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BETTER TO SERVE

An Essay On Community Service

Submitted In Consideration For The

Rabbi Emil William Leipziger Prize

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The Mormon church runs so efficiently it probably makes Fortune 500 board chairmen envious. From its central location in Salt Lake City, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints functions with an almost eerie precision. This is due largely, no doubt, to the strict tenets of the faith and the loyal membership that follows them, but another factor also at work is the Mormon concept of "service to the faith." A great many Mormon laypeople demonstrate their commitment to this concept by giving one or sometimes two years of service to their church. They may act as missionaries, but are more likely to serve as unpaid manual laborers, performing tasks that though simple and inglorious are nonetheless necessary to their church's prosperity. These adherents derive strength from the knowledge that their work, however mundane, is helping to spread and strengthen the gospel in which they believe, and their church, the device by which that word is spread, thereby benefits from the gifts of their hands.

We can learn a lesson from the Mormons, for in many ways they exemplify a commitment to their religion that we in the rabbinate lack to ours. Too often, it seems to me, young rabbis in search of their first position evaluate the possibilities in terms of self-oriented criteria: How much will I earn? What kind of lifestyle will I be able to pursue? What will my social life be like? Even questions of a professional nature reflect a preoccupation with oneself: Are the minhagim of worship close enough to my personal preferences for me to feel comfortable? Will the senior rabbi spend enough time with me to enhance significantly my professional development? Will I be given the opportunity to initiate programs and carry responsibility for preaching and pastoral duties, or will I be stuck as a glorified Sunday School teacher?

These are important questions, and satisfactory answers must be found in order for the novitiate rabbi to be happy and content in his or her new role. What seems to be lacking today, however, is the balancing of these questions by another one as important, but of a different nature, namely the simple question, "How best can I serve?"

My purpose here is to propose, in general, that every new rabbi without exemptive obligations undertake a one to three year commitment to work in some area woefully lacking in rabbinical staffing, and specifically, that an excellent way to do this is to serve a congregation overseas. The worst a rabbi could lose by spending a couple of years working as a chaplain in a prison or a hospital, or in the armed forces, or by serving overseas, is some time devoted to work he or she might be less than crazy about. Given the sort of person one would hope the rabbinate attracts, however, it is to be thought that the pleasure they would get from being of service, from filling a tragically empty void, would be ample compensation. The salary differences are not extraordinary, and over the course of a thirty to forty year career, the sum of whatever losses would originally be incurred would be negligible. In addition, such a course of action being followed by substantial numbers of new HUC-JIR graduates would certainly ease the crunch in the congregational job market in the United States today. This in turn could make a return to the United States for someone who had served overseas for a couple of years that much easier.

In any case, all this is beyond the scope of this modest effort. What I would like to do here is neutralize a few myths about serving overseas pulpits, present some of the advantages of it, and hope that in this manner at least one person who never considered occupying a

foreign pulpit before now will at least think about it.

I see three big treplications that prevent rabbis from seriously considering working overseas. The first of them is language. Few young rabbis know any foreign language except Hebrew well enough to use it in any sort of public capacity. And to enter a professional position in which frequent, public, and prominent speaking is an integral part seems ludicrous. The answer to that worry is two-fold. First, there are numerous job opportunities in English speaking parts of the world, especially in the United Kingdom, South Africa, and Australia. Second, virtually every congregation in a non-English speaking country is willing to pay a significant amount in order for the rabbi to learn at least some of the language before coming there to serve. If one studied a language like French or Spanish in high school, restudying it, even many years later, brings the prior knowledge to the surface and that, together with (for example) a six month course of study at Berlitz, can give the rabbi enough linguistic competence to feel comfortable at first. After an initial month or two, in which there are bound to be a few embarrassing and frantic moments, the problem will have disappeared.

The second major worry is money, or rather the lack of it. Moving into a tottally strange environment means that one has no idea how much a "reasonable" amount of money is, and consequently has no idea what a fair salary is, what fair perks are, and how membership in the CCAR pension plan can be arranged. Again, the answer is simple. Most foreign congregations are at least moderately well off, and providing their rabbis with reasonable packages should be no problem. Officials at both the CCAR and the World Union for Progressive Judaism can help the prospective candidate determine

of what an appropriate package should consist, and colleagues who are serving or have served in foreign pulpits can provide further counsel. Standard benefits include complete, two-way moving and relocation expenses, automobile expenses, health coverage, and at least one round trip ticket to the United States each year. Additional benefits can be negotiated with the congregation. Further, it is entirely appropriate for the rabbi to stipulate that payments of the proper size should be made, in American dollars, to the CCAR pension fund. Again, the CCAR and World Union officials can help out here as well.

The final fear, and this is probably the biggest one, is simply the fear of being alone. Serving overseas means that the rabbi is hundreds or thousands of miles from his or her friends, loved ones, and the society in which they feel at home. At least one trip back to the United States each year can help (that's probably about as often as friends living on the opposite coasts of the United States see one another), but there's no denying the severity of the problem. The only comment I can think of that may help mollify this loneliness somewhat is that in and of itself, this isolation can justify asking for a larger salary than one would request in the United States (a sort of "hardship pay"), and that it is of course to be hoped that the positive aspects of serving overseas outweigh the hardships of separation from familiar faces and territory.

It is to those positive aspects that we now turn, and like the important detriments, the major benefits number three too. The first might be termed a sort of reverse Ugly American process. Serving in foreign countries as dedicated, caring, sincere clergypeople, speaking the native language and assimilating as much as possible into the native culture and society,

the rabbi is a living advertisement for Progressive Judaism. In many parts of the world, Progressive Judaism is disliked and mistrusted by many Jews, mainly because it is simply not known. By teaching it, and by being a living, breathing example of that teaching, the rabbi can increase Progressive Judaism's scope, and more importantly, it is to be hoped, would inspire young people from that country to study to become rabbis or other Jewish professionals themselves, and then return to and serve the Jewry of their native country, not just as Jewish leaders, but as Progressive Jewish leaders.

The second asset to serving overseas is the incredible sense of worldliness, of cosmopolitanism, it can give someone. By thoroughly assimilating into a foreign culture, by achieving competency in a foreign tongue, one's appreciation and understanding of all things human grows boundlessly. For the rabbi, it can enable him or her to achieve new insight into human nature and gain a new appreciation of the varieties of ways in which people can work together. Furthermore, the richness of the experiences gained can only deepen and enhance the young rabbi's career by making him or her a broader, more mature, more visioned person.

Finally, and most important, we return to that word with which we began, "service." A rabbi serving an overseas pulpit has the opportunity to be of service in important and unique ways. First, he or she would likely be filling a role that has never been filled. Virtually all the South American capitals need rabbis, as do most of the major cities in Europe. And in many of these cities, it has been years since they have had a rabbi, if they ever had one at all. The World Union knows of several congregations throughout the world that want rabbis, and a little judicious investigation

would no doubt uncover more. The rabbi would have the satisfaction therefore of knowing that were it not for their presence, there would mostlikely be no-one occupying that pulpit at all.

The second point is perhaps an adjunct to the first. It seems to me that almost nothing could be as satisfying to a rabbi as serving a congregation where everything that takes place, all services, all programs, all education, rests upon him or her, and were it not for their presence, the Jewish life of that community would certainly atrophy. Human beings in general and rabbis in particular thrive on being needed. I can think of no other way in which a rabbi can fill so acute a need, and thereby gain such satisfaction, as serving an overseas congregation.

In a career of three to four decades, two years is a brief time. Yet in that time a rabbi can provide an invaluable amount of service as well as enhance his or her professional abilities. If, let us imagine, spending a couple of years overseas became common among newly ordained rabbis, the result would be that many more of the world's communities would have regular spiritual leadership, and this in turn would lead to a revitalization of those communities, the spawning of new Jewish leaders from their own ranks, and the expansion of the world community of Progressive Judaism. But perhaps the most important result would simply be this: Jews who need rabbis, and don't have them, would have them. And I cannot think of any other service that we as rabbis could provide, should provide, or I hope would want to provide.