# Roles and Challenges of Rabbis in the Modern World: Progressive Judaism and Interfaith Dialogue.

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I have been invited to talk about the roles and challenges of rabbis in the modern world, but insofar as the rabbi plays a leadership role in Judaism, this raises a broader question. What are the roles and challenges of Judaism in the modern world? I am guided in this question by the views of Rabbi Dr Leo Baeck, the leading figure of pre-war German Jewry. He survived the Theresienstadt concentration camp and in the post-war world continued to teach and challenge the Jewish and the wider society. In 1946 in London was held the first post-war conference of the World Union for Progressive Judaism. Dr Baeck, already in his seventies, gave the Presidential address. He said:

> ‘Since the last conference of our World Union a terrible ordeal has swept over the Jewish people and over humanity….We must never forget what we have lost and whom we have lost.’[1]

But at a time when the most that Jews could consider was how to support the refugees and survivors of the Holocaust, he looked towards the future. He spoke of two kinds of Judaism. The first he characterized as a ‘little Judaism’, one that concerned itself primarily with the building of congregational life. He pointed out that:

> The Congregation is the living germ-cell of Jewish life. Judaism cannot live without the Jewish Congregation; but the Congregation is not the ultimate purpose; it is not an end in itself. It is there for the sake of Judaism, for the sake of the great Jewish whole; in that only has it its true life. That must never be forgotten.[2]

I would only add to Dr. Baeck’s words that the congregation, with its democratic structure, its emphasis on welfare work, education, social responsibility and good neighbourliness, is one of the building blocks of civil society.

However, alongside this ‘little Judaism’ Dr Baeck urged commitment to a ‘greater Judaism’.

> Judaism must not stand aside, when the great problems of humanity, which are reborn in every new epoch, struggle in the minds of men to gain expression, battle in the societies of mankind to find their way. We must not, as Jews, deny ourselves to the problems of the time, nor hide ourselves, as Jews, in face of them; they must not be something that goes on outside our Judaism, in another sphere. We are Jews also for the sake of humanity; we should be there, quite especially in this world after the war; we have our questions to raise and have to give our answer. To rouse the conscience of humanity could here be our best title-deed. Surely we will then often have to speak a No for the sake of our great Yes, of our great demand. We shall often have to accuse, for the sake of justice, of love, for the sake of the promise; say

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[1] Quoted from John D Rayner ‘The Seventy-fifth Anniversary of the World Union for Progressive Judaism’ *European Judaism* 35,1 Spring 2002 144-150, 147-148.

[2] Leo Baeck ‘The Task of Progressive Judaism in the Post-War World’ Proceedings of the Annual Conference of the World Union for Progressive Judaism, July 28th, 1946, 53-60, p 56.

> No and accuse, because we are what we are and should be, the Lord's most loyal opposition on earth, the steadfast and stubborn for God's sake.[3]

That was at the time, and remains today, the great challenge to Judaism, to discover the meaning and purpose in our continuing survival as a people. But in order to do so we do need the 'little Judaism', the infrastructure of Jewish communities that helps forge Jewish identity and ensures our continuity. It is in that sphere that the rabbi often has his primary role. In this sense the rabbi is the 'general practitioner' of the Jewish world, the first port of call for Jews seeking to address the daily issues that confront them. But the rabbi is also called upon to be a kind of 'ambassador' to the outside world, a role that has become even greater in the open society that is geared to instant communication. In the course of this lecture I will touch on both aspects, but must begin with providing the necessary historical background on the nature of the rabbinic role.

The word 'rabbi' is derived from a Hebrew term 'rav' meaning 'master', but it became used as a title for a new kind of Jewish religious leader that emerged in Palestine at the beginning of the Common Era. Unlike the priests who officiated in the Temple, and whose title was hereditary, the rabbi was a scholar who earned the title through his own abilities and who acted as an interpreter of the Hebrew Bible and the oral traditions that accompanied it. Jews have understood themselves as bound to God through a covenant, a legal contract that defined all aspects of their behaviour. So the rabbi's task was to interpret and apply the obligations of the covenant, in part expressed as laws, to contemporary life. The term that covers the body of materials contained in the Hebrew Bible itself, and all subsequent religious studies, is Torah. Sometimes translated as 'Law', it is better understood as 'teaching', or 'guidance'. In that early period various schools of rabbis emerged and decisions were made democratically after debate and on the basis of the majority opinion. Effectively the rabbis were the leaders of a social revolution that created what we know today as Judaism. They oversaw the move from a religion based on the Temple cult to one centred on home and community worship, together with an emphasis on study. This transformation enabled the Jewish people to survive following the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple by the Romans, and the scattering of their people throughout the known world. The record of the debates and decisions of the early rabbis were first codified in the Mishnah in the second century of the Common Era, and then expanded over the following three centuries in two separate editions, one in Palestine, one in Babylon, known as the Talmud. The Babylonian Talmud was to become the central text for advanced study in the rabbinic schools that have functioned down to the present day.

In the early period the rabbi usually had another occupation to earn his livelihood, and gave his time freely to his rabbinic role. It was only in the Middle Ages that the rabbi, in addition to his task as interpreter and judge, became a teacher, preacher and spiritual head of a Jewish community. It is worth stressing that the rabbi is not a priest, and, like any other Jewish layman, can lead religious services and officiate at weddings and funerals. What distinguishes the rabbi is his learning, and in this capacity he would deal with legal disputes and supervise matters like divorce where complicated issues might be involved. The office of rabbi was initially an honorary one, because, ideally, every Jewish man should set time aside to study Torah for its own sake, without seeking a reward. But the reality of the task led to the

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[3] Ibid p 56.

creation of a legal fiction enabling the rabbi to receive a ‘*sekhar battalah*’, a compensation for the loss of time due to the requirements of the rabbinic office.
In modern times the rabbi is usually employed by a congregation with a professional contract and salary.

## The modern period

The vast changes in Jewish life since the Emancipation of the Jews in Europe have radically affected the degree to which Jews feel themselves committed to live within the framework of Jewish law and tradition. When areas of Jewish law passed into the hands of civil authorities the classical role, and indeed authority, of the rabbi as a judge within a closed society largely disappeared or became an area of specialization. In the nineteenth century Jews experiencing the new open society wanted their rabbis to have a broader culture and education and a firm grasp of Jewish history and philosophy. Some countries even demanded university qualifications in order that rabbis be recognized by the state on the same basis as the Christian clergy. In this coming together of state requirements and Jewish interests we see reflected the desire of many Jews to find their place as full citizens in the newly emerging nation states of Europe. The internal Jewish debate that continues until today, is whether the end-result is ‘assimilation’, the possible disappearance of the Jewish people as a recognizable entity, or ‘acculturation’, the maintenance of a distinctive identity, but expressed in the forms of the particular host culture.

When the traditional rabbinic academies for Talmud study, the *yeshivot*, were unwilling to accept university studies as part of their curriculum, the modern Rabbinic Seminary was born. These seminaries required a parallel university education, in some cases including a doctorate. There was less stress on Talmud study, and even here it was taught within the newly-emerging historical-critical approach of the Wissenschaft des Judentums (the scientific study of Judaism) ideology. Courses included Bible, liturgy, history, philosophy and theology, as well as homiletics, the latter reflecting the increasing importance of preaching. Within a sixty-year period in the middle of the 19th century the major Seminaries were created that were to transform the image, education and role of the rabbi in response to the new situation of Jews in Western society and, to a lesser extent, in Eastern Europe: 1827 Padua, later Rome; 1829 Metz, later Paris; 1847 Vilna and Zhitomir; 1854 Breslau; 1855 'Jews' College', London; 1872 Vienna; 1872 the liberal 'Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums', Berlin; 1873 the orthodox 'Rabbiner Seminar', Berlin; 1875 the reform 'Hebrew Union College', Cincinnati; 1877, the ‘Neolog’ seminary, Budapest; 1886 the conservative 'Jewish Theological Seminary', New York. One sarcastic response from an Orthodox rabbi in Germany to this new development was: ‘When rabbis became 'Rabbiner Doktor', then Judaism became sick!’

The 'new' rabbi in Europe adapted from the Christian clergy of the time, not only the black gown, even the clerical collar, but also a changing role as preacher, scholar and '*Seelsorger,* 'pastor'. The rabbi often functioned in one of the Reform or Liberal congregations which were created to offer a spiritual home for the newly emerging middle class Jewish community. In the religious services, emphasis was placed on decorum, helped by the introduction of the organ and musical settings for traditional prayers and hymns. Unlike the traditional separation of men and women in Orthodox synagogues, families sat together, again in imitation of the practice of their Christian neighbours. In Germany, the intellectual sermon, diligently prepared, elegantly structured, academically sound and well-rehearsed, became the trademark of the learned rabbi. (It was said that the more the sermon was above the heads of the congregation, the more they appreciated their Rabbi for his great learning.) Like a doctor or university professor, the rabbi too had his ‘Sprechstunde’, the time when people could make an appointment to consult him. Those same rabbis did their patriotic duty to the German Fatherland as Feldrabbiner, army chaplains, during the First World War.

However the precise role and task of the rabbi changed according to the nature of the society in which Jews found themselves. In America, particularly in the Reform movement, the rabbi, preaching 'prophetic Judaism' became a social activist. There is an iconic photograph of Rabbi Professor Abraham Joshua Heschel marching alongside Martin Luther King in Selma, Alabama at the height of the civil rights struggle. Many other rabbis were similarly engaged at the time, seeing this kind of activity as part of their religious responsibility. Just to indicate the continuity of this tradition, a glance at the current website of the organization ‘Rabbis for Human Rights – North America’ will find an invitation to a ‘Rabbinic Fact-Finding Mission’ on modern slavery, to meet with tomato packers of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers who are fighting human trafficking, slavery and other unjust working condition in the tomato fields of Florida. The same website provides Jewish educational materials to be used in the annual ‘Human Rights Sabbath’.

Naturally rabbis were at the centre of the great debates and internal struggles that have affected the Jewish community of the past few centuries. Most obvious divisions lie in the different ‘denominations’ that have emerged in the post-Emancipation era, based on questions about the historical truth of divine revelation as recorded in the Hebrew Bible, and the binding nature of Jewish law. The list of different religious movements in Judaism: Ultra-Orthodox, Chasidic, Modern Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Liberal, Reconstructionist, Humanist and others, are a testament to our ability to argue and fight amongst ourselves. From the beginnings of the nineteenth century the bitter debates about Jewish nationalism and Zionism, the political desire to create a Jewish state in Palestine, divided rabbis who were expected to offer their communities guidance. Today, though virtually all rabbinic organizations have placed Israel at the centre of their official policies, and most rabbis have received some part of their training in Israel, the debates rage about the policies of the Israeli government, and we shall return to this subject later.

## Perceptions of the rabbinic role

It was my privileged position for twenty years to be the Principal of a rabbinic seminary in London, Leo Baeck College. It is one of the few created since the end of the Second World War, in 1956, and for most of its existence the only one serving European Jewish communities. With the exception of the Budapest seminary, most of the other pre-war European seminaries listed above had been forced to close and their communities scattered or destroyed. The express purpose was to become the successor of the Berlin 'Hochschule fuer die Wissenschaft des Judentums' that served to train rabbis for the German 'Liberal' movement and was closed by the Nazis in 1941. One of the Hochschule's great teachers was Rabbi Dr Leo Baeck, and when he died in 1956 the College, that had been created by one of his former students, was given his name. The fact that the College was created at a time of considerable turmoil in the Jewish world enabled us both to embrace the classical studies of Jewish tradition as taught in the earlier seminaries, but also to try to find out what are the skills and qualities that rabbis need to deal with today's Jewish community and the wider society in which we live.

In January each year we would review the application forms of those who wish to be considered as candidates for the rabbinic programme. Amongst other questions they are invited to tell us what they see as the role and personal qualities of a rabbi. While the answers vary from applicant to applicant, they share many common views about the enormous range of tasks they feel rabbis should perform. The following is a random sample:

'Learning and teaching - enabling others to share in the experience of Jewish study.'

'Confident leadership and profound humility. Strong enough not to be looking for affirmation or praise through the role.'

'Leader, teacher and counsellor - as leader, a model of living Jewishly.'

'Qualities: compassion, integrity, calmness, strength of character and mind. A sense of humour. Love of God and of Judaism.'

'Represents Judaism to the Jewish community and non-Jewish world.'

'To lead the congregational services; pastoral work; social work.'

'The link between people and Jewish tradition.'

'A spiritual leader. A diplomat in dealing with the congregation. Multifaceted skills in areas of counselling, inspirational leadership...'

'Active in both community and personal development. Instill pride in being Jewish.'

'Available at all times of need and crisis.'

'The central pivot around which the community revolves. The one who sets the tone in spiritual and material matters.'

This complex range of tasks and qualities mirrors pretty well the different expectations people have about the rabbi. It points to the possibilities and potential within the role, but also the great burdens the rabbi has to bear. Any objective analysis of this list will show that it is impossible for any one person to live up to all these expectations. This is something that rabbis themselves acknowledge.

He, or she, is to be the spiritual leader of the community - though here too there is an inner tension. For in the Progressive Jewish world, rabbis are the salaried employees of the congregation. They have to learn how to tread the delicate tightrope between setting their own leadership goals and winning the support for them of a voluntary leadership that usually changes every few years. Those leaders may have quite different priorities, but ultimately they pay the rabbi's salary.

In our more democratic age, the rabbi is expected to be always available and approachable. If the rabbi has authority today in his or her community it is less because of the title and far more because it has been earned through personal qualities.

Already it must be clear that there are too many expectations raised by the very title 'Rabbi'. No one can fulfil them all well (and at the same time!) which leads to major problems for rabbis. When the expectations are so unrealistic how do you accept your limitations? Where do you get the self-confidence to admit that you cannot do everything, that you have strengths and weaknesses like anyone else? Does such an admission risk undermining your authority and indeed something of the mystique attached to the title? But is such a mystique no longer appropriate anyway? Certainly one of the classical models of the modern rabbi was that of the workaholic man, totally dedicated to the needs of his congregation. Often this dedication was at the expense of his family, and sometimes his own personal health and well-being. A modern awareness of the dangers of this kind of working led to a reconsideration of the role. But an even greater influence has been the emergence of women rabbis, initially within the US and UK Reform movements, since the early 1970's. Women rabbis with families still find themselves more committed to running housholds and raising children than their male counterpart. This is one of the findings of some studies done in America by women rabbis themselves. This means, quite pragmatically, that less time is available for the congregation, so different strategies have to be explored, underpinned also by aspects of feminist thought. The classical role of the rabbi was often hierarchic, with ultimate responsibility resting with the rabbi and a tendency to be 'hands on' in every aspect of the work. The change that the women have introduced is to empower more people within the community to take on responsibility for various aspects, with the rabbi supporting them in that role. This does not remove the pressures, particularly when some kind of emergency affects the community, but the values of personal space and family time are now more on the agenda of male Rabbis as well as women, though the old work ethic has a habit of sneaking up on them.

Most rabbis are acutely conscious of what they consider to be their personal inadequacies. The problem is not so much the kind of roles they feel they should fulfil, most of which reflect the idealism, spiritual commitment and willingness to serve the Jewish people that they have brought to the task. Rather it is in the lack of boundaries to the many roles, the blurring between their public and private life, and the assumption that a rabbi must be always on call. The rabbinate is one of the few professions where it is not only what one knows or does that matters, but who and what one is. It is the person as a whole that is on offer to the Jewish world and the wider community.

The recognition that there is a problem in the lack of boundaries and unrealistic expectations has had an impact on the training of rabbis, with more time devoted to acquiring skills in the area of counseling. The intention is to help them better understand the nature of the problems that their congregants bring to them, but also to strengthen their own awareness of the pressures they will encounter in their work. One consequence has been the creation of support systems needed by rabbis - whether by greater collegiality and the sharing of burdens or the use of some kind of professional supervision for the work itself, on the social worker or counsellor model, or as part of a broader 'in-service' training.

## The wider context of rabbinic activity

Much of the above still deals largely with what Dr. Baeck called the 'little Judaism'. But the nature of Jewish existence, our sense of relatedness to Jews throughout the world, and particularly to the State of Israel, adds a global dimension to our lives. This means not simply an awareness of things happening to Jews, but also the wider social framework within which these things take place and the question of our responsibilities. I have already mentioned the ordination of women as rabbis, but not emphasized what a controversial issue it was at the time. In the public perception rabbis were men, and amongst the fiercest critics of the proposal to ordain women were often Jewish women themselves. Perhaps the reason was that they had accepted the definitions of their life roles and expectations within traditional Judaism, and such a radical change challenged the very basis of their spiritual identity. But in the event it was the progressive religious world, the reform movements in the USA and the UK, that were the first to accept women candidates in their seminaries and congregations.[4] Today half the students at all the non-Orthodox seminaries are women, and there are hundreds of women serving as rabbis in congregations around the world. But even more controversial has been the issue of accepting homosexual men and lesbian women for rabbinic training. My own seminary, Leo Baeck College, struggled with this issue already some thirty years ago and decided to accept two women who applied to study. Again similar moves were being made in the USA. Despite the difficulties, and the fact that it cost our College support from some congregants, this too has become an accepted part of Jewish community life, with gay and lesbian rabbis serving in 'normal' congregations in the UK and the United States.

In many ways the above issues can be seen as part of the process of acculturation I mentioned earlier, adapting our traditions to changing developments in society, but also having the courage to take risks in promoting ideas of equality and simple social justice.

If these are somewhat inward directed issues, the challenge of interfaith dialogue firmly places us on the wider world stage. Some forty years ago, in part influenced by the events surrounding the Six Day War, rabbis involved with the Leo Baeck College set about seeking to open a dialogue with the Muslim world. I have written about the origins and development of this work.[5] Suffice it to say that the College was one of the founding institutions of an annual week-long international Jewish-Christian-Muslim student conference that takes place in Germany. All rabbinic students have to attend the conference at least once during their five-years of study at the College as part of their training, and many return to it later after graduation. The fact that the conference takes place in Germany is itself noteworthy, and was a source of controversy at the beginning. How could we organise a programme like this in the 'land of the murderers'. Yet we felt that it was the responsibility of a post-war generation of Jews, especially future rabbis, to confront that past and their own prejudices about Germany and the Germans. The conference celebrates its fortieth anniversary next year and its effect has been that several generations of rabbis have begun their congregational careers with first-hand intensive experience of dialogue with Christians and Muslims, and a network of contacts, and this has impacted on the way they make interfaith activity part of their congregational work. Just to give an example, the tragic events of 9/11 fell shortly before the Jewish New Year, the most solemn period of the Jewish calendar, and clearly that event had to be addressed. A number of rabbis used the opportunity to call for solidarity with Muslims who were likely to be targeted in retaliation for that crime committed in the name of Islam.

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[4] As an important footnote the first woman to be ordained as a rabbi was Regina Jonas who received a private ordination in Berlin in 1935. She served as a rabbi till taken by the Nazis to Theresienstadt concentration camp and then to Auschwitz where she was murdered.

[5] **Talking to the Other: Jewish Interfaith Dialogue with Christians and Muslims** (I.B.Tauris, London 2003).

But interfaith dialogue, too, is subject to wider social, political and emotional pressures. Two of the main organizations that initiated Jewish-Christian interfaith dialogue in the last century did so in response to perceived threats to Jewish society. The UK-based Council of Christians and Jews was formally established in 1942 in response to events that had begun with the rise of Nazism, and among its aims was to check and combat religious and racial intolerance. The very name of the American body charged with this work, the Anti-Defamation League, points to a similar defense-oriented task. Founded in 1913 its aim was ‘to stop the defamation of the Jewish people and to secure justice and fair treatment to all’. Both organisations have evolved broader agendas as circumstances have changed, but the background concerns endure. Which leads me inevitably to two topics that play out in the background to all aspects of contemporary Jewish life and the roles rabbis are asked to play.

## The Holocaust and the State of Israel

Two radically different experiences of the last century have had an enormous impact on Jewish life and continue to present challenges to rabbis, the Holocaust and the creation of the State of Israel. The Holocaust, the Shoah, meant the destruction of one third of the entire Jewish population of the world. Even the figure of six million murdered does not capture the depth of its impact on the Jewish people as a whole. We are still in mourning for the destruction of entire families and communities as well as the loss of the great reservoirs of traditional Jewish learning in the world of East European Jewry. But what was also totally undermined, was the love affair that Jews in Western Europe had had with modernity, with the culture of reason and rationality, with the promise of infinite possibilities and ever rising quality of life, and with the trust that here at last we could find a secure home. Since then we have become very sensitized to the threat of anti-Semitism, a term invented in the late nineteenth century in Germany as a more scientific-sounding term for ‘Judenhass’, ‘Jew hatred’. I suspect that it is difficult for others to imagine what it means to be repeatedly the object of hatred by individuals and entire movements of people, totally irrespective of what you actually do. It is as if your mere existence is somehow an affront to others, and leads them to invent religious or ideological justifications for seeking your exclusion, your humiliation and ultimately your destruction. Anti-Semitism is chameleon-like in the way it changes its rationale in different periods. It has been justified for Christian attacks on Jews throughout the centuries by the teaching that Jews killed Christ; for Muslims on the grounds that Jews betrayed Mohammad; for the Nazis because of alleged racial impurity; for the political radical right and equally for the political radical left because of an imagined powerful Jewish influence on society. This latter idea is reinforced by materials like the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, a well-documented forgery alleging to show a Jewish plot to control the world, that is currently available everywhere in the Arab world, and even had an influence here in Japan some years ago.[6]

It is therefore no surprise that Jews often consider criticism of Israel or 'anti-Zionism', not as a legitimate and balanced political evaluation of the actions of the Jewish state, but as yet another variation of anti-Semitism. Jews point to the myriad areas of injustice perpetrated in the world today, for example the destruction of Christian communities in the Middle East and in Muslim countries, yet none of these seem to attract the kind of world-wide condemnation or calls for boycott that Israel's actions acquire. I think that this perception and attitude needs to be stated, because it offers a perspective on the challenge presented to rabbis, in Israel and in the Diaspora, as they try to address the many real problems that exist within Israel itself and in relation to the Palestinians and neighbouring countries.

After the Shoah, no Jew can ignore anyone who calls for the destruction of Jews anywhere, whether it comes from the President of Iran, the public rhetoric of Hamas, Hezbollah and Al Qaeda, or from the mouth of an Islamist in France who murdered Jewish children in a school in Toulouse, or from those who elevate suicide bombers to the status of heroes or martyrs, and poison the minds of their children with anti-Semitic school books.

And yet despite all these legitimate concerns there are Jews and Israelis who are deeply sensitive to the tragic history of the Palestinian refugees and the suffering of the Palestinian people because of the actions of the government of Israel. Solidarity with our own people is a natural aspect of any human society. But self-criticism on the basis of human rights, justice, religious or political values, is the other side of the coin. Rabbis inevitably find themselves caught up in the struggle to be true to both of these often conflicting values.

Just to show how challenging this can be, one need only look at a number of e-mails I received recently within a couple of days of each other. The New Israel Fund (NIF) is a charitable organization that is dedicated to promoting religious pluralism and civil rights in Israel. Amongst the organizations they support is the 'Hotline for Migrant Workers', which has been subject to recent waves of violence. An estimated 40,000 refugees and asylum seekers live in Israel, a majority of them from Eritrea, Darfur and Southern Sudan, as well as some 180,000 migrant workers. For the festival of Shavuot, when we read the Biblical story of Ruth, herself a typical refugee, the NIF have circulated fact sheets about the current situation of such workers in Israel and a source sheet of Jewish teachings about refugees and human rights to encourage support for this organization and its work. But the NIF also supports two other important organizations in Israel: Rabbis for Human Rights is made up of rabbis from across the entire religious spectrum, and, among other goals, such as supporting women's rights in Israel, has championed the rights of Palestinians, often in conflict with state policies; B'tselem is the Israeli Information Centre for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories, again an organisation that is highly critical of Israeli government actions, documents and publicises its findings.

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[6] The *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, Aum, and Antisemitism in Japan by David G. Goodman http://sicsa.huji.ac.il/goodman2.pdf .

So it is hardly surprising that amongst the other e-mails I receive, is one from a Jewish organizations in the United States protesting that the New Israel Fund is allowed to participate in an annual parade in support of Israel. They argue that some of the organizations that the Fund supports 'actively promote economic warfare against Israel through Boycotts, Divestment and Sanctions,' and it adds, are funded by the European Union for the express purpose of undermining Israel. They single out B'tselem which is accused of producing a video that was shown at 'the infamous Israel Apartheid 2012 events held at universities and colleges worldwide'. In the view of the organization the NIF represents a threat to Israel and should be excluded from the parade. The document is signed by amongst others, a number of American rabbis.

If one tries to unpack these clearly deeply-felt opinions, at stake is the fear on one side about the possible destruction of the State of Israel, not just at the hands of enemies in the Arab world, but through internal dissent and public criticism, thus lending support to Israel's enemies. But on the other side is an equally powerful concern about the nature of the Jewish state, the quality of its activities and the desire for it to live up to the best of traditional Jewish values. Rabbis stand on both sides of the divide. Whenever Israel is physically threatened, the Six-Day War and the Yom Kippur War, are powerful examples, all such distinctions are dropped and survival and support become priorities. But when the crisis is over these deep divisions re-emerge. And with the haunting memory of the Holocaust behind us, the thought of the possible destruction of Israel is unbearable.

I suspect the careful and I hope balanced way in which I have tried to depict these internal Jewish struggles is an example of a rabbi trying to fulfil an ambassadorial role to the outside world while at the same time trying to be fair to the internal concerns and struggles within the Jewish people. Such detachment is not always possible.

Let me turn once again to Rabbi Dr Leo Baeck and something he wrote about the role of the rabbi, in this case as a preacher to the Jewish community. He wrote:

A message is not the preaching of a preacher but the man himself.

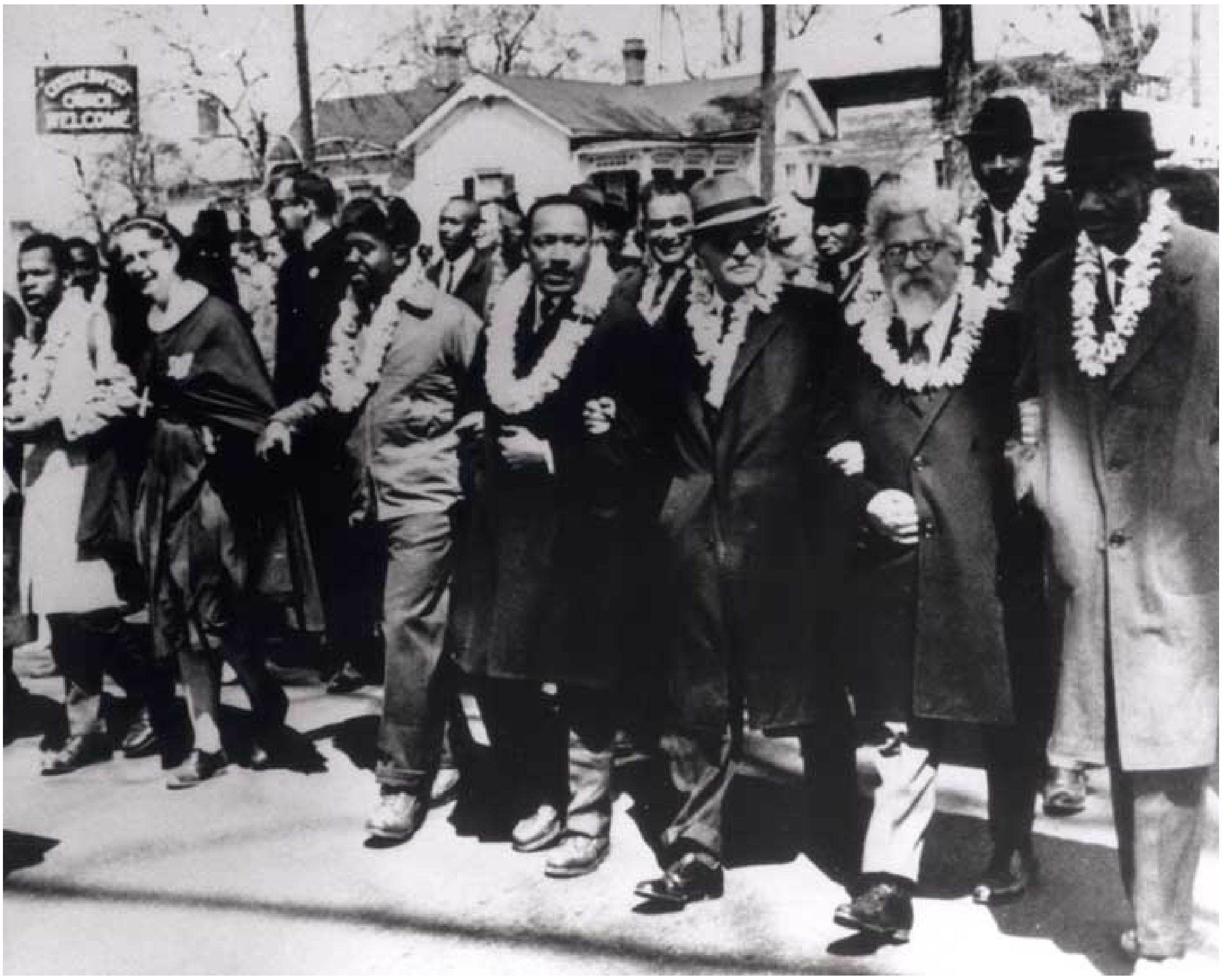
Few rabbis would disagree with the sentiment, but in their private moments, most must shudder at its implications. For who can live up to such an expectation. More acceptable, though also challenging in its own way, is a saying of Zussya of Hanipol, a strange ecstatic figure from the early period of the Jewish movement in Eastern Europe known as Chasidism. When he thought about his death and what it would be like to stand before the heavenly judgment he said to himself. If they ask me, Zussya, Zussya, why couldn't you be like Moses? Then I can say, how could I be like Moses, I'm only Zussya! But if they ask me, Zussya, Zussya, why couldn't you be like Zussya? Then what am I going to answer?

Let me end by evoking a Jewish blessing that is a plea that rabbis receive the practical and the spiritual support that they need. It refers to ‘Israel’, which traditionally means the Jewish people as a whole:

> For Israel and for the rabbis, for their pupils, and the pupils of their pupils, who devote themselves to the study of Torah, in this place and in every other place; let there be for them and for you great peace and favour, love and mercy, long life, ample sustenance and redemption from their Father who is in heaven.

• Home

Jüdischer Gottesdienst im Felde
(Feldrabbiner: Dr. Sonderling, Hamburg)
Laut Armeebefehl S. M. des Deutschen Kaisers vom 29./30. September 1914



Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, second from right, participating in the civil rights march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, on March 21, 1965.

First row, from far left: John Lewis, an unidentified nun, Ralph Abernathy, Martin Luther King, Jr., Ralph Bunche, Abraham Joshua Heschel, Fred Shuttlesworth.

Second row: Visible behind (and between) Martin Luther King, Jr. and Ralph Bunche is Rabbi Maurice Davis.