



THE ROLE OF THE RABBI

Many Gentiles incorrectly perceive the role of the rabbi in the Jewish community to be roughly equivalent or parallel to that of the pastor/minister in Protestant Christianity. While there are indeed some similarities, there are also some notable differences.

The title, Rabbi, literally means "my master" and actually implies two important aspects of the view held by Jewish people toward their religious leaders. First, the classical meaning of "master" is that of "teacher" (as in the English term, schoolmaster). This sense is very obvious in a well known approach to Jesus by a religious leader named Nicodemus, recorded in John 3:2:

*Rabbi ["my master"], we know that thou art a **teacher** come from God; for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him.*

The second meaning of "master" grows out of the first. The traditional Jewish esteem of education, particularly religious education, results in an elevation of the status of the teacher in the view of the public at large and of his students particularly. Again there is a very clear illustration of this sense in the Gospel record, □John 13:13-14:

*[Jesus saith to him,] Ye call me **Master** [actually the word translated literally, "teacher"] and Lord; and ye say well; for so I am. If I, then, your **Lord and Master** ["teacher"], have washed your feet, ye also ought to wash one another's feet.*

So, in the eyes of the Jewish community the rabbi is identified as a teacher who is to be highly respected because of that role.

While the official role of the rabbi is designated as that of a teacher of Torah (Old Testament Books of the Law), this function has expanded deductively. In order to qualify as a teacher of Torah, one must himself be an expert in knowledge and understanding of Torah. Therefore, it is reasoned, the rabbi is the most qualified individual in the Jewish community to interpret and apply the Torah to both religious and civil situations, adding to his role of teacher those of judge, arbiter, and ultimate authority.

In its extreme form, this kind of thinking results in an unquestioning deference to rabbinical direction, as indicated by Sholom B'Moshe in *The Jewish Press*, May 28, 1993, p. 7.

One of the areas in which even observant Jews sin is in their attitude toward their rabbis. The rabbi is not just a man

whom we have the right to hire and fire; he is not just a man who gives a speech on the Sabbath. He is a teacher and a leader. When he rules on a point of religious law, it is not only our right to listen to him, it is our obligation to do so. Yet, so many of our people do not do this and treat the ruling of a rabbi with indifference. If only we realized that **the Torah speaks to us only through the mouths of the rabbis, and that on this earth, the rabbi is the sole spokesman and interpreter of Divine Law!** [emphasis added]

Though this view would not necessarily hold true in all quarters of Judaism, nonetheless it is nearly universally the case that a rabbi's authority is expansive and not confined solely to matters Biblical. Today's rabbis, particularly in the Reform branch of Judaism (See Vol.1, No.3), are far more diversified in their function within and without the Jewish community than in previous eras; however, the fact remains that he is still viewed as the one who wields the authority of an expert teacher of Torah.

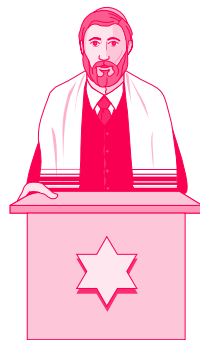
SPEAKING OF RABBIS, DID YOU KNOW THAT. . .?

- In Israel, the Rabbinat (Rabbinical Council) is composed only of Orthodox rabbis and is in complete control of all marriages, divorces, and conversions to Judaism. Any of these functions performed under the direction of a Conservative or Reform rabbi is considered invalid.

- The first rabbinical seminary in the United States, Maimonides College, was established by Isaac Leeser in Philadelphia in 1867. However, it closed shortly after his death in 1868, giving way to the founding of institutions still in existence, Hebrew Union College of Cincinnati in 1875 and Jewish Theological Seminary of New York in 1886.

- The wife of a rabbi is honored with a special title, Rebbetzin.

- An individual designated by a rabbi to supervise food production and preparation is known as the **Mashgiach** (pronounced mahsh-gee'-ak). Upon the mashgiach's report that all Biblical and rabbinical dietary laws have been obeyed in food handling, the rabbi will issue a Certificate of Kashrut endorsing the product as Kosher and acceptable for consumption by observant Jews.



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