating the importance of relational investment during this key period in prospective rabbis' lives.

Practical Implications and Possible Interventions

Two parallel findings from both halves of this study were especially salient: the most prolific rabbinic mentors were highly fulfilled in their rabbinates, and during their lives leading up to rabbinical school, the recent rabbinic alumni encountered rabbis who they perceived were highly fulfilled in their rabbinates who inspired them to follow in their footsteps. While

seemingly obvious, it is worth stating explicitly: rabbinic job satisfaction and the perception thereof seem to be a fundamental driver of the rabbinic pipeline.

Here the silent evidence is screaming: the vast majority of rabbis do not guide a single student to rabbinic school over the course of their careers. While some may serve in settings that structurally diminish the likelihood of the possibility of finding future rabbis–like smaller communities and non-communal roles like as hospital chaplaincy–most of the rabbinic mentors who participated in the study were not beneficiaries of "crimes of opportunity' presented by an expanded pool of potential mentees supplied by a larger congregation. Indeed, many worked or currently work in communities where there were or are multiple synagogues of similar sizes–or even larger congregations nearby–and they have been nonetheless particularly prolific amongst their peers.

An obvious hypothesis that emerges from these findings is that a substantial portion of rabbis have not attained the baseline professional fulfillment necessary to inspire others to consider becoming future colleagues. A full inquiry into the job satisfaction of the rabbinate is well beyond the scope of the present study, but such a survey would be highly informative towards understanding that piece of the puzzle. That said, for those rabbis who are in fact fulfilled in their roles but who are nevertheless not mentoring prospective rabbinical students, a possible intervention could be education about the concept of "passive mentorship" and the importance of "loving their jobs in public". Many rabbis may not realize the urgency and power of using their pulpits to inspire others in this way.

Given the rarity of the actual rabbinic "shoulder tap" and the diversity of views rabbinic mentors expressed about actively encouraging students to consider the rabbinate versus

waiting to be approached themselves for mentorship, two potential middle ground interventions stand out. First, rabbis should continue to focus on creating leadership opportunities in the communities they serve, especially for young people, "pre-ordaining" them by giving them the opportunity to self-actualize in rabbinic-style roles. Second, rabbis might consider actively hosting regular opportunities to educate the members of their communities–again, especially young people–about what it is actually like to be a rabbi. Finally, rabbis who are open to "shoulder tapping" should be encouraged to do so, with the caveat that they should not be discouraged when those whose shoulders they tap choose to go into different professions, as that is a regular outcome.

The diversity of rabbinic personae suggests that different student recruitment might benefit from pursuing different marketing and messaging approaches that speak to different types of prospective rabbinical students. What inspires the "performer" might scare the "scholar" and vice versa. Specifically highlighting rabbis who embody qualities of each persona and recruiting rabbis to speak to prospective students with similar backgrounds and interests could be a powerful strategy to pursue.

Finally, given the sense of isolation that was sadly pervasive in the CCAR's 2019 survey of its members, it is notable how fulfilled the most prolific rabbinic mentors were in the relational aspects of their rabbinates. Tellingly, rabbinic mentors in the study did not list loneliness among the realities of the rabbinate they most disliked; and the recent alumni in the study did not list loneliness as one of the challenges of the rabbinate they perceived in their own mentors. This suggests that we could consider the possibility that opportunities to mentor future colleagues could prove one way–among many–to remedy the sense of isolation that so

many rabbis feel. Furthermore, centering the relational "benefits" of the rabbinate could be key to inspiring more students to follow the path–especially those who manifest the "pastoral" and "community builder" personae.

Limitations of the Study

This study carries several notable limitations. First, both the recent alumni and rabbinic mentor segments were conducted with convenience samples, which may not be representative of the broader population of rabbis and prospective rabbis. In addition, the minimal professional and modest geographic diversity of the study participants, in particular the overrepresentation of rabbinic mentors from congregational settings and of alumni from HUC's New York campus, also limit the generalizability of its findings.

Second, the study's qualitative approach, though rich in detail and depth, inherently introduces limitations related to subjectivity and retrospective bias. Participants' reflections about their journeys to the rabbinate and mentorship experiences are inevitably influenced by personal memory, selective recollection, and present-day perceptions of their rabbinic identities. A future approach might attempt to capture these reflections closer to a key point in time, such as interviewing a rabbinical school applicant and their mentor immediately after an application has been submitted.

Third, while some attention was given to gender dynamics—particularly within mentorship experiences—the limited exploration of intersectionality, including socio-economic, racial, and ethnic diversity, may restrict the applicability of findings to a broader and more diverse rabbinic candidate pool.

Directions for Future Research

These limitations point toward opportunities for future research, including more extensive and diverse sampling, mixed-methodological approaches, and longitudinal analyses to broaden and deepen our understanding of the rabbinic pipeline from both ends. For example, one could imagine conducting a series of quantitative surveys or qualitative interviews of rabbis who have written references for students applying to HUC. One could also imagine conducting a detailed analysis of rabbinical students' application essays to see how they have changed over time in terms of tone, content, and more. Finally, one could imagine studies that research the silent evidence of individuals who might have considered becoming rabbis–especially youth group and camp leaders–but ultimately chose to pursue other professions. Such inquiries would help us develop more robust policy recommendations and interventions as we seek to patch the leaks in the rabbinic pipeline.

Conclusion

The famous opening lines of *Pirkei Avot* establish a chain of rabbinic transmission that goes all the way back to Moses and Mt. Sinai. These words come to teach us that every individual's path to the rabbinate is ultimately but a single link in the vast, intergenerational journey of the Jewish people, and of Jewish tradition. Currently, the continuity of one contemporary branch of that chain is at risk: the American Reform rabbinate. The decline in enrollment in the rabbinic ordination program at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institution of Religion presents a generational crisis.

This demonstration project has sought to understand the fluid dynamics of the rabbinic pipeline by examining it from both ends: through an exploration of the paths that recent HUC rabbinic alumni took to their eventual alma mater and through an investigation into a unique cohort of the most prolific rabbinic mentors. The theoretical frames of reference applied to the findings from these parallel studies concerned theological concepts such as "calling", the role of the rabbi, and obligation to transmit of Jewish tradition, as well as clinical concepts such as the psychology of career selection, the impact of role models, identify development, attachment theory, and the psychic burdens of serving as clergy.

The parallel studies surface several themes individually. First the study of recent alumni confirmed previous research which characterized five rabbinic personae–the performer, the teacher, the scholar, the activist, and the pastor–while introducing a sixth: the community builder. These personae are not mutually exclusive, with many rabbis exhibiting several of them, and they manifest not only in Jewish contexts, but in fact throughout the lives of those who choose the rabbinic path. This study also affirmed the significance of both family dynamics

and Jewish institutions in the shaping of Jewish identity development, especially opportunities to pursue leadership roles from a young age. Finally, the recent alumni consistently pointed to the essential role powerful rabbinic role models played in their desire to follow in their footsteps.

Which brings us to our second study, which focused on a group of such exemplary rabbinic role models. As it turns out, the most substantial influence these role models have on their mentees does not necessarily come in the form of direct, "active mentorship", but rather in the form of "passive mentorship", presenting themselves as positive "Symbolic Exemplars" who genuinely find joy and fulfillment in the work of the rabbinate. The most successful mentors also developed rich, warm, and deep relationships with their mentees, investing their time and talent in guiding them, not just instrumentally as potential future colleagues, but more generally as Jews. Rather than the "hands-on" mentorship of "shoulder taps", they often engaged in leadership "hand-offs", creating opportunities for mentees to shine and find fulfillment in rabbinic type roles.

This study presents several practical implications for addressing the current crisis in the rabbinic pipeline. First, given the importance of job fulfillment in successful rabbinic mentorship and the perception of job fulfillment in successful rabbinic recruitment, it is critical that a study of the career satisfaction of those currently serving in the rabbinate be conducted, followed by the evaluation and implementation of systemic interventions informed by the results of that research. Second, rabbis should be educated on the importance of "passive mentorship" to attracting prospective future colleagues to the field. Third, rabbinic recruitment might benefit from the employment of diverse marketing and messaging strategies that would appeal to the

diversity of rabbinic personae. Fourth, for the benefit of both current rabbis and their future colleagues–and for both theological and clinical reasons–rabbis should be encouraged to place their relational roles at the center of their rabbinic work.

At this critical moment in the American rabbinate and in the American Jewish community as a whole, inspiring sacred leadership is more essential than ever. This demonstration project offers new perspectives on the pipeline that feeds that field, and will hopefully illuminate ways to both improve the experience of those currently working as rabbis and those who aspire to join them.

The pipeline is not yet dry. The chain is not yet broken. A generational challenge presents a generational opportunity to dream of a better rabbinate, a rabbinate filled with Jewish leaders who will truly be symbolic exemplars in the best, most inspiring sense of those two words. May this be God's will–and ours.

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Appendix A: Consent Form

Google Forms Link:
https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSdOmaWW1RDMywBZTvy2tCyiOXSVbBBVS56MKqLkGz_AJrf3Yg/viewform

D. Min. Demonstration Project Interview Consent Form

Project Title: Journeys to the Rabbinate: Understanding Who Becomes a Rabbi and Who Helps Them Get There

Principal Investigator: Rabbi Daniel S. Ross, D.Min. Candidate

Research Supervisors: Wynd Harris, Ph.D., D.Min.; Rabbi Richard Address, D.Min.; Rev. Ann Aker, M.Div., LP, NCPsyA

Institution: Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion

Study Purpose: To understand the factors that influence individuals' decisions to pursue rabbinical education and the role of mentorship in that journey.

Description of Research: You are invited to participate in a research study about journeys to the rabbinate and rabbinic mentorship. You have been selected either as a recent graduate of HUC-JIR or as a rabbi who has mentored multiple students into rabbinical programs.
Procedure: If you agree to participate, you will engage in one 45-minute interview via Zoom, in which you will answer questions about your personal background and share your experiences either about your journey to becoming a rabbi or about mentoring others on that path. The interview will be recorded and transcribed for research purposes.

Voluntary Participation: Participation is entirely voluntary. You may withdraw from the study at any time without consequence and may decline to answer any question.

Risks and Benefits: There are no anticipated risks associated with this study. Some participants may find discussing their career journey thought-provoking or reflective. There is no direct benefit to participants; however, your insights will contribute to research on rabbinical recruitment and may benefit future rabbinic education and mentoring.

Confidentiality: Your identity and all personal information will be kept confidential. Data collected will be stored securely and only accessible to the researcher and research supervisors. Any publications or presentations will exclude identifying information, unless expressed written consent is obtained prior to publication.

Contact Information: If you have questions about this research, please contact Dan Ross at dan.ross@huc.edu or by phone at 610-613-7397.

Email:

Your Name:

Today's Date:

Summary
By checking the box below, you acknowledge that:

- You have read and understood this consent form.
- You voluntarily agree to participate in this research.
- You understand that you can withdraw at any time.
- You agree to have your interview recorded and transcribed.

Consent: I consent.