INSTRUCTIONS FROM AUTHOR TO LIBRARY FOR THESES AND PRIZE ESSAYS

Sample

AUTHOR Carla Freedman

TITLE The Rebbetzin in America in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries

TYPE OF THESIS: Ph.D. [ ] D.H.L. [ ] Rabbinic [✓]

Master's [ ] Prize Essay [ ]

1. May circulate [ ]) Not necessary
2. Is restricted [✓] for 10 years.) for Ph.D.) thesis

Note: The Library shall respect restrictions placed on theses or prize essays for a period of no more than ten years.

I understand that the Library may make a photocopy of my thesis for security purposes.

3. The Library may sell photocopies of my thesis. ___ yes ✓ no

Feb 20/90
Date

Carla Freedman
Signature of Author

Library Record

Microfilmed August 1990
Date

Marilyn Kruider
Signature of Library Staff Member

RESTRICTION REMOVED 9/14/20
Date

SS
Initials

THE REBBETZIN IN AMERICA IN THE NINETEENTH AND TWENTIETH CENTURIES

Carla Freedman

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for Ordination

Referee: Dr.Jonathan Sarna

Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion

1990

This thesis is dedicated to the women about whom it is written; to the women who generously contributed to this work by sharing their own reflections with the author; to the wives of rabbinic students, especially in my own class; to the partners of female rabbis who are largely excluded from the present consideration; and to all the rebbetzins throughout the centuries, whose experience is honoured herein.

I am indebted to Dr. Jonathan Sarna, my advisor, for his patience advice and encouragement while the work was underway.

And I am especially grateful to Jeanne Shanin, my room-mate, for enduring this experience, helping by editing the final draft, and always being an advocate for the subjects of this thesis.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DIGEST

This thesis discusses the subject of the rabbi's wife, sometimes known as the rebbetzin, in America in the 19th and 20th centuries. Consideration of the husbands of female rabbis is outside the scope of this work.

The thesis is divided into six chapters. Each chapter stands separately, though taken together they form a composite portrait of the rebbetzin. The first chapter serves as an introduction, and provides some insight into the role traditionally played by the rabbi's wife, as well as some indication of the controversy surrounding the use of the Yiddish term today. The second chapter reviews five studies which either focus directly on rabbis' wives or which use them to illustrate the case being made in the study.

Chapter Three examines the lives of women married to Christian clergy, drawing parallels and contrasts with the experience of rabbis' wives. This chapter presents a model for describing the different styles which wives of clergy bring to their roles. The fourth chapter explores the rebbetzin as a fictional character in American literature.

Chapter Five offers the words of contemporary American

rabbis' wives, as they reflect upon their own experience. This section is drawn from both published and unpublished works. The final chapter, number six, is the conclusion. It reflects upon the themes developed in the previous chapters, and suggests areas to be considered either in the expansion of this work or in separate studies to be undertaken at another time.

This thesis is clearly only the first step in any comprehensive study of this topic, and should not be mistaken for an exhaustive study.

CHAPTER ONE

THE REBBETZIN

The title of "rabbi" is, today, conferred by rabbinical seminaries upon those who have successfully completed the requirements of the particular school; these may include a program of courses, a number of sermons given for the purpose of evaluation, a thesis, some supervised teaching, and some practical experience in the role of rabbi. The title "rebbetzin" is acquired when a woman marries a man who is a rabbi;[1] women who marry rabbinical students acquire the title whenever they accompany their husbands to the congregation he serves as a student, and gain it permanently when he is ordained.

There is no course of study for those who become rebbetzins. As some of the women quoted below, in Chapter Five, indicate, there have been some efforts to provide guidance for the wives of rabbinical students during their husbands' course of study. Yet, these have been sporadic at best, and only marginally useful, by most accounts. And of course, such efforts do nothing to address the concerns of women who marry men already ordained.

The title "rebbetzin" has been, and for some people continues to be, considered an honour, as Robert Weinberg observes in his Ph.D. thesis, The Absorption of Wives into Their Husbands's Work [2]. The term is Yiddish, and means the wife of a rabbi [3]. It therefore arose in the Ashkenazi Jewish community of Europe, amongst the Germans, Poles and Russians who spoke their own dialects of Yiddish.

Not many works of non-fiction provide a portrait of the kind of woman for whom this title was coined. However, fiction, often a mirror to reality, can fill in where otherwise there is little or no material. Rabbi Wolfe Kelman, answering a request by the author of this thesis, indicates that "The best material on the European rebbetzin is in a work of fiction by Chaim Grade, Rabbis and Wives".[4] That book consists of three novellas, originally written in Yiddish and subsequently translated into English for publication in 1982.[5]

In the first of these, titled "The Rebbetzin", a portrait is given which may serve as a base line for this study. The rebbetzin in question is Perele, the wife of Rabbi Uri-Zvi Koenigsberg.

> Her father was a great rabbi and her husband is a great rabbi. The Divine Spirit shines from his face. Her sons

> could have been rabbis, too, but they preferred being businessmen.... [6]

A comparison is made between this rebbetzin and another who has been emotionally destroyed by the death of her only child. Of Perele, it is said that "...she shines like the sun..."[7] Her personal style of clothing was old-fashioned,

> Yet somehow Perele appeared more stately than they, even though she wore no jewellery except for simple gold earrings...But when Perele raised her huge, clear eyes and wrinkled her tall forehead, one felt that this little Rebbetzin was the embodiment of wisdom itself. There was about her an aura of noble breeding and gentle ways.[8]

When the community is unable to offer the rabbi a raise in pay, Perele, insulted by the suggestion that she should augment the couple's income by becoming a seller of yeast, orchestrates their departure from that town.[9] She ultimately chooses their new home, decorates it, and selectes the synagogue in which her husband was to pray.[10] She advises her husband on strategy to increase his status in their new town, while she embarks on a course of ingratiation with the other rebbetzins.[11] These worthies she entertains with lavish trays of delicacies she herself prepares [12]. Perele

manipulates her husband in order to seek revenge on the town's rabbi who had, years previous, been engaged to marry her, and who had broken off the engagement because of Perele's shrewish personality.

Grade gives us a fine portrait of a woman who knows how to use the power that goes with her honorific title. Perele succeeds in her goal of having her husband supplant her erstwhile suitor, because she is alive to the possibilities, while he is a dedicated scholar.

From this portrait, we learn that a rebbetzin can be a powerful figure in a community, not overtly like the rabbi, but in a more discreet way. She can influence the women directly as a role model, and can affect the men indirectly through their wives.

Rabbi Sylvan Schwartzman, in an article in the Journal of Reform Judaism, gives an interesting description of a rebbetzin:

> ...Being a rebbetzin is one of the most skilled professions - a combination of good Jewess; wife; mother; homemaker; assistant pastor; consultant on

> preaching, rabbinic strategy, and programming; unofficial guide to thecongregation and particularly the Sisterhood; an idea-person an informal educator; and general counselor to the rabbi. It is a role that requires the competence of a social worker, public opinion analyst, therapist, group worker, psychologist, educator, financial specialist, and much more.[13]

This description serves to transport the rebbetzin from her original habitat in Europe to the shores of North America. Schwartzman's description builds upon the implications of Grade's portrayal of Perele. In America, the rebbetzin continued along the lines of her European experience, but as the role of the rabbi came closer to that of Christian clergy, taking on a pastoral function not heretofore associated with it, so too did the rebbetzin's role evolve. Thus many of the competencies listed by Schwartzman would have been unfamiliar to Perele and those she represents.

Schwartzman provided his description in an article lobbying for the upgrading of the status of the rebbetzin.[14] That he feels the need to do so suggests that the title, and the position to which it is attached, have somehow fallen on hard times. In fact, Schwartzman acknowledges that some women don't like the role at all, and he sees in this a

foreshadowing of misfortune for rabbinic marriages.[15]

He argues that "Judaism itself is in need of good rebbetzins ...Jews can benefit from the role-model of the Jewess who cares about religion; who is knowledgeable about Judaism; who leads a dedicated Jewish life; who is supportive of husband and family; and who works hard at promoting the synagogue, the Jewish community and Jewish values in the community at large...(who does) not bear the label of 'professional Jew' because everyone knows that today she is free to follow her own interests." [16]

He goes on to argue that a woman truly involved as a rebbetzin strengthens her relationship with her husband, enriching her marriage thereby.[17] He acknowledges that "...a rabbi's wife may have to engage in part-time work, combining a half day of employment with a half day of being a rebbetzin" because of financial concerns, [18] but he does not seem to recognize the fact that this arrangement permits no real career on the part of the woman. Dr. Schwartzman has apparently not felt the impact of the women's movement, nor has he noticed that women are employed across the occupational spectrum, and that not all jobs lend themselves to part-time work. The only purpose for a woman's employment, according to Dr. Schwartzman, is to augment the family income.

He proposes adjustments to IRS regulations which do not allow the deduction of child care expenses while a woman is functioning as rebbetzin, and encourages the CCAR to plan training sessions for the rebbetzin to "sharpen her skills" [19]. And he closes with the hopeful observation that some people "...are taking a second look at the enormous potential in the once-customary role played by the rabbi's wife."[20]

Dr. Schwartzman's point of view is probably characteristic of rabbis (and perhaps many people) of his generation. But the times have changed, and it is therefore not surprising that of the three rebbetzins who reply to Dr. Schwartzman's article, none do so favourably. Lynn Stahl says that a woman needs to have a strong sense of her own self worth in order to be a good rebbetzin. She can withstand the strains on the rabbinical family "...if the individual views herself as an entity unto herself, and does not rely upon her linkage to her husband's success or failure." [21] Mrs. Stahl recognizes that successful rabbinical marriages, apparently Dr. Schwartzman's major concern, can be found with wives who are actively involved as rebbetzins and wives who are not.[22] Nor does Mrs. Stahl want to see the role upgraded; she rejects the implication that it has been down-graded, and declares herself content in her position.[23]

Carolyn Oppenheimer, who, when the article was written was married to a rabbinical student, says: "Advancing our mate's (sic) career should not be our concern....To be fulfilled through your mate's career is an unhealthy sublimation of your totality as a person". [24] She responds to the suggestion that wives work only for financial reasons by raising the possibility that a wife may earn more money than her rabbi-husband. In such circumstances, "...should he seek a part-time rabbinate spending the rest of his time advancing her career?"[25]

She further objects to equating the status of rebbetzin with that of a woman rabbi, which Schwartzman also suggested, [26] noting that rabbis receive five years of training, while their spouses get none.[27]

Joan Karff, also responding to the Schwartzman article, mentions her own career as a dancer, teacher and choreographer. She says: " To have stifled my creative needs and potential would have been unbearably frustrating." [28] Mrs. Karff indicates that she enjoys a role much reduced from that of the traditional rebbetzin, but one that she has defined for herself. Her contributions to the congregation are genuinely reflective of herself, and freely made.[29]

These responses make it clear that Dr. Schwartzman is not in

touch with the thinking of today's American women. But they are mild, compared to the response of Myra Yedwab. She writes: "Rebbetzin is a title not acceptable to Jews who believe in the equality of women." [30] She argues that we must "...strengthen rabbis...to resist congregational encroachment on their private time and private lives."[31] Further, says Yedwab, "It is simply wrong to define a person by their (sic) relation to another person's profession." [32] She concludes that "The person should have enough self-respect to insist that the term rebbetzin not be used and to end once and for all the image of the self-sacrificing nochshlepper the term implies." [33]

It is clear that even the term "rebbetzin" arouses strong feelings. This was made apparent during the discussions at the Spouses' Network meetings at the CCAR Convention which the author was privileged to attend in June, 1989. Some women declined to assist the author at all, and heatedly advised not using the term "rebbetzin" under any circumstances. Others considered it a slight to the husbands of female rabbis, though none were at any of the meetings the author attended. The debate over the acceptability of the term rebbetzin is largely ignored in the present study.

For the purposes of this work, the term "rebbetzin" is used to indicate the wife of a rabbi. Yet, there is some ambiguity because the term implies something more. Some rabbis' wives decline the role of rebbetzin, even though the title, by definition, applies. Marcia Weinberg, the wife of Rabbi Joseph Weinberg, has provided some insight into this apparent contradiction; she defines rebbetzin as "...the relationship between the rabbi's wife and the congregation." [34] When a woman chafes at the title, it may in fact be the expected relationship with the congregation that she finds uncomfortable.

The several chapters which follow each approach the subject of the rebbetzin from a unique perspective; taken together, they are intended to present some insight into the life of the rebbetzin in America. Chapter Two offers information gathered by five different studies which focused on rabbis' wives themselves, either directly or indirectly. Chapter Three draws comparisons and contrasts between the rabbi's wife and her Christian counterpart. Chapter Four examines the rebbetzin as she has been portrayed in American fiction. Chapter Five presents the reflections of some actual rebbetzins on their lives and experiences. Chapter Six contains some concluding thoughts on this subject.

It should be noted that there have not been, to date, any comprehensive studies on this subject. This work is only a first effort in that direction.

And it should be noted that the author is deeply indebted to the many rebbetzins who made their personal reflections available for inclusion in this thesis. It is hoped that what follows will be of interest to them, and an honest beginning at a serious study of their changing role and historical significance.

END NOTES

1.The subject of the spouses of female rabbis is discussed, briefly, in the last chapter of this thesis. The present work considers the wives of male rabbis; perhaps a future work will bring the subject of male spouses into clearer focus.

2.Weinberg, Robert Manfred. The Absorption of Wives into Their Husbands' Work: The Phenomenon, its Antecedents and Consequences. Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois, 1984. p.2.

3.Weinberg, op. cit. p.2.

4.Kelman, Rabbi Wolfe. In a letter to the author, dated August 28, 1989.

5.Grade, Chaim. Rabbis and Wives. Translated by Harold Rabinowitz and Inna Hecker Grade. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982.

6.Grade, op. cit. p.22.

7.Grade, ibid. p.22.

8.Grade, ibid. p.22.

9.Grade, ibid. p.16-19.

10.Grade, ibid.p.19.

11.Grade, ibid. p.35.

12.Grade, ibid. p.35.

13.Schwartzman, Rabbi Sylvan D. "Is There Still Room for the Rebbetzin Today?", in The Journal of Reform Judaism, Fall, 1981.p.64.

14.Schwartzman, op. cit. p.64.

15.Schwartzman, ibid. p.64.

16.Schwartzman, ibid. p.65.

17.Schwartzman, ibid. p.65-66.

18.Schwartzman, ibid. p.66.

19.Schwartzman, ibid. p.66.

20.Schwartzman, ibid. p.66.

21.Stahl, Lynn. A Response to Dr. Schwartzman's article in the Fall, 1981 issue of The Journal of Reform Judaism. p.67-8.

22.Stahl, op. cit. p.68.

23.Stahl, ibid. p.68.

24.Oppenheimer, Carolyn. A Response to Dr. Schwartzman's article in the Fall, 1981 issue of The Journal of Reform Judaism. p.69.

25.Oppenheimer, op. cit. p.69.

26.Schwartzman, op. cit. p.66.

27.Oppenheimer, op. cit. p.70.

28.Karff, Joan. A Response to Dr. Schwartzman's article in the Fall issue of The Journal of Reform Judaism. p.70.

29.Karff, op. cit. p.71.

30.Yedwab, Myra. A letter to the editor titled "Don't Call Me Rebbetzin", in the March, 1982 issue of Reform Judaism, which had previously reprinted the Schwartzman article from The Journal of Reform Judaism. p.2.

31.Yedwab, op. cit. p.2.

32.Yedwab, ibid.p.2.

33.Yedwab, ibid. p.2.

34.Weinberg, Marcia. "Rachel, the Rabbi's Wife", in the Journal of Reform Judaism, Winter, 1979.p.28.

CHAPTER TWO

ON RABBIS' WIVES: A REVIEW OF SOME RELEVANT STUDIES

The subject of the rabbi's wife has been addressed by a number of people, either directly or indirectly, in the course of research work. This chapter will consider several such studies, most of which were undertaken in fulfillment of certain requirements for academic degrees.

Robert M. Weinberg wrote his Ph.D. thesis on The Absorption of Wives Into Their Husbands' Work: The Phenomenon, Its Antecedents and Consequences. He used as his model the rabbi's wife.[1] Jack H. Bloom wrote his Ph.D thesis on The Rabbi As Symbolic Exemplar, making frequent references to the implications of this phenomenon for the rabbi's wife and family.[2] Leslie R. Freedman wrote his Ph.D. thesis on Stress in the Rabbinate: A Report on a Nationwide Study of Conservative and Reform Rabbis. This study contains a section on rabbinic marital stress.[3] Shannie Goldstein did her Master's thesis on the Emotional, Physical, and Financial Well-Being of Widows of Reform Rabbis.[4] The Lenn Report, Rabbi and Synagogue in Reform Judaism, was commissioned by the Central Conference of American Rabbis; it contains sections on the rabbi's wife and on the wives of seminarians.[5]

Bloom presents the crux of the matter with his work on the rabbi as symbolic exemplar. Using role theory he states that "a role consists of the system of expectations which exist in the social world surrounding the occupant of a position - expectations regarding his behavior toward occupants of some other position".[6] He points out that "Even ministers' wives have been seen to share the symbolic role of their husbands...(which is) partly an embodiment of the community conscience. This has the effect of setting her apart and isolating her." [7]

Bloom describes the result of role expectations on clergy and their family: "Clergymen behave at some level in a way they think their constituency would expect them to behave. This often includes the family. It can lead to being very scrupulous, a bit paranoid, and very careful that one is not seen doing things one 'should not do'." [8] These role expectations are not confined to public occasions and situations." The clergyman's life as husband and father is more exposed (presumably than that of other men). Though in Protestantism and Judaism he is allowed to marry, yet he lives in a glass house and what people expect to see in that glass house is an exemplary relationship among all who live there." [9]

Bloom argues that these expectations are not lost upon the

rabbis he studied. "The rabbis are very much aware of these expectations that others have of them. They know their wife (sic) and family are also included by the layman in the symbolic picture."[10] Rabbis affirmed that this inclusion is a separate source of stress for them, in addition to the stress they experience as a result of their own role as exemplar: "The rabbi says that tension is present because of the involvement of his wife and family in the rabbi's symbolic role...The rabbi's family is seen as an extension of his exemplarhood." [11]

One area in which expectations arise from the congregation is that of religious observance. "There are certain standards of religious behavior that a congregation expects not only of the rabbi but of the rabbi's family..."[12] Some rabbis' wives experience no particular difficulty in living with these often unarticulated standards: "...she fits into the community, she takes the role as a rabbi's wife, fits into that role very nicely without any conflict, no conflicts presented. She recognizes that there are some places she has to be because of the fact that she is my wife and is willing to accept those situations with grace and a sense of responsibility." [13] In assessing this rabbi's reflections on his wife's successful undertaking of her role, Bloom comments, "A rebbetzin who meets these kinds of requirements may be worth her weight in gold". This clearly implies that not all rebbetzins are able or willing to meet these

requirements.

Sometimes the religious expectations derive from the rabbi himself, and are a source of stress for that reason. One rabbi, whose denominational affiliation is not specified, reported that he was unable to persuade his wife to observe the traditional Jewish dietary laws. He saw this as a personal and professional failure, but ultimately came to realize that his job is not to persuade others; rather, his job is to be an example.[14]

In another comment, a rabbi indicated that at first he felt that he had to defend his wife's dietary practices, but later came to see that he did not. Still, it nearly kept him out of the rabbinate.[15]

Yet, the expectations of religious behavior on the part of the rabbi's wife can have a large impact on the rabbi's success. This can even be extended to the rabbi's wife's wardrobe. For one man, his wife's choice of pants suits for Shabbat morning services was the cause of an uproar in the congregation. The religious committee took a position against this form of attire: "They printed an article in the bulletin and I had to go print a retraction."[16]

Bloom observes that "The rabbi's wife's piety is a matter of public concern."[17] One rabbi wrote to him that "she (his

wife) rarely comes on Friday night but she tries to come every Shabbat morning because that's our style of living and it annoys the hell out of some people. That's tough...this is the way it's going to be and people are going to like it or not."[18]

The role of symbolic exemplar, for both rabbi and family, is not without its perils. "The two dangerous sicknesses of the rabbinate are ulcers and heart troubles. My wife got the ulcers. She had to have her stomach removed two years ago. Unfortunately, she took a lot of it (criticism) to heart, kept it inside and got ulcers but she felt that her actions were such that she helped me in my work."[19]

Not all rabbis' wives enjoy or cultivate their role. According to one respondent to Bloom's study, "The rebbetzin having represented a certain stereotype, just as the rabbi plays his very important and mysterious role, so does the rabbi's wife".[20] Bloom comments that "...it's only natural that some rebbetzins have 'delighted in trying to puncture the image'. How do you stop people asking a nice Jewish girl, 'How do you like being a rebbetzin?'" [21]

Moreover, not all rabbis' wives accept the role per se. They establish their independence and individuality vis a vis their husbands, and come to a congregation with the wife's

status clear in the couple's minds. "For some, defending their (the rabbi's) own individuality involves defending their wives' individuality. One made it part of a pre-nuptial agreement. 'Before I was married I said to my wife, "Remember, you're the wife, you're the mother of the children, and you're not part of the congregation in the sense of the professional.'"[22] Another rabbi made his wife's position clear to his congregation before he accepted the job with them: "In the initial interview I asked them about their attitudes towards rabbis, their wives and families...Another did it during the 'honeymoon'."[23]

One man wrote to Bloom: "I've made it very clear in this congregation that my wife doesn't work for the congregation....I introduced my wife at a "selichot" reception. She was seated among the people and I was up front and I said, "I'd like you to meet my wife. I'd like to introduce you to my wife, and even though she doesn't work for this congregation she's really a nice person to meet when you get to know her, if you make the effort." And everyone understood more or less what I said but it came out strong enough that You're not paying her and don't expect anything from her that she doesn't want to give or that you don't earn. And it's been that way very beautifully." (Emphasis originates with the rabbi who wrote this comment.)[24]

Yet, even this independence does not necessarily protect the

rabbi's wife from congregational expectations, nor especially from criticism, sniping and gossip that center around the rabbi. One rabbi wrote to Bloom: "I left my last congregation because they were eating her alive after eleven years. They didn't attack her in any way but...they nibble at the rabbi...and she would listen unfortunately and she took it to heart."[25]

This issue of the relationship of the rabbi's wife to his job is a matter which recurs with every move. "The rabbi's wife's involvement with her husbands's career, whether she tries to help or doesn't and in what degree, is a constant issue that has to be resolved and often re-solved in a new pulpit."[26]

That same issue is the central concern of Robert M. Weinberg's thesis, The Absorption of Wives into Their Husbands' Work. Weinberg observes that the phenomenon is sometimes signalled by the special designation or title given to "the absorbee"; for example, the wife of the President of the United States is called The First Lady. The children of clergy are known, certainly amongst themselves as P.K.'s (preacher's kids), or R.K.'s (rabbi's kids). And Weinberg notes that the title rebbetzin was intended as an honour.[27] He also comments that there is not yet an accepted title for the husband of a female rabbi.[28]

Prior to the use of the concept of absorption, the operant terminology was "the two person career". Weinberg cites a definition of "...the two person career as a combination of formal and informal institutional demands on both members of a married couple of whom only the man is employed by the institution."[29] Commenting on absorption, Weinberg says, "Absorption occurs in situations in which family members' direct and indirect contributions - effort and behavior, adjustment, discretion and restraint - are counted on to enhance one family member's job performance and, ultimately, occupational success." [30]. This clearly can effect what family members wear, where they shop, how they spend vacations and how they recreate.[31]

Certain occupational areas carry with them a potential for absorbing family members into their orbit. Aside from the clergy, other examples include the diplomatic service (especially at the ambassadorial level), farming, college presidencies, and the military.[32] Weinberg notes that women who marry men in these occupational areas generally do so with their eyes open, and therefore are at least somewhat prepared for the absorptive aspect of their situations.[33] He also points out that children born into families wherein absorption is a factor rarely have any say in their situations unless a career change is being considered.[34]

With respect to the clergy, Weinberg raises the question of why women would marry men whose careers have high absorptive qualities. He posits that women may marry clergymen because of their own spiritual orientation, and questions whether such women would have chosen to be clergy themselves if it had been open to them.[35] Others may place a very high value on sharing their husbands' lives, so that they marry men whose careers provide opportunities for the couple to be together a great deal.[36]

In describing the absorption of wives into their husbands' work, Weinberg refers to Bloom's work on symbolic roles, as discussed above. He quotes Bloom's address to the Central Conference of American Rabbis:[37]

> The pulpit rabbi is, most of all, a symbolic exemplar. He or she, as the case may be, is the symbol of something other than himself (sic). The pulpit rabbi is a symbolic leader who is set apart to function within the community as a symbol of that community and as an exemplar of desire for moral perfection. The rabbi thus is a walking, talking, living symbol. He stands for something other than himself and in order to function, he must act in such a way as not to destroy that symbol.

Weinberg goes on to add: "Similarly, his wife and children must act in a way so as not, by association, to destroy that symbol".[38]

Weinberg hypothesizes many factors which are related to absorptiveness. These include the husband's desire to have his wife involved in his work; the level of the wife's self esteem as connected to vicarious satisfaction; the skills a woman brings to the kind of work her husband's job makes available to her; the wife's availability to help out when the husband's work becomes overwhelming, especially in terms of time; the extent of a woman's "other directedness;" and the extent to which a couple structure their life so the wife can play an active role in the husband's career.[39]
This study also considers the constraints of absorptiveness, especially for the clergy. Though he says at one point that little has been written on the consequences of absorption, [40] Weinberg does offer some suggestions of what they may be. "Social invitations extended, accepted and declined take on magnified and often political meaning. Symbolic leaders have to be aware of interpretations of favoritism if more time is spent with certain constituents."[41]

Further, "The need for approval makes it even more difficult to be at all discriminating in one's social contacts. Wives of men in such positions find themselves having to "be nice"

to people who have caused their husbands considerable pain or difficulty. There is an imposed social hypocrisy involved in trying to please all the people all the time."[42] The consequence of this situation is likely to be guardedness. A rabbi's wife may become very careful about the people with whom she chooses to spend time; in whom she confides; where she works, and what kind of work she does; what kind of car she drives; where she eats, and how she relates to her children.[43] She may accept these restraints because of her commitment to her husband's success, or she may chafe because of them. Weinberg demonstrates in his work that the social constraints experienced <u>because</u> a woman is married to a rabbi "...serve to obstruct her ability to carry on a normal social life, to have close and/or casual friends unself-consciously, to be natural, to be herself."[44]

Much of the findings reported by Weinberg are supported by The Lenn Report on the Reform rabbinate, commissioned and then published by the Central Conference of American Rabbis. Rabbis, seminarians, and wives of both were questioned for this study.

In 1972, "57% of...seminarians have already selected their future <u>rebbetzins</u>."[45] That is to say that more than half the students at that time were married or about to be. So wives and fiancees were exposed to the preparation their partners

were getting for the rabbinate, and indirectly involved in it. For many, it was apparently not a happy experience: "The real surprise came when several of the younger rebbetzins (those who were married while their husbands were still in the seminary) started their comments with such phrases as "I'm still getting over our student days (at HUC-JIR)..." or, "It's a lot better than it was (at HUC-JIR)..."[46]

One rabbi's wife, reflecting on her experiences while her husband was a student, said, "My experience there was not only bad but demeaning. The wives (of seminarians) felt anger and frustration, especially the wives who started having babies. The wives who worked were better off."[47] Another commented that HUC-JIR "...is dehumanizing...They should have a full-time psychiatrist there, just for the students, the married ones and the single ones too."[48]

While the report does not elaborate on the source of all this bitterness about the seminary experience, one can hypothesize that it relates to the work load of students, the burden of bi-weekly travel to student pulpits, and the scramble to make enough money on which to live, all of which would intrude on a couple's life together. This may imply that the College-Institute had - and perhaps still has - done nothing to accommodate the fact that their students are no longer typically single young men. In that sense, perhaps the

"training" these future rebbetzins got was useful: it apparently makes the active pulpit rabbinate look much better in comparison. In fact, one rebbetzin makes just that point: "...and although it was harrowing at times, maybe it makes us enjoy a little more now."[49]

Of the 471 rebbetzins who were invited to participate in the study, 238 responded.[50] The study demonstrated that rabbis' wives are as ambivalent about the rabbinate as their husbands are; the same percentage of rabbis and wives reported that they'd want the husband to choose the same career again.[51] Yet 26% would prefer their daughters to marry a doctor rather than a rabbi, [52] and 32% would prefer their husbands to be college professors.[53]

About a third of the respondents (35%) described their roles as lonely.[54] Only half report personal friendships within the congregation.[55] One woman wrote: "A Rabbi (sic) and his wife cannot have friends inside the congregation - it must be friendly but impersonal."[56] Another said: "My experience has taught me to be nice to everyone but not too close to anyone," [57] and yet another wrote: "No confidants - never." [58]

Surprisingly, only 19% felt that being married to a rabbi is like living in a glass house.[59] And even fewer, 13%, felt

that their husbands' congregations made more demands on them that they were willing to meet.[60]

"Almost half (49%) feel "the need for developing (their) potentialities outside of home and synagogue," and another 26% are "somewhat in agreement on this score." Yet, only 14% have full time jobs and another 27% are similarly employed on a part time basis (outside of religious school teaching).[61]

Still, there are signs of discontent. One woman wrote: "I married a man, not a rabbi. And I'm basically a woman not a rebbetzin." (emphasis in the original.) [62] It is not clear what provoked this comment, but perhaps this woman should compare notes with another who said: "For the first ten years I was miserable (being a rabbi's wife). But now I wouldn't trade it for anything else in the world. My husband and I have an enviable position in our community...And we hold it with dignity. Being a rabbi is our job, not just my husband's job. In this way it's not a job at all. It's a way of life for both of us and for our son. I hope he decides to become a rabbi."[63]

Clearly, the rabbis who responded to the survey appreciate the importance of their careers in their wives' lives. One man wrote: "My wife has helped me tremendously, and it's not

so much what she does. Strange as it seems, and even more important, it's what she doesn't do, to get me into trouble. You know a lawyer's wife or merchant's wife can speak freely of what she thinks...(about people and things) in and out of a congregation. This is when a rabbi's wife learns early in the game that in her many jobs as a wife and mother that all married women have, she also carries the burden of always acting, just a cut above her friends. I know my wife is doing the right thing. I feel it..."[64]

But another man reported that he and his wife were experiencing enough trouble as a couple that they were at that time seeing a psychiatrist. He wrote of his wife that "she is a fine person but not strongly committed to Judaism and the synagogue. We have an internal power struggle between us, aggravated by a lack of confidence and sure purpose. She finds it difficult to accept being "the Rabbi's wife" in the typical sense. I thought she would be perfect but our experience is otherwise. She often resents my congregational involvements and interests. We hope to resolve this and other problems."[65]

He was not alone. Another rabbi wrote: "I don't know what she wants - me? the Temple? or what? She's a humanist, maybe even an agnostic or atheist. Who knows? I don't know what to do...When we were at school (they were married at HUC-JIR)

we thought it was school (and that things would be better)...after I was ordained. It's even worse now."[66]

Such frustrated and unhappy rabbis' wives are, according to the Lenn Report, not the norm. Three out of four regularly attend Friday evening, Festival and special services. Only four per cent attend rarely.[67] One woman comments: "Of course nine out of ten (rebbetzins) accompany their husbands to congregational affairs. And why not? Would many have much opportunity to go out with their husbands otherwise?" [68]

But they are involved in the life of the congregation themselves, as well. Eighty-four per cent are active in Temple events, and 94% report that they are members of the Sisterhood.[69] Twenty-two per cent go with their husbands on condolence calls, and 14% attend funerals.[70] Fourteen per cent teach in the religious school, but only seven per cent think it "ok to play an influential role in the synagogue".[71] Fifty-four per cent volunteer advice, and 43% give advice when asked.[72]

Clearly, the rabbi's wife's ability to adjust to and/or enjoy her role has an impact on the rabbi's happiness and success in his job. This observation is born out by Freedman's study on stress in the rabbinate.[73] One of the sources of conflict between rabbis and their wives,

according to Freedman, is the difficulty of balancing the role of rabbi with the role of marriage partner; it is a problem of the "role/person boundary".[74] Under these circumstances, Freedman encourages a form of psychotherapy which will encompass the rabbi's family and work systems.[75]

If the woman who marries a rabbi is faced with concerns that do not impinge upon other wives, such is certainly the case when she is widowed. Goldstein opens her study of rabbinical widows with this quotation: "When a congregation buries its Rabbi, it buries his wife along with him."[76] It was Goldstein's intention to discover how true this statement is, and to make recommendations to the Central Conference of American Rabbis on behalf of rabbinical widows.[77]

Of the respondents to her survey, 80% "... saw their role as rabbi's wife as central in their lives".[78] That the termination of this role, whether abruptly or otherwise, at the death of their husbands would be unsettling is no surprise. "Ninty per cent felt that they had put a lot of themselves into their husband's ministry....Most of the women viewed their work with their husbands as a partnership, entered into voluntarily, and enjoyed it."[79] One woman wrote: "I enjoyed my role as rabbi's wife...My husband and I

had 59 wonderful years together and we were partners in our private and synagogue life. There were only a few rough spots and they were soon resolved. It has been a rewarding experience." [80] Another commented: "I enjoyed doing things with my husband."[81] Perhaps this is confirmation of the comment cited above from the Lenn Report to the effect that rebbetzins who want to spend time with their husbands must participate in congregational activities, in order to be with them.

Responding directly to the matter of "being buried" along with their husbands, fully 2/3 disagreed with this idea.[82] Yet 44% of the respondents acknowledged missing the role of rabbi's wife; along with the loss of one's life partner goes the loss "...of status and position, loss of a thriving social life and network, and a lessening demand for her personal involvement with the congregation."[83] One woman reported feeling ambivalent, missing the status of rebbetzin while appreciating the privacy she now has.[84] Others miss the social life most.[85]

Yet, "Most of the widows, despite their feelings of loss also reported a sense of relief at relinquishing the responsibility of their role."[86] The most poignant comment in this regard is probably, "I miss my husband." [87]

At the time of their husbands' deaths, congregational support was experienced by 77% of the respondents, primarily from close friends in the congregation (which leads one to speculate on how those rebbetzins will fare who do not feel free to have close friends in their congregations).[88] A number of respondents indicated their understanding of the turmoil experienced in a congregation when the rabbi dies, and seemed to have tempered their expectations of support accordingly.[89] After the immediate period of bereavement, 55% reported that they still do receive emotional support from their congregations; of those who do not, it must be said that many have moved away from the location of that congregation.[90] Some note that they receive support from close friends only, and "...this is appropriate."[91]

Goldstein writes: "...a majority stated that they received no help at all in dealing with the technical problems following their husbands' death. One widow received help with the funeral, three got financial advice from a congregation member, and only four were provided with cemetery plots for their husbands. Although one congregation is funding the college education of the deceased Rabbi's children, eleven women reported receiving no help at all, three said they received very little, and five said that the congregation 'helped when they could'."[92]

Sadly, all but one woman indicated that the synagogue is a source of stress or pain now, evoking strong memories of their deceased husbands and underscoring their loss. One woman writes: "It is the most difficult place of all to be...it reinforces feelings of loss of my husband."[93] Another said: "I wanted to go to the synagogue to say kaddish for my husband, but it was the one place I could not go. It was just too painful."[94]

While other rebbetzins may chafe at the expectations of their role, and the burden of congregational social life, one widow wrote: "The hardest thing is accepting that I will be alone the rest of my life after a life of so many people around me."[95] This may reflect the degree to which this woman was "absorbed" into her husband's career, indicating that she may have had neither the time nor the inclination to develop a life of her own, outside her role as rebbetzin. Now, deprived of that role, she apparently lacks the confidence to create that life for herself.

Despite the fact that nearly half (47%) report loneliness as "...a major factor in their lives,"[96] what many seem to miss the most is the companionship of their husbands.[97] This would seem to be at odds with the common complaint of clergy wives that they don't get enough time with their husbands

(see Chapter Three, below.)

Goldstein asked her respondents to consider whether being the widow of a rabbi is different from being a widow in general. Some agree with one woman's comment: "The pain of widowhood has nothing to do with profession. It is directly proportional to the love between the couple."[98] Yet others disagree: "Basically it's not different, except...the rabbi's wife can become spoiled (and usually without knowing it). She does not have to go out of her way to make friends or receive attention while her husband is alive. One can be inundated with gifts and invitations and be made to feel 'special' just being the wife of Rabbi _____. After his death, we are set adrift on our own. We are no longer sought after for <u>who</u> we are but for <u>what</u> we are . After being out of practice in making friends, we find that we have to learn to reach out, take initiative, and relearn how to be a friend."[99]

Moreover, rabbinical widows must deal with their husbands' successors, and their wives who automatically replace the widow as the congregation's <u>rebbetzin</u>. Doctors' widows, or lawyers' widows do not have to confront those who take over their husbands' practices, nor, since they have no role comparable to that of the rabbi's wife in a congregation, do they have to deal with their own successors. Often, the new

rabbi and spouse do not arrive on the scene until well after the death of the former rabbi, and thus a congregation is without the person who could be most helpful to the rabbinical widow, the very person to whom anyone might turn for support and comfort. Where another rabbi is already part of the staff of the congregation, the death of his/her colleague is likely to result in a substantially increased workload, and a reciprocal reduction in time to devote to any particular person.

Questions 15a through 15f, and 37a through 37c of Goldstein's survey deal with the rabbinical widow's relationship with her husband's successor and spouse, yet the discussion of the findings contains no reference to answers to these questions. Thus we have no information about how attentive successors are to their predecessors' widows, nor about how the new rebbetzin relates to her predecessor. Especially in the case where an associate or assistant rabbi steps in, at least on a temporary basis, to take the place of a suddenly departed senior rabbi, it would be interesting to know how the various parties feel about their shifting roles and relationships. These are interesting lacunae in an otherwise informative document.

When asked to give advice to potential rabbinical widows, the respondents to Goldstein's survey urged: "Develop your own

interests."[100] She reports "...an overwhelming insistence that maintaining a sense of individuality is extremely important."[101] This suggests that those who are not excessively absorbed by their husbands' careers will do better in adjusting to life without that husband and that absorbing career, an idea supported by Weinberg's comments: "The greater a wife's sense of her own personal worth as an individual the less likely she is to be willing to accept vicarious achievement in lieu of her own, direct achievement. The lower her self-esteem the more likely she is to doubt her capacity to achieve "in her own right" and the more likely she will be to seek fulfillment by aiding and facilitating others."[102]

From the five studies surveyed in this chapter, some of the aspects of the role of the rebbetzin have been illuminated. The issue of symbolic exemplar helps to define the rabbi's role, and the concept of absorption explains why and how it applies to his wife as well. Both together suggest where some of the marital stress of the rabbinate may come from. That stress may originate in the seminary experience of some rabbis and their wives, not all of whom actually 'recover' from that period of their lives. Yet, apparently many rabbis' wives who outlive their husbands can look back on

their careers as rebbetzins with great appreciation for the special position they enjoyed, and even some regret at its loss.

END NOTES

1.Weinberg, Robert M. op. cit. p.iv.

2.Bloom, Jack H. The Rabbi as Symbolic Exemplar. Columbia University, New York, 1972. p.2.

3.Freedman, Leslie R. Stress in the Rabbinate: A Report on a Nationwide Study of Conservative and Reform Rabbis. The City University of New York, 1983. p.67.

4.Goldstein, Shannie.Emotional, Physical, and Financial Well-Being of Widows of reform Rabbis. Tulane University, New Orleans, La. 1986.

5.Lenn, Theodore H. Rabbi and Synagogue in Reform Judaism. Central Conference of American Rabbis, New York, 1972.

6.Bloom, op. cit. p.34.

7.Bloom, ibid. p.14.

8.Bloom, ibid. p.35.

9.Bloom, ibid. p.46.

10.Bloom, ibid. p.109.

11.Bloom, ibid. p.112.

12.Bloom, ibid. p.95.

13.Bloom, ibid.p.119.

14.Bloom, ibid. p.86.

15.Bloom, ibid.p.120.

16.Bloom, ibid. p.110.

17.Bloom, ibid. p.138.

18.Bloom, ibid. p.138.

19.Bloom, p.120.

20.Bloom, ibid. p.139.

21.Bloom, ibid. p.139.

22.Bloom, ibid. p.140.

23.Bloom, ibid. p.140.

24.Bloom, ibid. p.140.

25.Bloom, ibid. p.110.

26.Bloom, ibid.p.120.

27.Weinberg, op. cit. p.2.

28.Weinberg, ibid. p.2.

29.Weinberg, ibid. p.11.

30.Weinberg, ibid.p.11.

31.Weinberg, ibid.p.7.

32.Weinberg, ibid. p.1.

33.Weinberg, ibid.p.1.

34.Weinberg, ibid.p.2.

35.Weinberg, ibid.p.31.

36.Weinberg, ibid.p.31.

37.Bloom, Jack H. The rabbi's family. The CCAR Yearbook,86,105-114.

38.Weinberg, op. cit. p.53.

39.Weinberg, ibid. pp.63-73.

40.Weinberg, ibid. p.34.

41.Weinberg, ibid. p.78.

42.Weinberg, ibid.p.79.

43.Weinberg, ibid. p.79.

44.Weinberg, ibid.p.202.

45. Lenn, op. cit. p.338.

46.Lenn, ibid. p.338.

47.Lenn, ibid. p.339.

48.Lenn,ibid.p.339.

49.Lenn, ibid. p.340.

50.Lenn, ibid.p.369.

51.Lenn, ibid. p.369.

52.Lenn, ibid. p.369.

53.Lenn, ibid. p.370.

54.Lenn, ibid. p.373.

55.Lenn, ibid.p.374.

56.Lenn, ibid. p.374.

57.Lenn, ibid. p.374.

58.Lenn, ibid. p.374.

59.Lenn, ibid. p.377.

60.Lenn, ibid. p.377.

61.Lenn, ibid. p.378.

62.Lenn, ibid.p.379.

63.Lenn, ibid. p.379.

64.Lenn, ibid. p.379.

65.Lenn, ibid. p.380.

66.Lenn, ibid. p.380.

67.Lenn, ibid. p.374.

68.Lenn, ibid. p.374.

69.Lenn, ibid. p.375.

70.Lenn, ibid. p.374.

71.Lenn, ibid. p.376.

72.Lenn, ibid. p.376.

73.Freedman, op. cit. p.67.

74.Freedman, ibid. p.68.

75.Freedman, ibid. p.68.

76.Goldstein, op. cit. p.1.

77.Goldstein, ibid. p.1.

78.Goldstein, ibid. p.1.

79.Goldstein, ibid. p.1.

80.Goldstein, ibid. p.1.

81.Goldstein, ibid. p.1.

82.Goldstein, ibid. p.2.

83.Goldstein, ibid. p.2.

84.Goldstein, ibid. p.3.

85.Goldstein, ibid. p.3.

86.Goldstein, ibid. p.3.

87.Goldstein, ibid. p.4.

88.Goldstein, ibid. p.5.

89.Goldstein, ibid. p.5.

90.Goldstein, ibid. p.6.

91.Goldstein, ibid. p.6.

92.Goldstein, ibid. p.6.

93.Goldstein, ibid. p.6.

94.Goldstein, ibid. p.6.

95.Goldstein, ibid. p.7.

96.Goldstein,ibid. p. 7.

97.Goldstein, ibid. p.7.

98.Goldstein, ibid. p.9.

99.Goldstein, ibid. p.9.

100.Goldstein, ibid.p.11.

101.Goldstein, ibid. p.11.

102.Weinberg, op. cit. p.60.

CHAPTER THREE

THE WIVES OF CHRISTIAN CLERGY

While very little has been written about the wives of rabbis, considerable literature exists on the subject of wives of Christian clergy. Since, in general, Roman Catholic clergy take vows of chastity and celibacy, and marriage is not permitted to them, of necessity, the literature is confined to the wives of Protestant clergy.

The early church did, however, permit married clergy until the fourth century, when sex was forbidden to both married and unmarried clergy. Celibacy became a requirement for all clergy only in the 12th century.[1] In 1525, Martin Luther married a former nun, thereby setting the precedent for Protestant clergy.[2] The marriage of Protestant clergy was legalized in England in 1604.[3] This development gave "...esteem to woman's role as wife."[4] Marrying a minister became "...a passport to influence, deference and power."[5]

Since, for such a long period, there was no such thing as a minister's wife, the best role prescription came from the Book of Proverbs 31: 10-29: the famous and familiar "A Woman of Valour," or, as the Revised Standard Edition puts it, "a

good wife." This text serves as a model for all wifely behaviour, encouraging industriousness, self-sacrifice, generosity to the poor, and above all, making service to her husband her chief function. Clearly, that model was adopted for the wives of clergy not only because no other existed, but also because it put the husband's needs above all else, and defined the wife's role as enabler, supporter and companion.[6]

The earliest wives of Christian ministers certainly adopted the biblical standard, in the 17th century routinely performing duties which later became parts of the professions of nursing, midwifery, medicine and surgery.[7]

By the 18th century, the minister's wife had become a standard figure in her community, and her life had become so structured that Esther Edwards Burr could complain about the hardships with which she lived: her husband's frequent and extended absences, which left her essentially a widow; no time for herself or to herself; and just too much work to do.[8] The extended absences were a characteristic of the life of the evangelical minister, whose energies were directed to ministering far from home on the expanding frontiers of American settlement. Thus, he left his wife to raise their children and manage their household; this aspect of the life of a clergyman and his wife and family is apparently unique

to certain Protestant denominations, and that particular time in American history.[9]

A number of books were written to instruct the young wife of a minister about her role, and to encourage in her the proper attitude to her husband's important work. That literature tended to romanticize and dramatize the life of a minister's wife, while presenting the "model minister's wife" as an unbelievably sweet and perfect person.[10] In non-fiction, the minister's wife was presented either as a saintly and solemn soul, as a wifely assistant, or as a protecting mother.[11]

The literary model is entirely idealistic: the minister's wife

> ...is a woman who is the very epitome of all that is gracious, tactful, lovely, righteous, pleasant and friendly. She is a skilled financier who does wonders with her husband's limited salary, an understanding counsellor to those who seek her help, a gracious hostess to those accepting hospitality in her home, her husband's right arm, when needed, and possessing the finesse of a diplomat in handling interpersonal problems at home and in the church.[12]

The literature written for ministers' wives...sometimes <u>by</u> ministers' wives, was preoccupied with role expectations.[13]

It was also sometimes superficial to the point of silliness, offering extensively detailed schedules for housework, and such handy tips as how to dispose of a worn out flag.[14]

More recent works have identified the minister's wife as sharing many of the characteristics of the wife of a corporate executive. Both are seen as important to their husband's success or failure. They are expected to have well behaved children, who set examples for others in the community. They are expected to create a relaxed atmosphere in their homes, specifically to provide their husbands with a refuge from their demanding work. They are expected to dress conservatively, though attractively. They are advised to avoid controversy, and to avoid being too smart for their peers. Both are expected to be gracious and creative hostesses.

In addition to certain shared characteristics, both ministers' wives and wives of corporate executives are subject to certain consequences of their husbands' careers. Both may be required to relocate frequently. This can lead to loneliness, in that it takes time to cultivate close friendships. Ministers' wives may be reluctant to make close friends with their husbands' congregants, in order to protect their husbands from gossip or jealousy. Corporate wives may be constrained by the need to confine their relationships to

wives whose husbands are at similar levels in the corporate hierarchy as their own husbands are. Both corporate and clergy wives may experience themselves as living in a fishbowl.[15]

But there are striking differences between ministers' wives and those of other professionals or corporate officers. The former are inevitably involved, to a greater or lesser degree, in their husbands' work. "In marrying, they marry more than a man."[16] The professional lives of doctors, lawyers, professors, or corporate executives are quite separate from their family lives; their wives do not know whether they encounter their clients at the grocery store, at the P.T.A., or the country club. The minister's wife, by contrast, may be expected to recognize her husband's congregants, to entertain them in her home, and to be available as their confidant.[17]

The minister's wife, unlike the wives of other professionals, is expected to be involved in her husband's work in an active way. Yes, she may be his sounding board for sermons and keep her finger on the pulse of the congregation for him. But even more, she may be expected to teach in the religious school, to work with the women of the congregation and/or the youth groups, and provide her home as a location for church meetings.[18] Some wives of ministers also perform unpaid

secretarial functions, beyond merely taking messages for their husbands at home; this may include typing sermons, letters, minutes of meetings, and keeping their appointment calendars.[19]

There is another significant difference between ministers' wives and the wives of other professionals. There is an assumption that, if the minister is away for some reason, his wife will be able to fill in for him on the job. She may be called on to break bad news to a family, or attend a meeting for her absent husband. The wives of surgeons or engineers are not expected to fill in for their husbands, on the job.[20]

The extent of the involvement of a minister's wife in her husband's work may be a function of their particular denomination, or their socio-economic background, or their own personal sense of ministry, as William Douglas argued in his 1965 study. Beyond that, Douglas proposed three main types of ministers' wives: the team worker; the background supporter; and the detached.

The <u>team worker</u> sees herself as a co-worker with her husband. She feels her own sense of "call" to this work, and can be fully absorbed by church work, even though she may hold down a paying full-time job outside the church (usually out of financial necessity). She never finds it difficult to be

herself in the role of minister's wife, because that really is who and what she is.[21]

The background supporter considers it her first responsibility to be a good wife and mother. She enjoys being a good example to others, and enjoys the role of minister's wife. She limits her church activities and never takes a leadership role, even in the women's groups. Yet, she chafes at the lack of close friendships she experiences as a consequence of her role, and at the fishbowl existence imposed upon her family. She resents how much her husband's job takes him away from her and their children.[22]

The minister's wife who is detached is only involved in church activities because it is a way to be close to her husband, or because it is expected of her. She is not active in the congregation out of her own sense of commitment. She sees herself entirely as a lay person, not as a co-worker. She would rather maintain her church activity level the same as if she were married to any non-clergyman. To the extent that she can do so without damaging her husband's career, she rebels against the demands of the role, in which she cannot be herself. Problems may arise for this kind of minister's wife if her husband has different expectations of her. It may also be that being detached in this way is a function of the ages of her children.[23]

All three kinds of ministers' wives lead very busy lives. Yet many complain of loneliness because of the absence of close friendships, as indicated above.[24] Further, they feel isolated by the way people treat them; this agrees with observations made by Bloom in his study of the rabbi as symbolic exemplar, here discussed in Chapter Two, above.[25] They may compensate by developing close relationships with people outside their church.[26]

Ministers' wives report few close friendships with the wives of other ministers. They attribute this to competition amongst churches for memberships, and to theological/philosophical differences, which prevent them from feeling close with women with whom they would otherwise have much in common.[27]

It appears that young women today who marry ministers are less likely to follow the traditional model of home-maker and co-worker. They resent the expectation of free labour.[28] Instead, if they are inclined to serve the church, in most denominations today, women become ordained ministers. Those who choose to work outside the home in other areas do report some constraints on the kinds of careers "appropriate" for a minister's wife; their work must be seen as dignified and useful. Being a sales clerk or night club entertainer would not do.[29]

In recent years, Protestant clergy have struggled with the question of whether they are servants or professionals.[30] This is reflected in their effort to increase their salaries, and to move away from ownership of their homes by their churches.[31] Ministers' wives resent the lack of privacy they feel when they live in church-owned homes. Apparently, in extreme cases, parishioners feel free to drop in, and in essence, inspect their property, without regard for the privacy of the family living in it.[32] Parsonages tend to be located next door to the church, which is convenient on some levels, but completely deprives the minister and his family of any separation from his work. When the minister owns his own home, he chooses a location away from the church for that very reason.[33] Ministers and their wives also report that there is greater privacy in large cities than in small towns.[34]

To compensate for inadequate salaries, many communities encourage merchants to give ministers special discounts and other favours. The clergy and their families find this humiliating, and it confines them to doing business with such merchants, so that they have no choice about where to shop; further, their purchases and shopping habits may become the subject of local gossip. They'd rather be paid appropriate salaries and shop like everyone else.[35]

Many ministers' wives are concerned about the impact of their husbands' work on their children. They worry that there isn't much time for the whole family to be together. Even when family activities or outings are planned, they are always subject to cancellation because of emergencies.[36] Some worry that their children get too much attention, as the minister's kids, and that they are subjected to inappropriately high standards of behaviour at all times.[37] Yet, they see as compensation for these disadvantages, the development of excellent social skills through contact with people. Also, they are exposed to intellectual stimulation, as well as travel and other broadening experiences.[38]

Donna Sinclair, the wife of a Canadian Protestant minister, wrote about some of the other special aspects of being married to a minister. She points out that some ministers clearly believe that their "calling comes before wife and children."[39] Ms. Sinclair obviously disagrees with this stance and sees it as a major source of stress on the ministerial family.[40] She also mentions that women are attracted to clergymen, which may be difficult for a minister's wife to accept and live with.[41] For example, "The psychiatrist's wife is seldom put in the position of socializing and being loving toward the unhappy housewife who is desperately in love with her husband."[42]

Sinclair also writes that the mobility of the clergy has a negative impact on the careers their wives may pursue outside the church.[43] Yet she argues that a wife does not have to submerge her career for his. In her own case, she developed a highly portable career as an author, though she cannot say that this solution will work for everyone.[44]

The two career family is a source of strain no matter what the occupations are, but the problems are accentuated when one partner is a member of the clergy. The issues of lack of together time, child care responsibilities, and household management are more pronounced when one spouse's plans are always subject to emergencies which take priority. The laundry may be postpone-able, but picking up a child at day care is not, and in emergencies, the non-clergy spouse may be expected to drop her plans or commitments to cover for the minister's unexpected unavailability. Careers may suffer because of this.[45]

One problem which ministers share with doctors is the pedestal upon which they are placed by society in general. It is difficult for such men to shake off that role when they come home; they may continue to be enveloped by their symbolic function even when they are off duty.[46] Sinclair confirms Bloom's finding, that clergy are different from others (see above, Chapter Two), something of which they may

be continuously conscious.[47]

That notwithstanding, Sinclair writes that the marriages of clergy collapse for the same reasons as other people's.[48] Yet the consequences of divorce may be especially painful for the former minister's wife. Not only does she lose her husband, but also the community in which she functioned.[49] If the divorcing couple have come from a parsonage, he will go on to another congregation which will again provide him with a home, and support, while she will have nothing but her share of the furnishings they owned together; when there is no real estate to turn into an equal settlement, the wife clearly loses more than the minister.[50]

Moreover, she will lose friends, who will not know how to react to their disappointment in her.[51] And there is the loss of the role of minister's wife. While it may have its drawbacks in general, it also has its privileges, and the loss of these, as well as the role itself, is an additional burden for the divorced minister's wife to bear.[52] This may be accompanied by the pain of the loss of the congregation where she prayed; guilt over the failure of her marriage, which was supposed to set the standard for others; and may make it impossible for the ex-wife of a minister to return to church, even though she may urgently need the solace it could provide.[53]

Clearly, there are many areas of similarity between the wives of Christian clergy and the wives of rabbis. Certainly, the biblical model of a good wife, found in Proverbs 31:10-31, was applicable to all Jewish wives, including those of rabbis, long before it became relevant for Christian clergy. This poetic description of the perfect wife is read, according to tradition, by the husband to his wife every Shabbat evening; it has been set to many melodies, and in many homes it is sung by the whole family to the wife/mother, as a tribute to her.

Originally, the rabbi's role was that of scholar and judge, not pastor, preacher or priestly officiant. He was subject to the same expectations as any Jew, in regard to communal responsibility. These are articulated in the daily worship service as follows:

> These are the obligations without measure, whose reward, too, is without measure;
> To honor father and mother;
> To perform acts of love and kindness;
> To attend the house of study daily;
> To welcome the stranger;
> To visit the sick;
> To rejoice with bride and groom;
> To console the bereaved;
> To pray with sincerity;

To make peace where there is strife.
And the study of Torah is equal to them all because it leads to them all.[54]

All these communal obligations, other than study and prayer, have always been applicable to women as well as men. Scholars may have been expected to be exemplary in their performance of these duties, but they were not accountable for them to a greater degree than other Jews. And the wives of scholars may also have been expected to perform these deeds as models to the community, but not instead of others' performance of them. Only as the rabbinate took on the forms of Protestant clergy, since Jewish emancipation began in the 19th century, has the rabbi become the surrogate for his or her fellow-Jews in the performance of these acts.[55] This process may have been encouraged by the Americanization of Jewry,[56] and by the increasing specialization of occupations.

Since the rabbinate was not historically a ministering function, the concept of a "call" to it is generally foreign to the way people have described their decision to become rabbis. It is therefore equally true that women have not traditionally described their decision to marry a rabbi as responding to a "call".

Further, the rabbinate was, as mentioned, a scholarly

occupation, for which lengthy preparation was required. Until recently, that training was only available for men. Most Jews would not comprehend the idea that a rabbi's wife could be his partner, since the specific training needed for the role was absolutely unavailable to her. Therefore, Douglas's category of team worker, implying equal partnership of husband and wife, would appear to have no relevance in a Jewish context.

Yet, clearly, many rebbetzins have seen themselves as more than background supporters of their husbands. Esther Bengis, whose husband was an Orthodox rabbi, wrote a book about her experiences, which was published in 1934, at which time Rabbi Bengis had been forced into very early retirement because of poor health. In that book she wrote of "...our last pulpit."[57] She also said that "We are expected to visit our members...,"[58] (emphasis added) and that "girls...women unburdened themselves to me also."[59] Ruth Englander Brav wrote, in answer to a questionnaire, that she felt "needed for her husband's work as a rabbi".[60] Similarly, it was said of Rebecca Fischel Goldstein, the wife of Rabbi Herbert Goldstein of the Institutional Synagogue: "Not only did she follow up on details and trouble shoot on all pastoral fronts...she was a high achiever in her own right."[61]

Helen Jacobson, whose husband is now retired from the pulpit

he occupied for a long time in San Antonio, Texas, started out wary of her role as a rebbetzin, but grew to feel quite at home with it. Though she at first made her own rules, saying that she "would work; wouldn't necessarily be involved in the congregation; and wouldn't promise to go regularly to services,"[62] she discovered that she "loved being involved with the congregation."[63] Though much of that involvement took the form of Sisterhood activities,[64] she also wrote newsy letters to congregants serving overseas during the war,[65] and went calling on new members, prospective members, shut-ins, newly weds, the bereaved, and the sick.[66] Again, during the war period, while her husband was a Navy chaplain, she was called upon to host impromptu weddings in their home; she set everything up, and served refreshments to couples marrying before the husband was shipped off to war.[67]

Many more rebbetzins, however, would seem to fit more appropriately into Douglas's second category, that of background supporter. These are women who see it as their main function to provide their rabbi-husbands with a comfortable and relaxing home to which they can retreat from their work. They, like Joyce Foster, of Denver, Colorado, are "invited to do workshops, sit on committees, and give invocations," [68] but are primarily background figures. This accords well with the advice given by the rabbi who officiated at her wedding, to Ruth Levi Wolf: "Your first and

greatest duty will always be to look out for the welfare of your husband."[69] Mrs. Wolf also wrote: "A rabbi needs a light-hearted companion, one with whom he can relax and find recreation, one who can dispel the gloom that envelopes him from daily contact with defeat, depression, disillusionment."[70]

Even those rebbetzins who are clearly background supporters may have some visibility in their congregations. Some teach in the religious school. Occasionally, like the wives of Christian clergy, they may be asked to fill in when their husbands are ill; Mrs. Joan Glickstein had that experience, which led her to reflect upon the expectations of rabbis' wives as compared with the wives of other professionals, as described above.[71]

The vast majority of rebbetzins probably fit into the category of background worker. They keep the rabbi's home, raise his children and attend synagogue functions on an occasional basis at the minimum. Today, large numbers of these women are employed at least part time outside their homes. Between their jobs, their children, their homes, and perhaps even some volunteer work in the community, they are very, very busy. Too busy to write about their experience. And because they see themselves as wives in the background, most would not consider what they do worth writing about.

Today's rebbetzin may not share that perspective, but she is too busy to record her experience except perhaps in the form of a very personal diary not meant for anyone else's eyes.

If the positively disposed but behind-the-scenes type of rebbetzin is not much documented, Douglas's third category of the detached clergy-wife is almost non-existent on paper, outside of fiction. These would be wives who basically do not share their husbands' religious inclinations and who attend synagogue events primarily to please their husbands. They may or may not recognize the impact they can have on their husbands' careers; as Leonard Sweet observed, nothing a wife could do would "make him in the ministry, but she could unmake" him.[72]

One rebbetzin of this type whose story is well known is Edith Steinberg, who was married to Rabbi Milton Steinberg. Before they married, she made it clear that she had no interest in living "...the life of a rabbi's wife."[73] "She often made slicing remarks about his friends at the Seminary. But he was confident she would outgrow these traits."[74] He was wrong. According to Steinberg's biographer, Edith didn't "...share his enthusiasm for synagogue life."[75] She was unprepared for the social obligations of a rebbetzin.[76] She resented his evening absences, and found casual visits from congregants an intrusion on their privacy.[77] She was unprepared for the

criticism of her actions, and even her wardrobe.[78] To others she "seemed cold and deficient in religious interest."[79] She "...felt that she was not so much a person in her own right as Rabbi Steinberg's wife, and she was frustrated by this lack of individual identity."[80] During the first five years of their marriage, Edith left Milton twice.[81] Ultimately, Edith Steinberg broke with Milton's good friend in Chicago, and his position in the congregation grew precarious; fortunately, he was offered a pulpit in New York, and they were able to leave gracefully.[82]

His career dominated her life, interfered with her artistic bent, and the "...development of her own personality."[83] Yet she was thoroughly bound up with him. When he suffered a heart attack, she travelled to be at his side; en route she got drunk. "...thereafter, and for the rest of her life, she would turn to drink whenever tensions became too much for her".[84] Apparently, Milton didn't realize "...how difficult it was for her to be a rabbi's wife when she had no real interest in Judaism or the Jewish community."[85] Yet, "Her occasional tactless remarks or lack of discretion in the presence of congregants and friends undoubtedly caused him momentary anguish. He admitted that she was more "intemperate" and volcanic than most rebbetzins."[86]

Edith Steinberg must be considered an extreme representative

of the detached wife of a clergyman. She was not only disinterested in the role she acquired by marrying a rabbi, but actively resented it. Yet she could not have felt so strongly about it if she had not had a clear image of what others, including her husband, expected of her.

The role and its expectations were also apparently beyond Clara Birstein, who was the second wife of Rabbi Bernard Birstein. She was an unwilling rebbetzin, uncomfortable in social settings.[87] The formalities of her role were not familiar to her,[88] so she dedicated herself to raising the children her husband brought with him into the marriage, as well as those they had together. When her husband was offered a job in Cleveland, he worried: "...what would they make of Clara?"[89] He therefore did not take the more prestigious and better paying pulpit, where Clara's inadequacies as a rebbetzin would be apparent. Instead, he remained with the little congregation off Broadway, and became rabbi to many Jewish performers of the period.

It may have been common practice for Christian churches to provide their clergy with living accommodations, and to a declining degree it may continue, but it has by no means been the standard in Jewish communities. Where it has occurred, the home provided has not typically been located next door to the synagogue, which therefore relieved the rabbi's family of

the exposure to congregants of which ministers' wives complain. But where it has occurred, the families have experienced the same frustrations in getting repair work done as their Christian counterparts. Yet, this concern is so minimal in the lives of rabbis' wives that only one mention, outside of fiction, occurred in the research for this work. Agnes Herman, in an unpublished essay entitled "I Am a Rabbi's Wife!" comments that the Temple-owned house was large but difficult to keep in good repair.[90] She noted that the next rabbi's wife got improvements in the house, from which she deduced that "The rabbi's wife who behaves like a church mouse deserves to live like a church mouse."[91]

Rabbis' wives did - and do - complain about their fishbowl existence. Like their Protestant counterparts, they are aware that others critique their clothes, their homes, their children's behaviour, and of course their own religious practices. As Agnes Herman says, "Nowhere is it written that the rabbi's spouse has to be a role model for the congregation. Unfortunately, not <u>all</u> congregations understand this, and thus we continue to experience clashes of expectations."[92]

Nor do the expectations end when the rabbi takes a non-congregational job. When Rabbi Ervin Herman became an executive of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, his

family's life changed considerably, but the criticisms did not disappear. One summer Saturday, when Mrs. Herman was out on her front porch, she was aware that the neighbours across the street were watching her. She later learned from a friend who had been there, that they said; "...look, there is the rabbi's wife. Look, she's wearing shorts and drinking and...oy...she is sewing and it's Shabbas (sic). No wonder he doesn't have a congregation. She probably loses his job for him every time he finds one!"[93]

This notwithstanding, Mrs. Herman recognizes the advantages that accrued to her family and herself while her husband was a congregational rabbi, such as a television set (in the days when they were neither cheap nor ubiquitous), a new station wagon, a country club membership, camp scholarships, and free pediatric care.[94] Joyce Foster also acknowledges the many perks which her children enjoy, in being part of a public family, such as contact with celebrities, passes to concerts, movies, and sports events.[95] These extra benefits seem a striking contrast to the discounts and favours which ministers' wives apparently resent;[96] no mention of these special privileges was made in connection with ministers' families.

As noted above, Christian clergy may receive compensation for their low salaries in the form of favours from local

merchants. Undoubtedly this practice extends to rabbis too. Moreover, all clergy are expected to patronize members of their own congregations. Agnes Herman learned this just after moving to a new community, where she was seen walking down the street carrying a bag from the "wrong" store; her error was corrected by a congregant, and her sensitivities were alerted, to avoid such faux pas in the future.[97]

Conclusion

To the extent that rabbis have become clergy, their wives share much with the wives of Christian ministers. The areas of commonality include: high visibility in the community; standards of dress and demeanor; expectations of religiosity; and expectations of active participation in the life of the congregation. To the extent that the rabbinate still resembles its origins as a scholastic judiciary, rabbis' wives are unlike the wives of Christian ministers. The wives of scholars are not expected to share their husbands' expertise, nor to function in their stead.

Both the wives of ministers and the wives of rabbis are expected to set a standard of family life and religious commitment to which their congregants can look for

inspiration and instruction. This expectation seems more explicit for ministers' wives, many of whom appear to actually share their husbands' sense of "call" to ministry. By contrast, rabbis' wives declare: "I married a man, not a profession!"[98]

It seems that, as Jews become less sensitive to their individual personal obligations, as cited above from the daily worship service, the rabbi and spouse may become increasingly identified with the "pastoral" functions, just as they may become the only ones who study or pray regularly. This trend, a staggering diminution of the quality of Jewish life, may be a consequence of assimilation more serious than many others; learning and caring have never been confined to a professional class before, because they are at the heart of Jewish life. Are rabbis and their spouses going to be the only Jews living Jewish lives?

END NOTES

1.Sweet, Leonard I. The Minister's Wife; Her Role in 19th Century American Evangelism. Temple University Press, Philadelphia. 1983. p.12

2. Sweet, op. cit. p.12

3.Denton, Wallace The Role of the MInister's Wife. Westminster Press, Philadelphia. 1962. p. 17.

4.Sweet, op. cit. p. 13.

5.Sweet, ibid. p. 8.

6.Denton, op. cit. p. 18.

7.Sweet, op. cit. p.18.

8.Sweet, op. cit. p.25.

9.Sweet, ibid. p.24.

10.Denton, op. cit. p.28.

11.Denton, ibid.p.30-31.

12.Denton, ibid. p.32.

13.Denton, ibid.p.33.

14.Denton, ibid. p.34.

15.Denton, ibid.p.38-41.

16.Denton, ibid. p.43.

17.Denton, ibid. p.43.

18.Denton, ibid. p.47-8.

19.Denton, ibid. p.49.

20.Sinclair, Donna.The Pastor's Wife Today. Abingdon Press, Nashville, Tennessee. 1981. p. 26-7.

21.Douglas, William. Ministers' Wives. Harper and Row, New York, 1965. p.34-5.

22.Douglas, op. cit. p.41.

23.Douglas, ibid. p.46-53.

24.Denton, op. cit. p.62-3.

25.Denton, ibid.p.64.

26.Denton, ibid.p.65.

27.Denton, ibid. p.66-7.

28.Denton, ibid. p.46.

29.Denton, ibid. p.128.

30.Sinclair, Donna.The Pastor's Wife Today. Abingdon Press, Nashville, Tennessee.1981.p.31.

31.Sinclair, op.cit.p.31.

32.Denton, op.cit.p.101.

33.Denton, ibid.,p.103.

34.Denton, ibid.,p.102.

35.Denton, ibid. p.124.

36.Denton, ibid. p.84.

37.Denton, ibid. p.106.

38.Denton, ibid. p.106.

39.Sinclair, Donna, op. cit. p.23.

40.Sinclair, ibid. p.23.

41.Sinclair, ibid. p.50.

42.Sinclair, ibid. p.51.

43.Sinclair, ibid. p.104.

44.Sinclair, ibid. p.35.

45.Sinclair, ibid. p.98.

46.Sinclair, ibid. p.74.

47.Sinclair, ibid. p.82.

48.Sinclair, ibid. p.80-1.

49.Sinclair, ibid. p.85.

50.Sinclair, ibid. p.86.

51.Sinclair, ibid. p.86.

52.Sinclair, ibid. p.87.

53.Sinclair, ibid. p.87.

54. Gates of Prayer.Central Conference of American Rabbis, New York, 1975.p.52-3.

55.Meyer, Michael A. Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism.Oxford University Press, New York:1988. p.34.

56.Meyer, op. cit. p.235.

57.Bengis, Esther.I Am a Rabbi's Wife. Esther Bengis: Moodus, Connecticut. 1934.p.5.

58.Bengis, op. cit. p.24.

59.Bengis, ibid. p.21.

60.Brav, Ruth Englander.In reply to a survey from Fairfield University, 1967. Courtesy of Rabbi Stanley Brav.

61.Reichel, Aaron I.The Maverick Rabbi- Herbert S. Goldstein and the Institutional Synagogue. A New Organizational Form. The Donning Co.: Norfolk, Virginia, 1984. p.338.

62.Jacobson, Helen. From an address to the Spouses' Network at the Centennial Convention of the CCAR in Cincinnati, Ohio, 1989. p.2.

63.Jacobson, op. cit. p.3.

64.Jacobson, ibid. p.3.

65.Jacobson, ibid. p.3.

66.Jacobson, ibid. p.4.

67.Jacobson, ibid. p.4.

68.Foster, Joyce. From an address to the Spouses' Network at the Centennial Convention of the CCAR in Cincinnati, Ohio, 1989. p.5.

69.Levi, Ruth Wolf: "I Married a Rabbi", in I Married a Minister, Golda Elam Bader, editor. Abingdon Cokesbury Press, New York:1942.p. 164.

70.Levi, op. cit. p.168.

71.From a conversation with Rabbi Gary Glickstein, in September 1989, held in Cincinnati, Ohio.

72.Sweet, op. cit. p.18.

73.Noveck, Simon.Milton Steinberg - Portrait of a Rabbi. Ktav, New York 1978. p.39.

74.Noveck, op. cit. p.39.

75.Noveck, ibid. p.49.

76.Noveck, ibid. p.49.

77.Noveck, ibid. p.49.

78.Noveck, ibid. p. 49.

79.Noveck, ibid. p.49.

80.Noveck, ibid. p.50.

81.Noveck, ibid. p.50.

82.Noveck, ibid. p.51.

83.Noveck, ibid. p.230.

84.Noveck, ibid. p.153.

85.Noveck, ibid. p.230.

86.Noveck, ibid. p.230.

87.Birstein, Ann: The Rabbi on Forty-Seventh Street. Dial Press, New York 1974.p.65.

88.Birstein, op. cit. p.67.

89.Birstein, ibid. p.169.

90.Herman, Agnes.I Am a Rabbi's Wife. unpublished. 1984. p.14.

91.Herman, op. cit. p. 14.

92.Herman, ibid. p.20.

93.Herman, op. cit. p.18.

94.Herman, ibid. p.13.

95.Foster, op. cit. p.7.

96.Denton, op. cit. p.124.

97.Herman, op. cit. p.12.

98.Herman, op. cit. p.18.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE REBBETZIN IN FICTION

Clergy are not often the central characters in fiction. Sometimes they are presented as stereotypes and used as foils for the main characters in the story. The wives of clergy are also used in this way. Rabbis and their wives are typically treated in this way in fiction, too. However, in four relatively recent American novels, a rabbi has been the protagonist, and in each his wife plays a supporting role. In one novel, the rebbetzin is herself the protagonist. This chapter will consider these five works of fiction in the hope of shedding more light on the rebbetzin in America. That, in four of the books to be discussed here, the rabbi's wife is a very minor character would tend to endorse the "background supporter" [1] as being the model of rebbetzin most readily identifiable to readers of fiction. She is the clergyman's wife who sees it as her major function to provide a good home for her husband and children. She enjoys her role as rebbetzin, but is only active in the congregation to a limited extent. She may resent the time her husband puts into his "job", and the degree to which her family may be described as living in a fishbowl, but she remains supportive of her husband, and tries to lead a normal life despite the

circumstances which work against that.

This model applies in all of the works to be discussed here.[2] All five of the rabbis' wives are portrayed as "background supporters" and only one of these is shown to have a career...and an identity...of her own. That this singular rebbetzin is the only one portrayed in any depth, and in a book written by a former rebbetzin herself, is perhaps telling. The title character of Rachel, The Rabbi's Wife[3] appears to be the only fictional rebbetzin who does not accept the "background supporter" model gracefully.

Though the novels considered here are quite different, they share some interesting features. All are set in small New England towns, perhaps because there are so many of these that the author cannot be accused of describing any one in particular. Three of the five rabbis in these books are graduates of the Jewish Theological Seminary, and are therefore Conservative rabbis. Only in Howard Fast's The Outsider ,[4] is the rabbi a graduate of The Jewish Institute of Religion; in Noah Gordon's The Rabbi,[5] the rabbi is also Reform. This may be mere coincidence; it may reveal the orientation of the authors; or it may reflect the authors' expectation that someone "middle-of-the-road-ish" may be more recognizable to the fiction-reading public than a character at either extreme of the Jewish spectrum.

Regardless, the use of a Conservative rabbi in fiction imposes on him, and his family, and his community, the expectations of certain observable religious behaviour; the observance of kashrut, the participation in daily worship, and the adherence to traditions. Even Howard Fast's Reform rabbi conforms to these expectations, perhaps because the non-Jewish reading public would not know what to make of a treyf-eating rabbi! In Tennenbaum's book, the rabbi and his family's struggle with the dietary laws becomes symbolic of their discomfort with their life, as their inclinations no longer jibe with the expectations of their congregation.

Perhaps the best known fictional American rabbi is David Small, the hero of Harry Kemelman's mystery series. On each day of the week, a different phenomenon befalls the rabbi; these involve him in the solution of more crimes than one generally expects to find in such a quiet New England community, and they provide titles to the books. The books are similar, in that they allow the rabbi to apply his Talmudic logic to the solution of the mystery, and often deal with the political machinations within his congregation. For the purposes of this study, Wednesday The Rabbi Got Wet,[6] published in 1976, was selected as representative of the whole series.

Rabbi Small's wife is Miriam. She is presented as "...small,

with the trim figure of a young girl."[7] despite the fact that she must be in her mid-thirties, and is the mother of two children (a son, Jonathan, and a daughter, Hepsibah). She is blue-eyed and has long blond hair,[8] not the dark eyes and hair stereotypically identified as Jewish. In most of the novels in the series, Rebbetzin Small provides her husband with a sympathetic ear when the congregational politics threaten their comfortable lives. In Wednesday, as in the other novels, this coincides with an opportunity to express his thoughts on an issue current in American Jewish life: here, the rise of meditational spirituality in opposition to traditional Jewish worship.[9] So Mrs. Small's literary function is that of a sounding board. And of course, the rabbi, as sleuth, needs someone to listen to his interpretation of the crime as it develops. In this novel, she also provides the key to the resolution of the mystery, quite incidentally.[10]

Generally, Mrs. Small is shown working around the home. When a visitor drops in unexpectedly, she is an accommodating hostess: "We were just having a cup of coffee," said Miriam. "You'll join us, won't you? I'm taking a little breather from preparing for the Sabbath."[11]

During the same visit, when the visitor remarks that he is seeing his physician for a regular check-up, the rebbetzin

demonstrates her concern for her husband, which of course is typical of the background supporter: "You ought to do it, too, David," said Miriam automatically."[12]

Mrs. Small attends to the needs of their children while her husband privately prays the evening service,[13] thereby conforming to the image of a typically enabling "background supporter" once again.

Miriam Small is also portrayed as Jewishly aware, which is not the case with all the women to be considered here. In the same scene described above, when the number eighteen is mentioned, she responds: "Chai," Miriam murmured, and her husband smiled."[14]

In this particular story, another rebbetzin is mentioned. She is the wife of the rabbi who is functioning as a guru to some of Rabbi Small's congregants, and her role is entirely typical of a "background supporter." She will be present at a spiritual retreat led by her husband "...to serve the Sabbath meal and to bless the candles."(sic)[15] At the retreat, when an additional guest arrives, he is introduced to the rebbetzin, who is "...in there right now preparing the Sabbath meal."[16] "She was a short dumpy woman in her mid-thirties. She acknowledged the introduction with a sad, tired smile."[17] She tells the new-comer that his presence is

no trouble, that there is lots of food, and that the secret to the success of her gefilte fish is that she chops it, and doesn't grind it.[18] The new-comer is not overcome with spirituality during the course of the retreat, and in listing to himself the disappointments of the event, he mentions the "tasteless food",[19] thereby discounting this rebbetzin's only function in the novel, and her claim-to-fame!

If one were to deduce the role of the rebbetzin from Kemelman's book(s), one would have no reason to suppose that the role includes any activities connected with the synagogue itself. Rather, one would understand the rebbetzin's life as a domestic adjunct to her husband's, always providing him (and his children) with a warm, comfortable home, and delicious Jewish meals and snacks. The matter of living in a fishbowl, or of being deprived of privacy, does not present itself in this story. The Smalls are apparently quite content with their life style. And Mrs. Small's life is not impinged upon by her husband's career.

A more detailed picture of the rebbetzin emerges from Israel Jacobs' Ten for Kaddish.[20] Here too, the setting is New England, and here too the rabbi is Conservative. This protagonist is Rabbi Morris Kleinman (meaning "small man"...), and he and his wife Beth have a son named Jonathan, who is away at a yeshiva. Rabbi Kleinman's contract, like

Rabbi Small's, becomes a contentious issue, and he too takes stands on matters of principle. Rabbi Kleinman has been suffering from an ulcer, so one of his wife's main functions in this novel is to keep him faithful to the entirely unappetizing diet to which his doctor has confined him. In fact, this is the content of the scene in which she makes her first appearance, at the very beginning of the story.[21]

But within the context of that scene, she reveals another aspect to her role. She reports that she is consulted by women in the congregation on matters of kashrut.

> "Ruth? When did you speak to her?"
> "Tuesday. She dropped in to ask about Par-cream. Wanted to know if she could use it at a meat meal."
> "Asked you? I'm the rabbi. Why didn't she ask me?"
> "I suggested she ask you," Beth said. "Know what she answered?"
> Kleinman swallowed the bait. "What did she answer?"
> "Oh, maybe I'd better not," Beth demurred.
> "Come now, Beth. Don't keep me in suspense...doctor's orders. I'm not supposed to get excited."
> "If you insist. Ruth said - and these are her words, Morris, not mine - 'When I want to know what's permitted in the kitchen, I may as well go directly

to the rebbitsen (sic). The rabbi's going to ask her anyway."

"How did Ruth uncover that secret? Did you tell her?"

"Heaven forbid! I wouldn't let the cat out of the bag. I guess it was her woman's intuition."[22]

It is interesting to note that the rabbi doesn't ask his wife what advice she gave on the use of the product mentioned.

Beth's regular practices do not include attending Saturday morning services. She bundles him up for the walk, but clearly has no intention of joining him.[23] She apparently attends regularly on Friday evenings, and reminds him that it's the women "...who drag their husbands to shul."[24]

In a later scene, a guest arrives at their home, only to be lectured by Mrs. Kleinman for not having been around sooner. The rabbi reprimands her for this chiding, and the two engage in a brief, mild debate over this, the rabbi concluding it by saying, "Now that you've given your lecture, maybe like a good rebbitzen (sic) should, you'll show some hospitality and bring our guest something to eat and drink?"[25] A discussion ensues between the rabbi and the visitor, following which the rebbetzin serves blintzes and sour cream.[26] She declines to eat with them, returning with coffee and cake as she prepares

to go to a Sisterhood meeting. When the rabbi asks if she's really going out in the cold, she replies, "Yes dear. I have a Sisterhood meeting. Rose Wasser called to remind me. I'm to deliver the invocation tonight."[27] Apparently this is all part of her "job" as rebbetzin, which neither she nor her husband question. Nor does the rabbi ask her what she plans to say; once again, there seems to be an atmosphere of confidence between them.

Unlike Mrs. Small, Mrs. Kleinman shows some awareness of her husband's job impinging on her life. When he is about to go out to a round of appointments on a Sunday morning, she responds:

> "I wish I could spend one Sunday morning with my husband."
> "That's the penalty for being a rebbitzen (sic)", Kleinman said airly (sic). "You can't have only privileges you know."
> "What's the privilege?
> Kleinman grinned. "Me, of course." [28]

Beth Kleinman does not know that her husband will suffer a fatal heart attack that very day. Her next appearance is as a dutiful wife outside his hospital room,[29] and her final appearance is at her husband's funeral, where she comports

herself with appropriate dignity, despite her pain.[30] Since the novel is about her husband and the rebbetzin is, as is frequently the case, a supporting character in the action, we are given no indication of what the future will offer for the widowed rabbi's wife.

The reader feels, as this novel comes to its bitter conclusion, that the Kleinmans' marriage was healthy, and that, despite the intrusions of his job on her life, they both enjoyed their roles in the community. By contrast, the reader of Howard Fast's The Outsider knows that Rabbi David Hartman and his wife Lucy do not share such a marriage.

This novel is set in a small New England town, beginning in the late 1940's. Rabbi Hartman, a graduate of The Jewish Institute of Religion, takes up his first pulpit there after returning from World War Two. He had just recently married the daughter of Jewish atheists,[31] a woman not at all Jewishly educated.[32] Though she takes on the role of rebbetzin willingly, reading the Bible so as to stay one step ahead of the religious school class she agrees to teach, it is clear that she was "...never cut out to be a rabbi's wife."[33] In fact, she tells her husband, "Rebbetzin. I hate that word."[34] Yet, it does not seem that her problem is with her role. She willingly makes shiva calls with her husband,[35] and entertains frequently in their home.

She makes friends with the wife of the Congregationalist minister, who remains her only ally in the community.[36] Together they commiserate, and later her friend reveals her own thinking on the subject: "...it's not easy being a minister's wife."[37]

Lucy Hartman's problem is the man she married. He is a serious person, given to brooding over the meaning of his life, his faith,[38] and his role as rabbi.[39] When she leaves him temporarily, she tells him that she needs "laughter...joy...a kind of excitement"[40] in her life which his disposition does not encourage. Their incompatibility is underscored when he rejects an offer to become Chief Jewish Chaplain of the U.S. Army, with all the benefits that go with it. She vents her anger at that moment, complaining about their low income, lack of luxuries and niceties.[41] When she leaves him for good, it is clear that his occupation and its limitations have cramped her style, but also that his personality was suited to those restraints, while hers was not.[42]

It is not that Lucy Hartman, as <u>rebbetzin</u>, rejects the model of "background supporter." She bears two children, learns to cook and to keep a kosher home, and pitches in when needed in the congregation. A representative of her time, the 50's, she does not express a desire for a career of her own until

the next decade, when American women did reach out beyond the domestic front. But when that era arrives, Lucy, like many real-life counterparts, one suspects, is ready to move beyond the role of help-meet. Yet, the real dissatisfaction in her life is her marriage, not her role. She did not attempt to develop a career while married to the rabbi, which clearly would have been a possibility. Still, freeing herself of her husband also frees her of her role as rebbetzin, a role for which she had no preparation.

Equally unprepared for this role is the wife of Rabbi Michael Kind, the protagonist in Noah Gordon's The Rabbi. She is a Jew-by-choice who studies Judaism without her future husband's knowledge.[43] As a convert, she can have had very little awareness of the role of rebbetzin, and less preparation for it. But she is the daughter of a Congregationalist minister, so she probably has some ideas of what the role entails. Leslie Kind struggles with her reality, losing the battle and spending months in a mental hospital. There is no suggestion that it is her role as rebbetzin which causes this painful turn of events in her life.

However, her origins trouble the placement director.[44] It is not a matter of concern to the congregation which hires him immediately after their marriage.[45] Later in his career,

however, Leslie reveals to her husband that she is aware, when they take up a new congregation, that the women will check her out even more than they will him: "I know what I'm talking about. Remember, I've been through it before. Those...yentas...flock to the temple, not to pray, not even to hear the new rabbi, but to see the shickseh."[46]

This is the only issue raised with respect to Mrs. Kind's relationship to her husband's career. There is no indication of imposition on her from her role, or by virtue of the expectations of congregants. The author does not show Leslie Kind, in any of the places she lives as rebbetzin, taking any role in the community or even the congregation her husband serves.

Leslie Kind, Lucy Hartman, Miriam Small, and Beth Kemelman are all rebbetzins created by male authors as partners for their main male characters, rabbis. Even in the case of Lucy Hartman, who divorces her husband, and Leslie Kind, who experiences an emotional collapse, the women are not fully realized characters. Their creators pay no attention to the role the rabbi's wife is expected to play in a congregation. Of these four women, only Beth Kemelman is shown actively engaged in the community her husband serves.

In striking contrast is Rachel Sonnschein, the protagonist of

Sylvia Tennenbaum's Rachel, The Rabbi's Wife. In this novel, the tables are turned and the rebbetzin is the centre of attention, while the rabbi becomes not much more than a cardboard figure. Rachel is the middle aged wife of a Conservative rabbi, and together they are the parents of a teen-aged son.

Rachel understands and accepts the idea of the rebbetzin as background supporter, at least at a conscious level. She goes through the motions, but does not complete the tasks involved:

> Rachel suddenly remembered Glatt.
> "Glatt called."
> "What did he want?"
> "Something about a meeting tonight."
> "What kind of meeting?"
> "I can't remember."
> "Why didn't you write it down?"
> "The pencil's broken."
>
> Conversations with congregants dropped through Rachel's mind like stones through a clear pond.[47]

She does, however, accepts her role within the congregation. In the Sisterhood, she is accorded respect because she is the

rebbetzin, but she undermines herself by devaluing the Sisterhood, and therefore not giving it enough of her energy and attention to do properly what it asks her to do.

Rachel had, indeed, forgotten about the Sisterhood meeting.

"No, no, I didn't forget," she said, trying to rearrange the day to set two hours of it aside for the Sisterhood.

"If you didn't forget, I hope you also remembered you promised to say the D'var Torah."

Rachel sighed. "Just tell me when I'm supposed to be there."

"You did forget! It's a luncheon meeting. Be there at twelve-thirty. Hadassah Kleinholz is talking on Jewish Renewal."

"Hadassah Kleinholz?"

"The rebbetzin from Roslyn. Surely you know her."

"Of course," said Rachel, though she didn't have the foggiest idea who Hadassah Kleinholz was.

Rachel hung up. The day was shot to hell. She would have to write the D'var Torah, get dressed up, go out in the cold, smile a lot and listen to the rebbetzin from Roslyn.[48]

She knows what is expected of her, and by agreeing to do these things she indicates that she understands and accepts the role of rebbetzin. But at a level not entirely removed from awareness, Rachel resists the role and the expectations. "The congregation thought that she dressed carelessly. In fact, she spent far too much time choosing what she would wear. It was simply that in this, as in other matters, she was guided by a spirit of contrariness."[49]

Rachel knows that she does not dress to the satisfaction of her husband's congregants. "At synagogue meetings she was bound to stand out. She was the rebbetzin and she had exotic taste. People said, 'Will you look at the rebbetzin, she's got up like a hippie!' Had she worn dowdy dresses and dark felt hats, like the rebbetzins who had preceded her, they would have sniffed and said she was mousy. She was caught between the wish to be invisible and the need to assert her individuality."[50]

> ...The membership of Shaare Tefila, though Conservative by now, expected its rabbi (and his rebbetzin) to observe certain of the practices set forth in the Shulchan Aruch, that awesome compendium of Orthodox Jewish laws and rituals. It was thought proper for Rachel and Seymour to refrain from eating treif, food that was not kosher, and to observe the

> prohibition against mixing meat and milk. It was expected that they not desecrate the Sabbath by riding in a car, lighting a match, writing a letter, or handling money....The rebbetzin was not expected to shave her head and cover her bald pate with a wig. Trips to the mikvah, the ritual bath, would have seemed excessive, even bizarre. Modernity exacts a certain price, they agreed - we do not care for fanatics. This is America, after all.[51]

These expectations, which the congregants have of their rabbi and his wife, do not apply to themselves. But this double standard does not reduce the sharpness of the criticism, or its effectiveness.

> Had Rachel thought that she was liked by most of the people in the congregation she might have basked in the light of their approbation and become nicer and friendlier than she by nature was. But she knew (Golda Garfinkle had pointed it out) that there were many voices raised in criticism against her. She was accused of being incomprehensible, difficult, cold and snobbish. She was cited for being lax in her ritual observances, a Jewish illiterate. Because she knew that there was some truth to all the charges she took them to heart, suffered, became more

incomprehensible still. She wondered about all those who disliked her, but could not bring herself to think about them for very long. Some of her enemies were cool, others fawned on her, but try as she might, she could not imagine how they spoke to each other about her or what they actually said. Her imagination would not extend in that direction; when she was away from them their voices ceased to exist.[52]

Rachel's commitment to the dietary laws is flimsy, which even her son recognizes:

Aaron went to the refrigerator to look for dessert. He came to the table with half a gallon of Breyer's ice cream - butter pecan.

"Use a milchig plate please," said Rachel. "You shouldn't be having ice cream at all."

"What's wrong with ice cream?" asked Aaron, full of mock surprise.

"You're fleishig, son," said Seymour. It was an old refrain.

"I always am," said Aaron. "I'm made of meat".

"Just keep the plates straight," said Rachel. "Don't

make a mockery of the dietary laws or your father will be fired."

"That's a hypocritical reason for keeping them," said Aaron.

"I know," said Rachel.[53]

In their town, she publicly adheres to these laws, even though she'd love not to. She goes to a local luncheonette often, but restrains her inclinations. "Rachel ordered a tunafish sandwich even though she would have preferred a BLT(on toast with mayo). She was not brave enough. In the next booth sat a trio of Sisterhood ladies, all of whom worked in shops on Main Street."[54]

Later, when they are on vacation, enjoying anonymity at Cape Cod, Seymour and Rachel indulge their mutual taste for forbidden foods. "She bought clams and lobsters and shrimp. She broiled sirloin steaks and made pot roasts with bottom round, browned in bacon fat. All of it made her feel guilty (why could she not rid herself of that stupid guilt?) but her meals tasted awfully good."[55]

Rachel is a painter, an artist. She enjoys her work and its solitariness. Because that is how she has chosen to define herself, she is rarely aware of how isolated she is. But occasionally, this realization penetrates her solitude, and

underscores her own perception of her failure as a rebbetzin. "...When she came downstairs and saw the festive table set only for them, she grew sad for a moment, thinking that her efforts ought to provide for more than three people. A real rebbetzin would have invited some lonely strangers to share their feast."[56] (emphasis in original)

Rachel knows, because she is told, often, what her role is. The visiting rebbetzin from Roslyn tells her, "As rebbetzin you must be active. You should set an example."[57] And her husband tells her, "...You're supposed to embody all the virtues of 'a woman of valor'. The last thing you're supposed to do is question their values. You are supposed to be what they can identify as 'Jewish'."[58]

Yet, Seymour has not pressed her to conform more to his and others' expectations. "Seymour, whom she loved, had been so gentle about her needs. He accepted her enormous ego. As long as she took care of him and continued to love him, he let her be what she wanted to be. He never tried to destroy that image she had of herself."[59]

Rachel is a reluctant rebbetzin, but because she accepts the expectations of others, and attempts, however sporadically and unsuccessfully, to meet those expectations, she cannot be classified as detached, as in Douglas's system.[60] She

resents the fact that the congregation sells the home she has lived in and loved for years, and replaces it with a much more conventional house near the new synagogue building in the suburbs.[61] But there is no suggestion that the congregation feels free to drop in on the rabbi and his family; in fact, they have no real friends amongst the congregants.

Both Rachel and Seymour have extra-marital sexual affairs in this novel. Yet, the story concludes with them going off to a new life together; Seymour is leaving the congregational rabbinate, and Rachel will realize her artistic ambitions.[62] Apparently, the author cannot extricate Rachel from the mess she has made of being a rebbetzin within a congregational setting. The message seems to be that congregational life leaves no room for nonconformists.

If Rachel is not popular with her husband's congregants, she is certainly no more so with the women who reviewed the book. Marcia Weinberg, herself a rebbetzin, writing in the Journal of Reform Judaism, says that when she finished Tennenbaum's novel, she "...felt very sad. Rachel had been a rebbetzin for eighteen years, and she had only unhappy experiences. She missed all the joys, the love, the humor of being a rabbi's wife."[63] She sees Rachel as "angry, bitter, resentful".[64]

Weinberg does recognize that this novel raises interesting questions about the rabbi's family: "What is the role of the rabbi's wife? Can she have a career of her own? What special needs does a rabbinical family have? What can and should we expect of a rabbi and his family? "[65]

Weinberg also notes that Rachel wants to be alone - that is her style. She concludes that Rachel is not a "social being," and that "...This has nothing to do with having another career (and I do say another career, for being a rebbetzin is as noble a profession as any other)."[66] And Marcia Weinberg provides what may be the best definition of that 'profession': "Rebbetzin - the relationship between the rabbi's wife and the congregation."[67] By that definition, Rachel is not much of a rebbetzin at all; she is a woman married to a rabbi, period.

Ruth R. Wisse, writing in Commentary, is also not impressed with this novel; she finds it "vulgar."[68] She sees Rachel as a "genuine provincial snob."[69] Wisse takes issue with the presentation of the role of the rabbi's wife: "The role of the rabbi's wife is presented as paradigmatic of woman's fate, making functional demands without recognizing the 'real person beneath'."[70]

In Rachel, the Rabbi's Wife, the 'real person beneath' is

actually shown. Unlike the other fictional rebbetzins discussed here, Rachel is actually revealed to the reader. Unfortunately, she does not emerge as a likeable, or even sympathetic character. Wisse is right: Rachel is a provincial snob. She prefers to get all her personal enrichment outside the community in which she lives. She is genuinely appalled when Seymour raises the possibility of moving to Omaha, Nebraska.[71] One of Omaha's chief drawbacks is that it is not near New York City.[72]

In her review of this book, Weinberg indicates that being a rabbi's wife may be full of stresses and strains, but that the rewards are worth it.[73] For Rachel, there don't seem to be any rewards. One wonders what Mrs. Tennenbaum's experiences were like when she was married to a rabbi. And one wonders how much of a self-portrait this work of fiction actually is. How did the people served by her ex-husband enjoy reading this book? The supporting cast here is made up of unidimensional characters, each more a caricature than a fully developed person.

In the end, one must conclude that even in this book whose main character is the rebbetzin herself, the rebbetzin is not well served by fiction. Those in search of a thoughtful, sympathetic treatment of such a person are still waiting. This is not meant to suggest that the only acceptable

presentation would be that of a meek, acquiescing figure. To the contrary, it would be interesting to watch a contemporary rebbetzin balance career, home, and family with her desire to fill the role available to her, especially if she were intelligent and graced with a sense of humour. So far, we have been offered either stick people, with almost no personalities and minds of their own, or an inside look at a mild and not very likeable rebel.

For an honest and sometimes telling presentation of the life of a rebbetzin, we now turn to real life, where, fortunately, people are more believable than they are in fiction.

END NOTES

1.Douglas, op. cit.p. 41.

2.Note: this chapter does not constitute an exhaustive study of fiction featuring American rabbis and their wives; rather, it is a survey,

3.Tennenbaum, Sylvia. Rachel, The Rabbi's Wife. William Morrow and Company, Inc., New York 1978.

4.Fast, Howard. The Outsider. Houghton Miflin Company, Boston 1984.

5.Gordon, Noah. The Rabbi. McGraw Hill, New York 1965.

6.Kemelman, Harry.Wednesday The Rabbi Got Wet. William Morrow and Company, Inc. New York, 1976.

7.Kemelman, op.cit. p.30.

8.Kemelman, ibid.p.30.

9.Kemelman, ibid.p. 143-145.

10.Kemelman, ibid. p.296.

11.Kemelman, ibid. p.103.

12.Kemelman, ibid. p.106.

13.Kemelman, ibid. p.273.

14.Kemelman, ibid.p.109.

15.Kemelman, ibid. p.81.

16.Kemelman, ibid. p.119.

17.Kemelman, ibid. p.119.

18.Kemelman, ibid. p.119.

19.Kemelman, ibid. p.133.

20.Jacobs, Israel. Ten for Kaddish. W.W.Norton & Company, New York, 1972.

21.Jacobs, op. cit. p.11-24.

22.Jacobs, ibid. p.17.

23.Jacobs, ibid. p.127-9.

24.Jacobs, ibid. p.18.

25.Jacobs, ibid. p.174.

26.Jacobs, ibid. p.184.

27.Jacobs, ibid. p.184.

28.Jacobs, ibid. p.235-6.

29.Jacobs, ibid. p.267.

30.Jacobs, ibid. p.281-3.

31.Fast, Howard, op. cit. p.11.

32.Fast, ibid. p.11, p.179.

33.Fast, ibid. p.50.

34.Fast, ibid. p.50.

35.Fast, ibid. p.222.

36.Fast, ibid. p.79, 132.

37.Fast, ibid. p.183.

38.Fast, ibid. p.175.

39.Fast, ibid. p.138.

40.Fast, ibid. p.195.

41.Fast, ibid.p.229.

42.Fast,ibid. p.232.

43.Gordon, op. cit. p.194-6.

44.Gordon, ibid. p.207.

45.Gordon, ibid. p.214.

46.Gordon, ibid. p.278.

47.Tennenbaum, op. cit. p.16.

48.Tennenbaum, ibid. p.20.

49.Tennenbaum, ibid. p.23.

50.Tennenbaum, ibid. p.26.

51.Tennenbaum, ibid. p.24-5.

52.Tennenbaum, ibid. p.26.

53.Tennenbaum, ibid. p.37.

54.Tennenbaum, ibid. p.80.

55.Tennenbaum, ibid. p.265.

56.Tennenbaum, ibid. p.318.

57.Tennenbaum, ibid. p.28.

58.Tennenbaum, ibid. p.36.

59.Tennenbaum, ibid. p.54.

60.Douglas, op. cit. p.46-53.

61.Tennenbaum, op. cit. p.69.

62.Tennenbaum, ibid. p.395.

63.Weinberg, Marcia. "Rachel, the Rabbi's Wife" in The Journal of Reform Judaism, Winter 1979. p.31.

64.Weinberg, M. op. cit. p.27.

65.Weinberg, ibid. p.26.

66.Weinberg,M. ibid.28.

67.Weinberg, ibid. p.28.

68.Wisse, Ruth R. A Review of Rachel, the Rabbi's Wife in Commentary, June 1978. p.77.

69.Wisse, op. cit. p.77.

70.Wisse, ibid. p.77.

71.Tennenbaum, op. cit. p.222-225.

72.Tennenbaum, ibid. p.224.

73.Weinberg, op. cit. p.31.

CHAPTER FIVE

SOME AMERICAN REBBETZINS SPEAK

Having considered the wives of Christian clergy, having reviewed academic studies featuring rebbetzins, and having met some rebbetzins through the medium of fiction, it is finally time to seek out the real article, and, as much as possible, to let her speak for herself. That is the purpose of this chapter, for which much of the material was gathered from articles written by rebbetzins, and in some cases shared directly with the author, from published material, from speeches given at various conferences, from questionnaires and from personal interviews. Some information was gleaned from books about the husbands of rebbetzins, and occasionally something was discovered from conversations with rabbis.

The story of the rebbetzin in America necessarily begins with the arrival of the first ordained rabbi, Abraham Joseph Rice, in 1840;[1] he was married to the former Rosalie Leucht, of Zell, Bavaria.[2] This "first rebbetzin in the land"[3] supported her husband in his battle against Reform, urging him to stay in Baltimore and hold his ground.[4] Other than the fact that she took in an orphan who helped in the store

she ran,[5] little is recorded of Mrs. Rice.

Rabbis and their wives followed the Rices and settled into the new life of American Jewry with varying success. Some rabbis arrived without wives, and found themselves suitable life companions from amongst the daughters of Jews already established in the new world.

Isaac Mayer Wise did both. He arrived in America in 1846 with Theresa Bloch, to whom he had been married for just two years.[6] Over the course of their thirty years of marriage, they had four sons and four daughters, all of whom were at her bedside when she died.[7] Wise consulted with Theresa about everything, including, in 1854, the decision to move from Albany to Cincinnati, to which she agreed.[8] Somehow, with a house full of children and a husband who was both at the centre of controversy for his Reform ideas, and an author, Theresa Bloch Wise was able to help her husband by proof-reading for him.[9] Described as "gentle...kind to the poor," one who loved music, over the last two years of her life she appears to have suffered a mental collapse.[10] Her death, in 1874, left her energetic husband bereft.[11]

Wise mourned his beloved Theresa, and then got on with his life. He was about to found both the Union of American Hebrew Congregations and the Hebrew Union College; he was

still the father of eight children. Nonetheless, he met and fell madly in love with Selma Bondi, the daughter of Rev. Jonas Bondi.[12] He wrote her zealous love letters which reveal that he was capable of complete devotion to her, despite his previous devotion to Theresa.[13] Of the second Mrs. Wise not much is known, except that the American Israelite, her husband's newspaper, indicated that while he would give sermons at the Temple, she would do so at home.[14] She led the mourners after his death in 1900.[15]

Both of the wives of Isaac Mayer Wise were primarily "mistresses of his estate;" they ran the home, bore the children, and gave him a refuge from the causes into which he poured his enthusiasm. In this sense, they can both be characterized as background supporters.[16] The rebbetzins Wise may therefore be taken as the basic model for most rebbetzins in America.

A totally different model emerges from consideration of Anna Meyers, who "...was a rebbetzin but had a career of her own as a Jewish leader."[17] Such a description will seem quite commonplace in the latter part of the twentieth century (as will be shown below), but is quite remarkable for a woman whose activities occurred in the first two decades of the century. Mrs. Meyers is described as intelligent, with a commanding personality, and an excellent Jewish background;

her most unusual asset may have been "...the support of her husband who treated her like an equal."[18] She prepared for her role through years of volunteer experience.[19] The Denver Report characterized Anna Meyers as "a type of rebbetzin who represents the exquisite blend of piety and purity of the old generation and the culture and refinement of the modern."[20] Such a description is the envy of many a modern rebbetzin!

As soon as Anna Meyers came to California, in 1905, she became a founding officer of the Jewish Women's Foreign Relief Association.[21] In 1906, she managed a children's matinee benefit for the victims of the San Francisco earthquake-fire.[22]

In 1909, Mrs. Meyers was the interstate representative of The Jewish Consumptives' Relief Society of Denver; on its behalf she did public relations work, and spoke to various community groups, including synagogues wherein she spoke from the pulpit.[23] Fluent in German, Yiddish and English, she not only gave public addresses, but also arbitrated the affairs of local Jews.[24]

In 1909 she contributed articles to newspapers, promoting Jewish charities; in October of that same year she herself was the subject of an article in the Los Angeles Examiner about her Denver-based job.[25]

On a Saturday morning in 1910, she established a "first," by giving a "drosho," a sermon, in Yiddish to an orthodox congregation.[26] Nor was that her only venture into the religious sphere; it is reported that she acted as a "one woman Bet Din,"[27] though the purpose and effectiveness of this act is not recorded.

When she retired from her Denver position, she became a "visitor" for the Los Angeles Federation of Jewish Charities.[28] She also acted as a social worker for indigents, found foster homes, jobs, medical aid, clothes and money for those in need. On their behalf she wrote letters and telegrams, and made phone calls.[29] She even acted as an agent in private adoptions.[30]

Anna Meyers stands in clear contrast to the wives of Isaac Mayer Wise, whose contemporary she very nearly was. Hers is the model of the activist rebbetzin who takes on her own causes. The articles which detail Mrs. Meyers' activities do not indicate her age, nor any details about any children she may have had, so that it is difficult to obtain a full picture of this dedicated woman; yet, for any woman to travel, as she did, and to raise funds for charities was, in the early part of this century, unusual enough for it to be said that Anna Meyers was a very unusual rebbetzin.

Sybil Feinman Krauskopf, the second wife of Rabbi Joseph Krauskopf, was a contemporary of Anna Meyers, and a more conventional rebbetzin as well. Married in 1896 to the widower with three children, she appears to have acquiesced to the model exemplified by the mesdames Wise: "The wives of ministers, whether Protestant or Jewish, are religious leaders within their congregations, without pay and often without recognition. In addition, they must be exemplary in the management of their households, charming hostesses, paragons of virtue and pre-eminently successful in rearing their children."[31] Mrs. Krauskopf succeeded, loving her husband and her children, which she considered her most important responsibility.[32]

Apparently, Rabbi and Mrs. Herman Rubenovitz had no children, so she was free to invest her energies in her role as rebbetzin. Born to "an unreconstructed" Southern family in the late 19th century, Mignon grew up in an observant household in Baltimore.[33] She became a Conservative rabbi's wife in 1915, and moved with him to Boston.[34] She was elected president of the Boston Hadassah group,[35] and entertained Zionist activists at home [36]. In 1921, she chaired a reception for Mrs. Chaim Weizmann and Mrs. Albert Einstein, raising money for WIZO by collecting jewellery.[37] She was a founder and vice president of the National Women's League of the United Synagogue movement, in 1922.[38] During

the Second World War, she was active within groups receiving refugees from Europe[39] and hosted some, amongst a diverse guest list, at the family seder table in 1942.[40]

At about that time, she became a collector of Jewish ceremonial art, establishing at the synagogue served by her husband a museum to house the collection. She was involved in research, study and travel on behalf of this museum, which was dedicated in 1940.[41] Mrs. Rubenovitz travelled as a speaker for Hadassah,[42] and wrote plays for the sisterhood of her congregation, including one based on the life of Maimonides; she made up a bridal scene in order to include roles for women, and gave advice to the bride-to-be on how to be the "consort to the great scholar."[43] As rebbetzin, she made many condolence calls.[44] Perhaps the advice given by Rebbetzin Rubenovitz to the bride of Maimonides would have included encouragement to be active in communal affairs as she herself was.

The wives of Isaac Mayer Wise and the wives of Joseph Krauskopf, together, represent a very traditional picture of a rebbetzin, primarily concerned with her family and the home it occupied. Anna Meyers and Mignon Rubenovitz, on the other hand, represent the activist who is moved (compelled?) to address contemporary Jewish concerns directly through her own

efforts. The activist is not an exact parallel to Douglas's category of "the team worker"[45] because she seems to be involved in her own tasks, not sharing the responsibilities of her husband's job.

While the background supporter model and the activist model do not need to be mutually exclusive, it may be that in practice, no rebbetzin with a growing family is free to become the activist. Regardless, all of the women considered above lived in times when few careers were open to women, and either model of rebbetzin brought with it a certain amount of community stature, respect and satisfaction. Which course a particular rebbetzin chose may reflect such diverse factors as her own energy level; her personal interests; her education, both secular and Jewish; her self-confidence; the issues current during her active years; her husband's priorities; the community's receptiveness to her; and many more.

While it may be true that some women deliberately set out to marry rabbis, that was not the case for any of the women who contributed to this study in any way. Most would say, as Adrienne Sundheim did in 1980, addressing the CCAR, "...I did not marry a rabbi. I married a man who wished to become a

rabbi. I do not share my life with a rabbi. I share my life with a man whose profession is the rabbinate. I do not love a rabbi. I love a man who is rabbi..."[46]

But marrying a man who is, or is about to become, a rabbi is not the same as becoming the wife of a lawyer or professor. The husband's career impinges seriously on his wife's life, as was shown in Chapter Two. It not only gives him a career, it usually gives her a career.

At the Centennial Convention of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, in June 1989 in Cincinnati, four rebbetzins addressed the Spouse Support Network. They each spoke on the topic: "Funny, you don't look like a rebbetzin!" Clearly, at least in the minds of those who planned the session, there is an image of what a rebbetzin looks like.

Mrs. Joyce Foster, noting that the speeches were being tape recorded for future distribution, enjoyed challenging the stereotype:

> A Few important statistics before I begin:
> I've been married 23 1/2 years; we've been in our congregation 19 years - and for those of you who couldn't attend this presentation and are listening on an audio cassette which you've purchased - I'm 5'8", long blond hair, blue eyes, I measure 38-22-34,

and weigh 105 lbs. soaking wet!! And everyone always tells me, "You don't look like a Rebbitzen (sic)!"

Seriously, I'm medium height; I wear a shetel (sic); lots of navy and brown dresses, support stockings - I'm easily recognizable since I'm always pregnant, pushing a stroller and saying B'ruch Ashem (sic)!!! Everyone knows I'm a Rabbitzen! O.K., O.K., so I'm the Joe Izuzu (sic) of Rebbitzens (sic) !"[47]

Yet, moments earlier, when Mrs. Helen Jacobson spoke, she observed that, when she began her career as a rebbetzin in Brownwood, Texas half a century earlier, "I suppose I did look like a rebbitzin (sic), at least in my lifestyle. So, I think, did the majority of rabbis' wives of my vintage."[48] Though Mrs. Jacobson would agree with Mrs. Sundheim's comment above, it was quickly brought home to her that her life was not ungoverned by external...and internal...expectations:

So there I was, only a few weeks after meeting David, a rebbitzin (sic). I hadn't given any thought to what this would entail. I just happened to fall in love with a rabbi.

I remember that shortly after our marriage three Methodist friends came to call. We had all been part of a high school group that included the daughter of an old-time, restrictive Methodist minister. Hardly

had I opened the door when they asked, "What can't you do now, Helen?"[49]

Agnes Herman learned from family and friends, when she announced her engagement to a rabbinic student, that Mrs. Jacobson's friends' expectations were shared by others. The expectations of a rabbi's wife were not limited to appearances. A friend warned:

> You will lose your <u>self</u>...You will be at the beck and call of others at all times. You will not be able to do your own thing or be your own person. You won't grow! And tell me, do you really believe in all that religion stuff?[50]

In going through the transition from being a rabbi's steady girlfriend to being his wife, Didi Carr Reuben actually did a little research into her future as a <u>rebbetzin</u>. She asked a <u>rebbetzin</u> and a rabbi (it is not clear whether this represents one couple) about the role toward which she was headed. The woman told her, "Well, at first I loved it, and then I hated it, and now I tolerate it."[51] The rabbi told her: "When a congregation hires a rabbi, they also hire his wife. In other words, the rabbi and his wife are 'The Rabbi' - they are a rabbinical team."[52]

The future Mrs. Reuben responded by thinking to herself, "But I'm not learned in Judaica...how on earth could I ever be a rebbetzin?"[53] This is a common concern of many women who married rabbis. But Mrs. Reuben discovered that her expertise in things Jewish was not a useful yardstick by which to measure her success as a rebbetzin. She learned that "...being successful in my new role was mostly a matter of public relations. I found that simply being accessible to the congregation is what it's really about."[54]

Some future rebbetzins grew up in observant homes, so that they approached at least the technical aspects of their roles with less trepidation. Barbara Gibson, in her speech to the Spouse Support Network at the CCAR Centennial Convention, noted that her background enabled her to outscore the rabbinic students, including her husband, on tests during the ulpan of their summer in Israel.[55] But others came from assimilated backgrounds, and improved their Jewish knowledge " on the job". Helen Jacobson's bridegroom made the mistake of trying to teach her Hebrew on their honeymoon; within 150 miles he gave up, and she later acquired her knowledge of the language from someone else.[56] Agnes Herman recounts her early experiences with kashrut, revealing that there were pockets of data not firmly acquired in the hurry of "on-the-job-training":

It happened during our second year of marriage. I

had asked my good friend and neighbor why her fried chicken tasted so much better than mine. Did she do something special?

"It's all in the skillet; you just don't have the right kind." Her explanation sounded so simple, one of those facts that my Mother, obviously, forgot to share. I immediately went out and bought the "right" skillet.

It worked; Erv's compliments pleased me. I had become a fried chicken "mayven," an overnight expert. Mine was the best, he told me.

Before the evening was out, Erv coaxed the secret from me.

"The label on the pan suggested simmering a pound of fat in it for an hour, in order to "season the pan forever." Rather than waste a pound of chicken fat, I borrowed a pound of lard from Ruth. That's why the chicken was so good!"

"LARD!" Erv exclaimed in disbelief, "Do you know what lard is? It's PORK fat!"[57]

Some of the women who became rebbetzins married their husbands before or during the latter's rabbinical training. As the Lenn Report, discussed above in Chapter Two, showed, for many wives, their husbands' seminary years were not a happy experience. Others enjoyed those years, although they did not necessarily consider them adequate training for their future.

Joyce Foster reports that there was a wives' club at HUC during her years in Cincinnati; she found this an intimidating experience, because "All the 4th and 5th year wives knew everything..."[58] But Agathe Glaser, describing her experience many years before that said that "...The College became warm and parent-like..." for the students and their spouses.[59] For Mrs. Glaser's contemporaries, rebbetzins like Belle Wohl and Amy Blank acted as mentors and guides, showing the novices "...how to be unobtrusively supportive of the husband Rabbi but with her own interests."[60] Mrs. Foster's group also benefitted from advice by experienced rebbetzins. They were told, "Never dress too well, or too shabby. Congregants will criticize. And never wear RED!!"[61] Apparently that was a lesson which Joyce Foster chose to accept literally: "So I heeded their advice and never wore RED - I've chosen HOT PINK and FUSHIA (sic)!!!"[62]

The other half of that lesson, however, seems well founded: congregants will criticize. At their first congregation, Rabbi and Mrs. Herman learned that they were subject to continuous scrutiny:

> "I passed the rabbi's house this morning; he was still at home. It was ten o'clock! One would expect he would have been at the temple working!"
>
> "Did you notice that the rabbi's baby doesn't wear shoes..are they hillbillies?"
>
> "Would you believe that SHE never wears a hat? The next thing you know, she will be running around town in slacks!"
>
> That first year in a congregation, I was shipwrecked, deserted and struggled to stay afloat in a raging sea. No one thought to throw me a life preserver. Visitors came and offered unsolicited advice and asked deeply personal questions. They readjusted our blinds and our lifestyle. They seemed to believe that the rabbi did not need support, he gave it.[63]

For her own amusement, apparently, Adrienne Sundheim composed a pseudo-survey of rebbetzins which suggests the extent to which they are subject to congregational or communal

criticism.

Some of the items included are:

Should have brains but not use them

Should not have brains

Should make the Rabbi happy

Should make congregants happy

Should make herself happy

Should not make anybody anything

Should build her own sukkah

Should eat in her own sukkah

Should not eat

Should speak Hebrew

Should not speak Hebrew

Should not speak

Should clean her own house

Should fix her own car

Should cook her own goose

Should bake her own challah

Should know what challah is.[64]

The early years of a rabbinic couple's experience in the field are not easy in any case, because they are so different from the school experience, regardless of what that was like. As Agnes Herman puts it, "Once demanding texts turned into ever the demanding appointment book; the new faculty members were called congregants, officers, the BOARD!"[65]

Barbara Gibson found the greatest difficulty at this stage in her husband's demanding work schedule:

> ...The time commitments were tremendous. He had no staff except for one part-time janitor, who didn't have a phone. He was the rabbi, cantor, educator, Bar Mitzvah tutor, receptionist, and secretary. He was on the road constantly, driving from one town to the next, "riding the circuit" as we called it, making hospital visits, teaching, holding adult education sessions, etc. I wasn't ready for it. Slowly, we made adjustments - Jamie cutting back on his commitments and I got used to frequently being a single parent.[66]

For Joyce Foster, her husband's absences were also the least expected and least welcome part of a rough adjustment period; she had two sons, one 22 months old and one only weeks old, when they moved to Denver. Her physical recovery from childbirth was slow, their furniture didn't arrive, and the

social obligations began to occur; yet:

> ...Steve wasn't home - that was the most difficult concept - since he had been home, and in school, for the past several years - and all of a sudden, I was on my own with two kids, one dog, and no car!! Of course, who knew from post-partum depression? That was just an " extra" !...[67]

And Agnes Herman described that first year in painful terms:

> That first year in a congregation, I was shipwrecked, deserted and struggled to stay afloat in a raging sea. No one thought to throw me a life preserver.[68]

It is not clear what would have been the "life preserver," but clearly loneliness was a large part of the problem. Joyce Foster mentions it specifically:

> Perhaps the most important was my feeling of loneliness. I've been in the midst of a large function - hundreds of people - and I felt invisible. A few perfunctory "Hellos" and "How are yas," but no one really cared. There were many occasions I told Steve to take along one of my dresses and place it on the chair beside him - no one would miss me. There are still some times when I feel that way.[69]

Agathe Glaser conveys a similar experience in recounting her

first congregational experience after her husband's ordination:

> ...I wanted to work side by side with my husband, but more often I waited at home and lay awake after hearing all the days (sic) events that had happened, with my Rabbi husband lying fast asleep beside me. My little boy (just now turned Rabbi) would hear mom say "darn daddy isn't home yet" and referred to daddy repeatedly as "darndaddy." A friend tried to change it to "dear daddy" but that didn't take..."[70]

Helen Jacobson appears not to have suffered from this experience, probably because her husband, when she met him, was the new rabbi of the Temple in which she had grown up; hence, she did not go through the wrenching experience of moving to a new community where she knew no one.[71]

Despite the difficulties of the early years, most rebbetzins eventually adjust to their lives and their roles. They learn coping behaviours, as Joyce Foster explains:

> ...Maturity, "Chutzpah", and even indifference helps. Now I'm the one who initiates conversations, I go up to the invisible people - I even introduce myself. Though I've gotten in trouble, since they may say, "Of course you know me, I've been a member of Temple

> for 20 years." But you see, I don't care, I'd rather introduce myself and begin talking than to stay my distance and have people think I'm cold.[72]

Agnes Herman learned some self defence techniques:

> I did learn to put shoes on Jeff (her son) as visitors approached and to free his feet as the door closed behind them. It became a bittersweet game, as Erv and I devised all kinds of clever, facetious and fictitious answers for their curiosity.[73]

Didi Carr Reuben discovered that the solution to the disruptions of their family time was "...an ANSWERING MACHINE - LEFT ON ALL THE TIME - ESPECIALLY WHEN YOU'RE AT HOME."[74]

Not all rabbinical situations resolve themselves happily. Rabbi Jason Edelstein, who operates the CCAR's Rabbinic Hotline for rabbinic families, suggests that the pressures on rabbis and their families are much the same as those on other professionals and their families.[75] He characterizes two kinds of rebbetzins who tend to have the most difficulty in managing their lives and roles; women who either over-identify with their husbands' roles, or women who are not very involved at all. In either case, the woman is in some fashion caught in a struggle with her own identity.[76]

The former, over-identified with her husband's role, usually does not have a career of her own. Life at home with the rabbi tends to be very intense. They talk over problems within the congregation, so that she becomes an extension of his sensitivities, and probably loses her objectivity in the community at large. On the surface, it may appear that the rabbi and his wife are very close, but in reality they may be too close for her well being.[77] The latter, not very involved in her husband's role,is distant from the congregation, perhaps out of fear that she will be consumed by it and its expectations of her.[78]

One rebbetzin whose struggle gave evidence of the obvious pain she experienced is Judith Siegel, the wife of Rabbi Martin Siegel. Her experience is chronicled in her husband's diary, which he kept for what turned out to be an eventful year in his wife's life. The diary was begun as an exercise in reflection, and for most of the first half of the book, his wife is a shadowy figure, hardly mentioned at all. He does note that Judith denies herself, "spending virtually nothing on clothes, and other personal items."[79] She is at best indifferent to the swimming pool which he decides to have installed in their yard; it is a measure of success to him and nothing at all to her.[80]

Judith's involvement with the congregation is never

mentioned. Rabbi Siegel says only that she pays their bills and gives him pocket money.[81] Later he notes in passing that they had house guests, two nuns, a former priest, his wife and child ;[82] one can only assume that this increased the responsibilities borne by Judith Siegel.

Rabbi Siegel indicates, in his diary, that he is very busy; his wife "has to make an appointment to see" him.[83] But, despite the hectic quality of his professional life, even he notices that something is wrong.[84] She becomes withdrawn and stops functioning, signs of the breakdown she is experiencing.[85] She tells her husband that she is "...tired of being the rabbi's wife...I want to be Judith...Mrs. Siegel."[86] Confronted by her disintegration, Martin Siegel realizes how busy he has been, and how absent he has been from Judith's life. He recognizes that she has no friends, no outside activities;[87] her life has been reduced to caring for their young child and looking after her husband. Judith has the sense that she is serving her husband, a particularization of her general sense that she serves others; this is a large factor in her breakdown.[88]

In coping with his work and managing his life through the period of Judith's collapse, her husband observes that no one asked him about Judith. He recognizes that this isolation has contributed to her problem, and will contribute to her

recovery.[89] In fact, she seems to recover, but later has a relapse. Her husband observes that "people only allow her to be the wife of an abstraction, an extension of my own unreality."[90] Martin recalls the rabbi's charge at their wedding: "the rabbi's life is different, the rabbi's wife is different."[91]

A holiday away from the pressures of home seems to help, but immediately upon their return, Judith reverts to her bad condition.[92] She makes a seemingly miraculous recovery, only to collapse again, raising the possibility that she is suicidal.[93]
Following this, she is admitted to a psychiatric hospital.[94] Reflecting on Judith's condition, Martin Siegel notes that in their previous location, Judith had her own role, but he does not mention what that may have been. In their new (present) location, her life is complicated by their baby, the proximity of his mother, especially after the death of his father, Judith's isolation, and Martin's absorption in his job, all of which contributed to her breakdown.[95]

This is not a novel, but the actual diary kept by a rabbi over the course of one year. Therefore it has no ending, per se; it simply concludes when the time period elapses. One could suggest that Rabbi Siegel had no way of knowing what this particular year held in store for his wife, and that may

have been a large part of the problem, in itself. So caught up in the issues of his day, and the political machinations of his congregation was he that he failed to notice the narrowing of his wife's world, of which he was not really an inhabitant but more like a guest. It would be unfair to say that, had he been more attentive to her, she might not have experienced the breakdown. And one wonders where the people who make up this congregation were, showing no interest in or concern for their rebbetzin. On the other hand, nothing in Rabbi Siegel's diary suggests that his wife had any relationship with the congregation.

Judith Siegel's complaint, that she's tired of being "the rabbi's wife" is shared by many other rebbetzins. Didi Carr Reuben, writing in the Journal of Reform Judaism, describes her experience at a P.A.R.R. convention, meeting with the wives of her husband's colleagues. They developed "... an instant sense of camaraderie and connection..."[96] being "...finally in an atmosphere where (they) could feel free to say whatever was on (their) minds about (their) husbands and the congregations to which (they) were attached."[97] In sharing their frustrations, they discovered that most of the problems "...seemed to stem from the congregants' lack of sensitivity to the needs of the rabbi and his family."[98] They complained about phone calls at all hours of the day or night, with no sense, on the part of the callers, of the

intrusion upon the rabbi's, or the family's privacy.[99]

And these rebbetzins, like Judith Siegel, expressed irritation at being referred to as "The Rabbi"s Wife": "Many of these ladies are professionals themselves, career women with strong identities of their own. They resented this generic handle which seemed, to some, to minimize their many years of hard work and struggle to become people of stature, apart from their mates."[100]

Mrs. Reuben, explaining that she herself has overcome this resentment of the reference to "The Rabbi's Wife," has come to think that "The-Rabbi's-Wife-Reuben" has "...a unique and catchy ring to it. Of course, people to whom I'm closer just call me 'The'".[101] In fact, she later admits, the less sensitive she became to the title, the less people seemed to use it instead of her name.[102]

Mrs. Reuben's wry sense of humour is milder than the tone which characterizes a piece written by Adrienne Sundheim, possibly for use at a C.C.A.R. Spouses' Session in 1975. In this cynical essay, Mrs. Sundheim explains how to prepare for life as the spouse of a rabbi:

> To begin with, choose to be born into a fatherless family. This will accustom you at an early age not to expect to have a man around the house. If this

> situation does not appeal to you, at least choose the proper kind of father. For instance, a travelling salesman who comes home only on weekends, is a poor choice. You will then be under the mis-impression that your spouse will also be home on weekends. This, as you know, does not happen. Far superior than a travelling salesman, would be a piano player in a brothel. His hours are irregular, he works at night and on weekends, and meets extremely interesting people in the course of his work. He also cannot tell you what happens at the office.[103]

She further advises future rebbetzins not to learn "...to cook, sew or bake... The Sisterhood will eventually find out, and you will be sorry."[104] She suggests learning to eat quickly so that a Shabbat or erev Yom Tov dinner can be eaten in the half hour that the rabbi will have between work and time for the next service.[105] She notes that social events are part of the life of the rabbi's spouse, but socializing with the rabbi on such occasions is for everyone but the rabbi's partner.[106] Mrs. Sundheim encourages future rebbetzins to acquire expertise in areas unlikely to become topics for Sisterhood meetings or courses in the Adult Education program; if one is musically inclined, she recommends the tuba, as "This instrument is rarely used in synagogue music. Though rumor has it that the new holy day

prayer book will present a Kol Nidre for tuba."[107] Her final instruction is to listen, subliminally, to a tape which repeats over and over again the message: "You don't look like a rabbi's wife"; by the time the future rebbetzin is actually married to the rabbi, when this phrase pops up in conversation, "...you simply won't hear it."[108]

Another "occupational hazard" of being a rabbi's spouse is the phenomenon of groupies, or the women characterized by Didi Carr Reuben as "obsequious, fawning, female fans (hereafter referred to as O.F.F.F.s)"[109], who arouse the jealousy and insecurity of the rabbi's wife by virtue of their mere presence. O.F.F.F.s seem to be in love with the rabbi, but Mrs. Reuben points out that they don't really know the rabbi, and therefore are only in love (if it is more than mere infatuation) with the idea of the rabbi, a man who "...simply does not exist".[110]

Mrs. Reuben concludes that rebbetzins need not be threatened by O.F.F.F.s,[111] but one suspects that, her assurances aside, many a rabbi's wife has taken this threat seriously. Agnes Herman learned a bitter lesson on this subject from a congregant she had considered a close friend: "...there are always women who find the rabbi attractive and, for the dissatisfied and unhappy, anything goes, all's fair."[112]

Together, she and her husband overcame this threat to their happiness, "...but I was never able to give unqualified trust away. Never!"[113]

The pulpit rabbinate also imposes a fishbowl existence on the rabbi and his family. "I never became accustomed to it," writes Agnes Herman. "I was startled when a temple member, a neighbor, did not hesitate to walk into my kitchen, unannounced, early in the morning. I resented the intrusion but lacked the courage to say, "Call first!" It took years before I learned to use those two words."[114]

Even the children of rabbis experience the pressures and expectations of being the rabbi's family. The Hermans' daughter, "...at the tender age of two...had begun to call him "Rabbi" in her effort to become part of his entourage."[115] After her father had left the pulpit rabbinate to work for the UAHC, Judi Herman reported that "A bunch of kids from religious school were swimming today. They didn't even know Daddy...so he and I had a wonderful time!" [116] Furthermore, she was pleased to announce that she didn't "...have to call Dad 'rabbi' anymore."[117] Yet, Agnes Herman observed that "The children experienced some difficulty with the absence of VIP status at the Temple..." the family joined when Rabbi Herman changed jobs.[118] Their son adjusted well to his reduced status:

> When asked to fill out a registration card for Hebrew School, our nine year old crowded the lengthy phrase "Director of Regional Activities" into the small blank left for father's occupation. When the principal wondered why he simply had not written "rabbi" in the designated place, Jeff was quick to answer: " The teacher would expect the son of a rabbi to know all the answers. But she won't know what to expect from the son of the Director of Regional Activities!" Jeff delighted at being out of the fishbowl.[119]

Ruth Wolf Levi also noted the fishbowl phenomenon in her description of the rebbetzin's life in the 40's. She mentions that, "Whether her existence is in a small city or a large metropolis, the only difference is the size of the bowl."[120]

Agathe Glaser was grateful when her husband left the pulpit rabbinate. She writes of her experience before then: "Small towns are wonderfully warm but even I who had been trained for this in Cincinnati and way before and who wanted to do my part out of need and love for transmitting Judaism felt the fish bowl effect and wanted to withdraw our children. I wanted to have our own shabbat (sic), our own holidays, our

own celebrations."[121]

Today, many rabbinic spouses pursue careers of their own, as Didi Carr Reuben pointed out, above. They are professionals, well educated and quite independent, who happen to be married to rabbis. This may have a large impact on the rebbetzin's relationship with her husband's congregation, as Agnes Herman observes:

> Years ago the rabbi's wife who pursued a career and therefore was absent from meetings and services, receptions and luncheons, was a problem for the congregation, an anomoly (sic). Today rabbinic spouses seek a balance and are generally gaining the confidence of congregants who are responding with growing acceptance of their careers. Congregations seem no worse and no better for the lack of full time attention from the rabbi's wife. The spouse who devotes full time to the rabbi's career, undoubtedly finds satisfaction in that role. If it works for the rabbinic couple, fine.
>
> In families, however, in which the spouse of the rabbi follows a personal career, a new relationship with the congregation must be formulated. For

example, that spouse may find a place similar to that of the members...Every member has a right and an obligation to pick and choose areas of interest which allow for the expression of individual talent and concern within personal time allowance...

Questions raised are, therefore, many: Should we have more respect for the woman who stays home from a service to care for a sick child than we have for the woman who stays home because her work day was exhausting, and she needs to care for herself? Families with two working adults are common and necessary throughout our society today. Is the rabbinic family exempt from this? Does it make a difference if the work is to meet a financial or a morale-building need? Is the rabbi's spouse privileged to participate in an income-producing role to express individual talent and growth?[122]

For Barbara Gibson, the challenge of being a professional and a rebbetzin began even before her husband began his rabbinical training. They decided to marry so that they could spend the first year of his training together in Israel, as husband and wife. "In one week's time, I took two days of nursing boards, had a rehearsal dinner, the wedding,

a 1 1/2 day honeymoon and left for our year in Israel."[123] She intended to pursue her career as an operating room nurse while in Israel, but quickly discovered that her conversational Hebrew was not adequate for that kind of work. The job she was offered, in the respiratory ICU, would have meant a six-day work week with no vacation...not exactly conducive to enjoying the year, so she declined, and found work as a babysitter. She also became the unofficial nurse for the entire class and she "...was happy to fill this role."[124]

When the Gibsons returned to Cincinnati, her home town, Barbara was only able to find work as a registered nurse on the night shift, which she managed for eight months.[125] Thereafter, she moved to a position in the operating room, which she enjoyed over the last three years of her husband's seminary experience. His ordination necessarily interrupted her happy work experience; this was not made any easier simply because it was anticipated.[126]

When they took up their residence where Rabbi Gibson had his first pulpit, in Wausau, Wisconsin, his wife "...got a job in the OR and started over at establishing (herself) professionally."[127] She found that "Working helped. Our (sic) congregants understood that I took my career seriously and that they had hired my husband only. With this base of

information established, I could then choose, as they do, exactly how and to what extent I wished to participate in the congregation. And I did participate..."[128] When the time came to move on to another congregation, Mrs. Gibson "...had to juggle when we broke the news to the congregation that we were leaving with when to tell the hospital that I was leaving my position there so that congregants wouldn't hear the news from any other source."[129] In their next location,Pittsburgh, Pa., she undertook part-time work: "Work, again, has helped me adjust to my new city. I go to work, and although they all know my husband's occupation, there I am a nurse first."[130]

Clearly, the transition from one congregation and location to the next can wreak havoc on the spouse's career. This may be even more true today, when women are working as lawyers, doctors, stock brokers, etc, all of which require state licensing despite the obvious transferability of the actual job skills. "Most of the wives were teachers, nurses and social workers during the 60's..." as Joyce Foster recalls.[131] Mrs. Foster worked as a recruiter in Personnel while her husband was a student, until, in their last year in Cincinnati, 1970, she became pregnant, and was fired.[132] She returned to work in 1977, on a part time basis, as the Employment Co-ordinator for the J.F.C.S. in Denver, and has continued in that position ever since.[133]

Agnes Herman appears to have stopped working after her husband's ordination, and did not return until he had left the pulpit rabbinate and their children were young teenagers.[134] She says that, "Until then, it never occurred to me to follow the career which was tucked away with my graduate degree....Yet when I did return to work, I thoroughly enjoyed my career growth and success."[135] She confesses, however, that she will never know what she would have done, had the children reached teenage, and her husband still been in a pulpit.[136]

Mrs. Herman reports that, in recent years, the discussion at CCAR Spouse Network meetings has given evidence of the changing expectations spouses have of their roles as partners of rabbis. "I do my thing, not his!" was the comment of one rabbinical spouse; her contemporaries applauded, but the older women were shocked.[137] Another woman explained:

> My husband and I have an excellent understanding; we respect each other's career. I go to Shabbat Services, for example,when I am not too tired or busy. If our priorities on a certain day blend, that is fine. If not, that is okay too: we give each other space. It's working![138]

This is a far cry from the description given by Ruth Wolf Levi in the chapter she contributed to the book, I Married a

Minister. Describing her life as the wife of a rabbi, Mrs. Levi makes it clear that, in 1942, her first priority was at home:

> Next to her home activities, the chief obligation of the rabbi's wife is definitely to assist in the work of the synagogue over which her husband presides and to interest herself wholeheartedly in the people he serves. This must take precedence over any other cause outside her home...[139]

Mrs. Levi does acknowledge that there was a great need for the rebbetzin to be involved in the settlement of new immigrants, not in the provision of necessities, which were looked after by others, but in attention to "...the cry of the dispossessed soul."[140] She seems to regard this 'spiritual social work' as an extension of her congregational involvement,[141] though today we would probably see such activity as quite separate, and professional.

Another drawback of the life of the rabbi's spouse is the constraint she may feel on the part of others. Ruth Wolf Levi observes that "...people are not quite themselves with her."[142] Barbara Gibson experienced something similar, perhaps thirty years later: "True, it took several months to convince people that they could swear and tell dirty jokes in

front of me. Telling them some of mine certainly helped."[143]

On the whole, though, most rebbetzins appear to enjoy their lives. Joyce Foster says, "...I wouldn't trade my life for anything. Sometimes I feel I deserve 'Honorary Smicha'! I've stopped trying to earn my Rebbitzen (sic) Badge because I'm elated with my 'Cinderella Slippers'."[144] Barbara Gibson acknowledges that "Being a rabbinic spouse was not exactly in my life's plan...It's been a challenge."[145] In 1984, Adrienne Sundheim, sounding more mellow and content than she did in her 1975 presentation to the CCAR Spouse Network, wrote: "Being part of a rabbinic family has many advantages for the rabbi, the spouse and the children. But being human, we all too frequently reflect on the problems instead. Just as in our health status, we take the positives for granted, and want to resolves the negatives, so in our clergy families, we do the same."[146]

Helen Jacobson, speaking to the Spouse Network meeting in 1989, said:

> Some time ago in a Chinese restaurant I got a fortune cookie that read: "You work too hard for no pay". (I still have this statement in my wallet!) It was wrong. I have been paid in other coin - in

> fascinating experiences, entwinement with many lives, satisfying human relationships, enriching contacts with all sorts of people, and the affection and concern of a fine congregation.
> I can think of no more fulfilling way to spend a life![147]

Clearly, women like Edith Steinberg and Judith Siegel and the fictional Rachel Sonnschein might not share these sentiments, but many, perhaps most rebbetzins would. From those whose experience coincided with Mrs. Jacobson's, one gets the impression of a genuine joie de vivre. Whether that comes from the role of rebbetzin or derives from what one puts into the role, it certainly bespeaks a life worth living.

END NOTES

1.Meyer, op. cit. p.236.

2.Sharfman, I. Harold:The First Rabbi in America - Origins of Conflict between Orthodox and Reform. Joseph Simon Pangloss Press, U.S.A. 1988. p.34.

3.Sharfman, op. cit. p.711.

4.Sharfman, ibid. p.711.

5.Sharfman, ibid. p.257.

6.Heller, James G. Isaac Meyer Wise, His life, work and thought. UAHC, New York, 1965.p.425.

7.Heller, op. cit. p.425.

8.Heller, ibid. p.237.

9.Heller, ibid. p.231.

10.Heller, ibid. p.425.

11.Heller, ibid. p. 425.

12.Heller, ibid. p.426.

13.Heller, ibid. p.427.

14.Heller, ibid. p. 429.

15.Heller, ibid. p.495.

16.Douglas, op. cit. p.41.

17.Kramer, William M. and Norton B. Stern." A Woman Who Pioneered Modern Fundraising in the West". Western States Jewish History, Vol.XIX, Number 4, July 1987, p.335.

18.Kramer and Stern, op. cit. p.335.

19.Kramer and Stern, ibid. p.335.

20.Kramer and Stern, ibid. p.335.

21.Kramer and Stern ibid. p.337.

22.Kramer and Stern, ibid. p.337.

23.Kramer and Stern, ibid. p.335.

24.Kramer and Stern,ibid. p. 335.

25.Kramer and Stern, ibid. p.338.

26.Kramer and Stern, ibid. p.340.

27.Kramer and Stern, ibid. p.341.

28.Kramer and Stern, ibid. p.343.

29.Kramer and Stern, ibid. p.343.

30.Kramer and Stern, ibid.p.343.

31.Blood, William.Apostle of Reason. Dorrance and Co. Philadelphia,1973. p.60.

32.Blood, op. cit. p.60.

33.Rubenovitz, Mignon L.The Waking Heart, Part II - Pages from the Journal of a Rabbi's wife. Nathaniel Dane and Co., Cambridge, Mass. 1967.p.169.

34.Rubenovitz, op. cit. p.205.

35.Rubenovitz, ibid. p.205.

36.Rubenovitz, ibid. p.215-17.

37.Rubenovitz, ibid. p.219.

38.Rubenovitz, ibid. p.230.

39.Rubenovitz, ibid. p.241.

40.Rubenovitz, ibid. p.245-7.

41.Rubenovitz,ibid, p. 250.

42.Rubenovitz, ibid. p.250.

43.Rubenovitz, ibid. p.281.

44.Rubenovitz, ibid.p.284.

45.Douglas, op. cit. p.34-5.

46.Sundheim, Adrienne. "The Personal Equation of a Rabbi's Life". A speech presented to the CCAR Convention in Pittsburgh, Pa.,

June 1980. p.1. Provided by Mrs. Sundheim to the author.

47.Foster, Joyce. "Funny, You Don't Look like a Rebbetzin". A speech given to the Spouse Support Network at the CCAR Centennial Convention, Cincinnati, Ohio, June 1989. p.1. Provided by Mrs. Foster to the author.

48.Jacobson,Helen. "Funny, You Don't Look like a Rebbetzin." A speech given to the Spouse Support Network at the CCAR Centennial Convention in Cincinnati, Ohio, June 1989. p.1. Provided by Mrs. Jacobson to the author.

49.Jacobson, Helen, op. cit. p.2.

50.Herman, Agnes, op. cit. p.2.

51.Reuben, Didi Carr. " Two's Company, Three thousand's a Crowd": Reflections of a Rebbetzin's Husband's Wife. an article originally written for the Spouse Connection, and later published in The Journal of Reform Judaism, Spring, 1986.p.37-38.

52.Reuben, op. cit. p.38.

53.Reuben,ibid. p.38.

54.Reuben, ibid. p.38.

55.Gibson, Barbara. "Funny, You Don't Look like a Rebbetzin". A speech given to the Spouse Support Network at the CCAR Centennial Convention, in Cincinnati, Ohio, June 1989. p.1. Provided by Mrs. Gibson to the author.

56.Jacobson, op. cit. p.3.

57.Herman, ibid. p.5-6.

58.Foster, op. cit. p.3.

59.Glaser, Agathe. "Funny, You Don't Look like a Rebbetzin." A speech given to the Spouse Support Network at the CCAR Centennial Convention in Cincinnati, Ohio in June 1989.p.2. Provided by Mrs. Glaser to the author.

60.Glaser, op. cit. p.2.

61.Foster, op. cit. p.3.

62.Foster, ibid. p.3.

63.Herman, op. cit. p.7.

64.Sundheim, Adrienne. "A Cynical Questionnaire for Rebbetzins." Unpublished. 1975. Provided by Mrs. Sundheim to the author.

65.Herman, op. cit. p.6.

66.Gibson, op. cit. p.5.

67.Foster, op. cit. p.4.

68.Herman, op. cit. p.7.

69.Foster, op. cit. p.5.

70.Glaser,op. cit. p.4.

71.Jacobson, op. cit. p.2.

72.Foster, op. cit. p.5.

73.Herman, op. cit. p.7.

74.Reuben, op. cit.p.9.

75. Rabbi Jason Edelstein,interviewed by Carla Freedman by telephone, September 5, 1989.

76.Edelstein, ibid.

77.Edelstein, ibid.

78.Edelstein, ibid.

79.Siegel, Martin. Amen: The Diary of Rabbi Martin Siegel. A Maddick Manuscripts Book, New York, 1971. p.62.

80.Siegel, op. cit. p.62.

81.Siegel, ibid. p.69.

82.Siegel, ibid. p.91.

83.Siegel, ibid. p.157.

84.Siegel, ibid. p.158.

85.Siegel, ibid. p.172.

86.Siegel, ibid. p.174.

87.Siegel, ibid. p.176.

88.Siegel, ibid. p.177.

89.Siegel, ibid. p.179.

90.Siegel, ibid. p.217.

91.Siegel, ibid. p.226.

92.Siegel, ibid. p.233.

93.Siegel, ibid. p.234.

94.Siegel, ibid. p.239.

95.Siegel, ibid. p.241.

96.Reuben, op. cit. p.38.

97.Reuben, ibid. p.38.

98.Reuben, ibid. p.38.

99.Reuben, ibid.,p.38-39.

100.Reuben, ibid. p.39.

101.Reuben, ibid. p.39.

102.Reuben, ibid. p.40.

103.Sundheim, Adrienne. Can You Prepare To Be a Rabbi's Wife?. An essay written for presentation at the 1975 meeting of the C.C.A.R.'s Spouses Network. unpublished. p.1.

104.Sundheim, Can You Prepare To Be a Rabbi's Wife? p.1.

105.Sundheim, Can You Prepare To Be a Rabbi's Wife?, p.1.

106.Sundheim, Can You Prepare To Be a Rabbi's Wife?, p.2.

107.Sundheim, Can you Prepare To Be a Rabbi's Wife?, p.2.

108.Sundheim, Can You Prepare To Be a Rabbi's Spouse? p.2.

109.Reuben, op. cit.p.40.

110.Reuben, ibid. p.40.

111.Reuben, ibid.p.40.

112.Herman, op. cit. p.8.

113.Herman, ibid. p.8.

114.Herman, ibid. p.14.

115.Herman, ibid. p.16.

116.Herman, ibid. p.16.

117.Herman, ibid. p.16.

118.Herman, ibid. p.16.

119.Herman, ibid. p.16-17.

120.Levi, Ruth Wolf, op. cit. p.170.

121.Glaser, Agathe, op. cit. p.5.

122.Herman, ibid. p.19-21.

123.Gibson, op. cit. p.1

124.Gibson, ibid. p.1-2.

125.Gibson, ibid. p.3.

126.Gibson, ibid. p.4.

127.Gibson, ibid. p.4.

128.Gibson, ibid. p.4-5.

129.Gibson, ibid. p.5.

130.Gibson, ibid. p.6.

131.Foster, op. cit. p.3.

132.Foster, ibid. p.3.

133.Foster, ibid. p. 6.

134.Herman, op. cit. p.21.

135.Herman, ibid. p. 21.

136.Herman, ibid. p.21.

137.Herman, ibid. p.18.

138.Herman, ibid. p.19.

139.Levi, Ruth Wolf. op. cit. p.166.

140.Levi, ibid. p.166.

141.Levi, ibid. p.166.

142.Levi, ibid.p.170.

143.Gibson, op. cit. p.6.

144.Foster, op. cit. p.8.

145.Gibson, op. cit. p.6-7.

146.Sundheim, Adrienne. An untitled paper presented to the CCAR in June 1984. p.4. Provided by Mrs. Sundheim to the author.

147.Jacobson, Helen, op. cit. p.7

CHAPTER SIX

SOME CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

This work has largely been a foray into uncharted territory. The research demonstrated that very little material was written by or about rebbetzins until relatively recently. There are a number of factors which may explain this situation.

First, I hypothesize that rebbetzins have been too busy to keep diaries, or to write books about themselves. Busy doing what? What rebbetzins do. They care for the rabbi, they bear and raise children, they run their home, they participate to some degree in the activities of the congregation served by their husbands, they participate in community service organizations. These activities can easily fil all the days and evenings of a woman's life. Further, the rebbetzin would often prepare lavish Shabbat dinners and luncheons, to which the rabbi might, on a weekly basis, invite a diverse selection of guests; the rabbi's home, in many communities, is a centre of Jewish socializing and culture. The rebbetzin might be expected to open her home to indigents, to visiting dignitaries, or to her husband's colleagues, always providing a splendid Jewish meal or

refreshments, even on short notice. Invitations to the rabbi's table for a Holy Day meal may be zealously coveted, especially if the rebbetzin has a reputation as a fine cook.

Even if the rebbetzin would not consider herself too busy to keep a diary, or to write letters to family or friends, most rabbis' wives apparently would not have considered what they did important enough to document. In a religious culture which has placed such a premium on learning, such as that associated with rabbinical training, the daily activities of women, traditionally not particularly educated, would not merit much attention.

Therefore, until the women's movement taught women in general to value their own efforts, it is not surprising that rebbetzins did not write much about themselves. So, since the 60's, some rabbis' wives have been writing articles in magazines and journals. They have been meeting, too, under the banner of the Spouses' Support Network, within the Reform Movement. There, rebbetzins feel free to complain about their husbands' workaholism, and its consequences. In the safety of such an environment, they even feel free to reject the title "rebbetzin", and to stake out their own independence.

The rebbetzins whose thoughts and feelings have contributed to this work left some interesting questions unaddressed. Few mentioned the Sisterhood of their husbands' congregations, as though by now it is not an organization which intrudes upon their lives. Even the older women made only rare references to it. Not one indicated that her husband wanted her to attend or be involved; those who have participated have done so when and if they chose to, apparently.

Few have articulated any pressure on the part of their husbands to attend services regularly. In fact, most seemed to suggest that they enjoyed services, and attended about as frequently as their own dispositions inclined them.

None of the rebbetzins considered in this thesis described a mentoring role in which they were coached or nurtured by a "senior" rebbetzin. None reported that they had taken on that role vis-a-vis a younger woman, or a woman new to the community. This may be the result of their reticence to intrude, or to behave like a "Jewish Mother". It may be the consequence of natural competitiveness between congregations in the same town, or between rabbis, who regard their turf as private. It may bespeak jealousy or intimidation. In any case, it seems that not much mentoring is going on in the field.

Though an effort was made to find unhappy rebbetzins, real life versions of Rachel, the Rabbi's Wife, none were discovered. This may be because a rabbi's wife, regardless of how unhappy she is in her role, is still inclined to protect her husband and his career. She would, accordingly, be reluctant to make known her unhappiness. It may also be true that unhappy rabbis' wives solve their problem ultimately by divorcing the rabbi; the divorce rate amongst clergy is known to be substantial. That being the case, a woman who has been unhappy in her role may simply keep quiet about it, knowing that the situation, like the marriage, cannot last. Likewise, women who have been unhappy in the role of rebbetzin, but who have left that role behind, simply disappear from that scene, and go on to make new lives for themselves; Sylvia Tennenbaum, the author of Rachel, the Rabbi's Wife, is the exception to this "rule;" she left the scene, but wrote and published a novel which must in some ways be autobiographical.

Still, some unhappiness is discernable in the tone of some things written by rebbetzins, as discussed in Chapter Four. Yet, time seems to have a mellowing effect, as distance is put between the present and those hectic years of child rearing. Also, it seems that older women can reflect with some humour upon experiences that, at the time, were frustrating, embarrassing, and unfair. In general, women

looking back on their lives as rebbetzins seem to be content with themselves. If there are women out there who feel differently, they keep it to themselves.

One phenomenon which has greatly changed the way women relate to the role of rebbetzin is the extent to which women are employed outside the home now, as compared to previous decades of this century. As noted in Chapter Five, women now work in all the fields previously held to be exclusively the domain of men: law, medicine, dentistry, the stock market, engineering, sales, etc. These professions require lengthy training, and in some cases, a licence must be obtained from each state in which the person works. Many of these occupations can only become lucrative once a client base has been established; therefore, frequent, or even occasional moves necessitated by the rabbi's career will be directly counter-productive to the wife's career. Moreover, women pursuing such careers have less time and energy to contribute to a lifestyle such as that described in the second paragraph of this chapter. They may delay having children, or even choose not to have children, because of career considerations; this can lead to a conflict between the wife's values and the traditional family espoused by Judaism.

Such women are usually independent and self-sufficient, and may have difficulty taking on the role of rebbetzin. They view their husbands' careers much as they view their own, and may resent any expectation that they share in their husbands' professional lives as much as they would resent their husbands' wanting to be involved in the wife's professional life. Unless a couple has a very clear understanding of the limits of mutual expectations, this kind of dual career household may be a triggering device for a divorce.

Even women who work in the traditional female occupations, such as nursing, teaching, or social work may have a very different attitude to their careers than similar women had previously. They may equally resent the disruption of their careers because of good career moves on the part of their husbands. They may zealously protect their independence, resisting involvement with the congregation because they are busy in their own right.

And women who do not work outside the home may feel exactly the same as those who do; they simply make a career out of running a home and caring for a family. They may choose only to be marginally involved with the congregation because they feel that, regardless of what occupies their time, they are not the employees of the congregation. Such women may be very active in volunteer organizations of their own choosing,

whether they be within the Jewish community or within the community at large; service organizations, cultural groups and even the school systems depend on the declining number of women available and willing to volunteer their time and energy during the day.

While the picture of the traditional rebbetzin shows her as an expert in the laws of kashrut or family purity,[1] this image did not emerge from the research done for this thesis. This is in large part due to the fact that a distinctive majority of the rebbetzins discussed here are or were the wives of Reform rabbis, for whom these practices are not compelling. Some women were, however, married to Conservative rabbis, and still, not much emphasis on these obligatory practices was discovered. In fact, from Sylvia Tennenbaum, the creator of the fictional Rachel Sonnschein, came the theme of the hypocrisy of the rabbi and his family, in appearing to uphold these teachings in their own lives while secretly longing to violate them, and doing so at every opportunity.[2] Tennenbaum's fictional rabbinical couple is problematic for a variety of reasons, discussed above in Chapter Four, and cannot be taken as typical of Conservative rabbis and their wives. Perhaps another fictional rebbetzin, again the wife of a Conservative rabbis, is more

representative; Beth Kleinman, in Jacobs' Ten For Kaddish, does seem to be the authority to whom women turn for advice about the dietary laws.[3] Other Conservative rabbis and their wives may simply take for granted their adherence to these practices. In any case, in real life, no mention of these concerns was discovered.

Another issue considered but without much success was the question of whether some rebbetzins would themselves have become rabbis, had that been open to them; the hypothesis is that they did the next best thing, by marrying a rabbi. Not one rebbetzin considered herein gave any evidence of this. Most indicated that they married the man, not the title nor the profession. Rabbi Jason Edelstein, who answers the CCAR Hotline for Rabbinical Families, did indicate that, over the years, he has encountered perhaps as many as three women who would have become rabbis themselves had they the chance; all three were characterized by Edelstein as "older," meaning that they saw themselves as too old to begin rabbinical school, once the Hebrew Union College began ordaining women, in 1972.[4]

That the rebbetzins discussed here did not want, themselves, to be rabbis, does not mean that there is no connection

between rebbetzins and the possibility that women could be rabbis. Rabbi Wolfe Kelman, interviewed by the New York Times in August, 1989 on the eve of his retirement from the Jewish Theological Seminary, said that reflection upon his mother's life as a rebbetzin pursuaded him to support the ordination of women in the Conservative movement: "It was her example that made me believe that women could function as rabbis."[5] Rabbi Kelman acknowledged, in the same interview, that his late mother would probably not endorse his reasoning, since she remained devoutly Orthodox all her life, and women are not ordained by the Orthodox.[6]

Moreover, there is a single example of a rebbetzin who was asked, following the death of her husband to become the congregation's spiritual leader. Paula Ackerman, of Meridian, Mississippi, functioned as the rabbi of Temple Beth Israel without benefit of official ordination.[7]

However, while a few rebbetzins were discovered who are the daughters of rabbis, which may suggest a predisposition toward marrying a rabbi, most women discussed in this work had no rabbis in their families. This may be a phenomenon more likely to occur in Orthodox communities, which are more cohesive, and where, at least to some extent even today, marriages are arranged.

The only other observation related to this which can be made is that, because of the location of the Reform movement's seminaries, in New York, Cincinnati and Los Angeles, there may be a disproportionately high number of rebbetzins who come from these locations. A thorough survey would have to be taken to test this hypothesis.

Finally, there is another phenomenon which further research may develop. That is, of course, the subject of men married to women rabbis, and corollary to that, the phenomenon of two rabbis, husband and wife. Since the ordination of women began in America in 1972 in the Reform movement, and in the Conservative movement in 1985, there are, undoubtedly, dozens of candidates for such consideration. However, both these phenomena are outside the scope of this undertaking, and must await another researcher.

It is interesting to note, however, that in the introduction to his Ph.D. thesis on The Absorption of Wives into Their Husbands' Work (see above, Chapter Two), Robert Weinberg, writing about the term rebbetzin, said: "...although by the end of June, 1983 there were more than 60 ordained female rabbis, roughly half of whom are married, no corresponding term has developed to refer to the rabbi's husband".[8] In 1986, when Margaret Meyer was ordained in Cincinnati,

however, her husband, Professor Michael Meyer had begun to use the term rebitz, not only describing himself thus later in an article in the Journal of Reform Judaism,[9] but also proudly proclaiming this aspect of his identity on the licence plate of his car.

The matter of rabbinical couples will also invite examination. For the last several years at the Cincinnati campus of the Hebrew Union College, at least one rabbinical couple has been ordained each year, and the class of 1991 contains perhaps as many as four such couples. This will add great stress to the job placement process, and will lead to many creative solutions to that problem, including job sharing and job alternating. Clearly, this phenomenon warrants study.

Eventually, some consideration may be given to the partners of gay and lesbian rabbis, as well. Currently, while it is acknowledged that such couples exist, "out there," they seem to live a closeted life, and are not available for open research. However, if and when that changes, the issues which complicate their lives will make for an interesting study, and will become another contribution to the field merely begun with this current work.

When one sets foot in "virgin territory," one cannot be certain what one will find. That has certainly been the case with this thesis. However, this work was conceived of as a first step, not the definitive effort on this topic. It was necessarily limited by the time constraints of a Rabbinic thesis, and by the financial resources of the researcher, both of which did not permit extensive surveying or telephone inquiries. It is my hope that I will be able to expand this work into a more substantial volume, containing the results of a well developed survey as well as extensive anecdotal material. The present work has demonstrated that there is much to be learned from America's rebbetzins, and I look forward to contributing further to this field.

END NOTES

1.See above, Chapter One, The introduction.

2.Tennenbaum, op. cit. p.37;p.80; p.265.

3.Jacobs, op. cit. p.17.

4.Edelstein, Rabbi Jason. op. cit., September 5, 1989.

5.Kelman, Rabbi Wolfe, interviewed by Ari L. Goldman in The New York Times, Sunday, August 20, 1989. p.23

6.Kelman, op. cit. p.23.

7.Turitz, Rabbi Leo E., and Evelyn Turitz.Jews in Early Mississippi. University Press of Mississippi, Jackson, Mississippi, 1983.

8.Weinberg,R., op. cit. p.2.

9.Meyer, Michael A. "On being a Rebitz", in The Journal of Reform Judaism, Summer, 1987. p.77-78.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

PRIMARY SOURCES

A. Unpublished

Foster, Joyce. "Funny, You Don't Look like a Rebbetzin". A speech given to the CCAR Spouse Network meeting at the CCAR Centennial Convention. Cincinnati, Ohio. June 1989. Unpublished.

Gibson, Barbara. "Funny, You don't Look like a Rebbetzin". A speech given to the CCAR Spouse Network meeting at the CCAR Centennial Convention. Cincinnati, Ohio. June 1989. Unpublished.

Glaser, Agathe. "Funny, You Don't Look like a Rebbetzin". A speech given to the CCAR Spouse Network meeting at the CCAR Centennial Convention. Cincinnati, Ohio. June 1989. Unpublished.

Herman, Agnes. "I Am a Rabbi's Wife". An unpublished essay. 1984.

Jacobson, Helen. "Funny, You Don't Look like a Rebbetzin". A speech given to the CCAR Spouse Network meeting at the CCAR Centennial Convention. Cincinnati, Ohio. June, 1989. Unpublished.

Sundheim, Adrienne. " A Cynical Questionnaire for Rebbetzins. Unpublished. 1975.

_____ "Can You Prepare To Be a Rabbi's Wife?" An essay written for presentation at a meeting of the CCAR Spouse Network. Unpublished. 1975.

_____ "The Personal Equation of a Rabbi's Life." A speech given to the CCAR Convention in Pittsburgh, Pa., 1980. Unpublished.

_____ An untitled paper written for presentation to the CCAR in June, 1984. Unpublished.

B. Published

Bengis, Esther. I Am a Rabbi's Wife. Moodus, Connecticut: by the author. 1934.

Eisenstein, Ira. Reconstructing Judaism: An Autobiography. New York: The Reconstructionist Press. 1986.

Mowshowitz, Libby. Straight Talk From a Rabbi's Wife. Binghampton, New York: Gould Publications. 1986.

Plaut, W. Gunther. Unfinished Business: An Autobiography. Toronto: Lester & Orpen Dennys. 1981.

Rubenovitz, Mignon. The Waking Heart, Part II: Pages From the Journal of a Rabbi's Wife. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Nathaniel Dane and Co. 1967.

SECONDARY

Birstein, Ann. The Rabbi on 47th Street. New York: Dial Press. 1974

Blood, William. Apostle of Reason. Philadelphia: Dorrance and Co. 1973.

Bloom, Jack. "The Rabbis as Symbolic Exemplar." Ph.D.diss., Columbia University, 1972.

Denton, Wallace. The Role of the Minister's Wife. Philadelphia: Westminster Press. 1962.

Douglas, William. Ministers' Wives. New York: Harper and Row. 1965.

Fast, Howard. The Outsider. Boston: Houghton Miflin Company. 1984.

Freedman, Leslie R. " Stress in the Rabbinate: A Report on a Nationwide Study of Conservative and Reform Rabbis". Ph. D. diss., The City University of New York, 1983.

Goldstein, Shannie. "Emotional, Physical and Financial Well-being of Widows of Reform Rabbis". Master's thesis, Tulane University, 1986.

Gordon, Noah. The Rabbi. New York: McGraw Hill. 1965.

Grade, Chaim. Rabbis and Wives. Translated by Harold Rabinowitz and Inna Hecker Grade. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1982.

Heller, James G. Isaac M. Wise, His Life, Work and Thought. New York: UAHC. 1965.

Jacobs, Israel. Ten for Kaddish. New York: W.W. Norton & Company. 1972.

Karff, Joan. "A Response to Dr. Schwartzman". The Journal of Reform Judaism 28 (Fall 1981).

Kemelman, Harry. Wednesday The Rabbi Got Wet. New York: William Morrow and Company. 1976.

Kramer, William M. and Norton B. Stern. "A Woman Who Pioneered Fundraising in the West." Western States Jewish History. Vol. XIX Number 4. July 1987.

Levi, Ruth Wolf. "I Married a Rabbi." In I Married a Minister. ed. Golda Elam Bader. New York: Abingdon Cokesbury Press. 1942.

Lenn, Theodore H. Rabbi and Synagogue in Reform Judaism. New York: Central Conference of American Rabbis. 1972.

Meyer, Michael A. Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism. New York: Oxford University Press. 1988.

_____ "On Being a Rebitz." The Journal of Reform Judaism 34 (Summer 1987).

Noveck, Simon. Milton Steinberg: Portrait of a Rabbi. New York: Ktav. 1978.

Oppenheimer, Carol. "A Response to Dr. Schwartzman". The Journal of Reform Judaism 28 (Fall 1981).

Reuben, Didi Carr. "Two's Company, Three Thousand is a Crowd: Reflections of a Rebbetzin's Husband's Wife." The Journal of Reform Judaism 33 (Spring 1986).

Reichel, Aaron I. The Maverick Rabbi: Herbert S. Goldstein and the Institutional Synagogue - "A New Organizational Form". Norfolk, Va.: The Donning Company. 1984.

Schwartzman, Dr. Sylvan. "Is There Still Room for the Rebbetzin Today?" The Journal of Reform Judaism 28 (Fall 1981).

Sharfman, I. Harold. The First Rabbi - Origins of Conflict Between Orthodox and Reform. Malibu, California: Pangloss Press. 1988

Sinclair, Donna. The Pastor's Wife Today. Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press. 1981.

Stahl, Leslie. "A Response to Dr. Schwartzman." The Journal of Reform Judaism 28 (Fall 1981).

Sweet, Leonard I. The Minister's Wife; Her Role in 19th Century American Evangelism. Philadelphia: Temple University Press. 1983.

Tennenbaum, Sylvia. Rachel, The Rabbi's Wife. New York: William Morrow and Company. 1978.

Turitz, Rabbi Leo E. and Evelyn Turitz. Jews in Early Mississippi. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi. 1983

Weinberg, Marcia. Review of Rachel, The Rabbi's Wife by Sylvia Tennenbaum in The Journal of Reform Judaism 26 (Winter 1979).

Weinberg, Robert M. "The Absorption of Wives Into Their Husbands' Work: The Phenomenon, Its Antecedents and Consequences". Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University. 1984.

Wisse, Ruth. Review of Rachel, The Rabbi's Wife by Sylvia Tennenbaum in Commentary 65 (June 1978).

Yedwab, Myra. "Don't Call Me Rebbetzin". A letter to the editor in Reform Judaism, March 1982.