

Dr. Levitz is a clinical psychologist, practicing in Woodmere, N.Y. where he is also Clinical Director of the South Shore Psychological Center. A Professor at Yeshiva University's Wurzweiler School of Social Work, he holds the Carl and Dorothy Bennett Chair in Pastoral Counseling, and is mentor to the MSW program for clergy. Dr. Levitz received his Ph.D. at Ferkauf Graduate School and Semicha at the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary.

CHILDREN OF RABBIS

For the majority of congregational rabbis, role-related stress is a significant factor affecting not only the rabbi, but his family as well (Freedman, 1985). Always in the public eye, the rabbi, and by association his family, is subject to constant scrutiny, unrealistic expectations, distorted projections, community intrusiveness, economic insecurity and frequent mobility (Silverstein, 1979). In contrast to the average family, the rabbinic family is not only socially more visible, but psychologically more vulnerable.

The rabbinate, Klaperman (1979) suggests, tends to encircle the life of the rabbi, engulfing him to the point where he has time neither for himself nor for his family. According to Friedman (1986), rabbis are actually involved in negotiating three separate emotionally interfaced family systems—"the individual families which make up the congregation; the congregation itself which functions as a family in its own right; and their own nuclear and extended" families.

Freedman (1985), in his study of stress in the rabbinate, noted that "the man who has assumed the role of rabbi is faced with special problems in marriage. He has taken up a role that conflicts with, and seeks to invade, his role as husband." Reflecting the strain experienced in rabbinical families is the precipitous increase in divorce among rabbis (Singer, 1985).

The results reported by Hutchinson and Nichols (1980) in their study of divorcing clergy seems particularly relevant to rabbinic

marriages as well. They found that 70 percent of divorced clergymen reported that the primary complaint of their former wives was their inordinate time commitment to career. Freedman found that 30 percent of his sample of rabbis reported that their wives would prefer that they not be rabbis. Hutchinson and Nichols ominously concluded that "the peak of clergy divorce has not yet been reached."

In recent years there has been a mushrooming concern about the impact of the rabbinate on both the rabbi and his family. Nevertheless, there has been no empirical data reflecting the effects of rabbinical life on children of rabbinic families. Systems theory clearly suggests that stress on any family member affects the homeostasis and functioning of the entire family (Ackerman, 1958; Minuchin, 1974).

Though observations of the impact of clerical life upon children of ministers have been reported (Moss, 1980; Ehring, 1980), despite their obvious roles as barometers of family life, children of rabbis have not been investigated in any systematic way. The purpose of this study, therefore, was to determine the impact of the rabbinate on children raised in rabbinic families.

It was reasonably expected that children of congregational rabbis would show many of the stresses experienced by children of clergy in general. In Moss' (1980) observation, the higher standards and greater expectations placed upon children of clergy create for them inordinate difficulties in growing up. Consequently, children of clergy experience feelings of isolation and inner conflict emanating from the strong desire to maintain the family image while being accepted by peers as individuals with an identity apart from their ancillary role. Among clergy children, intra-familial distress is often reflected in episodes of dramatic rebellion, both as a way to attract attention from the clergy parent enmeshed in congregational life and as an expression of anger against a way of life often experienced as overly restrictive and coercively imposed.

It is reasonable to assume that children of congregational rabbis have much in common with children of all clergy. With the impact of congregational life on rabbinic families as perceived by their children as the focus of this study, it was my interest not only to learn more about the particular blend of anxieties and stresses experienced by rabbinic families, but to investigate their strategies for maintaining homeostasis and stability in light of these stresses.

The three areas of concern that guided this investigation were the impact of the rabbinate on the developing self-identity of rabbinic children; rabbinic family dynamics; and interpersonal relationships outside the family unit.

METHOD

The investigation took the form of a series of in-depth, semi-structured interviews of forty children of rabbis who met individually or in small groups (2-3) for a minimum of one hour.

Children of congregational rabbis who served as respondents were selected in several ways. The subject pool consisted of personal contacts, referrals of one respondent by another, and volunteers who incidentally heard about the inquiry and requested interviews.

Since the purpose of the study was to examine the unique experiences of children of congregational rabbis, children of rabbis engaged in educational, organizational or other professional careers were intentionally excluded.

Of the 23 female and 17 male respondents the mean age was 26.7 with an age range of 17 to 52 years. They included 22 children of Orthodox rabbis, 13 of Conservative and 5 of Reform rabbis. The interview was in two parts. The first involved structured questions pertaining to the three areas of focus, namely issues of identity, interpersonal relationships and family dynamics. In the second part, respondents were asked to candidly discuss whatever relevant memories, events or anecdotes they felt could best reflect their unique experiences as children of rabbis.

In an attempt to expand the opportunity for data collection, and to solicit as wide a range of perception and memory as possible, respondents were invited to submit in writing any experiences, memories, insights or reactions that came to mind following the interview. Eight respondents submitted written material.

With assurances of strict confidentiality, the interviews generally elicited candid and often cathartic responses, with respondents invariably expressing gratitude for the opportunity to share what they believed were some of the most salient albeit unrecognized dimensions of their development. The high degree of congruence among this diverse group of subjects suggests that their perceptions are not atypical and may be representative of children of congregational rabbis in general.

What follows is a discussion of the emergent patterns reflected in these interviews.

ISSUES OF IDENTITY

By virtue of every psychosocial definition of the construct "role," *rabbi's child* emerges as a distinct role. There are role expectations related to behavior and attitudes, as well as an overall sense of

responsibilities associated with the designation *son/daughter of a rabbi*. It is an ancillary role not unlike that of *rabbi's wife*, but one acquired by birth not volition, rooted in a parent's career choice, often unrecognized and undefined, yet apparently having significant impact on the developing identity of rabbinic children. As one rabbi's daughter wrote:

I always struggled to maintain an identity of my own. I was always introduced by name, then followed by "the Rabbi's daughter." It was as if I couldn't be whole without having the attachment to my father's profession noted. . . . My brothers had it worse . . . I used to cringe at overhearing congregants comment on the "little Rabbis." Even though I really believe that many of these remarks were well intended, the reality was that my brothers and I felt as if we were stripped of the dignity of being who we were first and foremost.*

Another rabbi's child bemoaned the fact that for half of the community he did not even have a name. He was simply "the Rabbi's son."

Not all rabbis' children experienced the role as entirely negative. For the most part, rabbis' children looked upon their role as one affording them special status. Vicarious identification with a prominent father, and pride associated with his achievements, were for most children of rabbis the positive aspects of the role.

Figuring prominently among the negative aspects of the role, however, was that of experiencing frequent isolation. Similar to Ewing's (1980) observation of children of Christian clergy, rabbis' children also tended to recall a strong sense of isolation during childhood and adolescence. Feeling both "special" and "isolated" seems to best reflect the ambivalence of rabbis' children to their role. An example of this is the rabbi's daughter who expressed great resentment at being so closely identified with her father's profession, but recalls standing in front of her yeshiva day school building when she was eleven and proudly proclaiming to all who would listen that her father was the man who had built the school. Similarly, a rabbi's son recalled feeling most privileged to sit next to his father in the synagogue, but resented being a rabbi's son when his friends excluded him from hearing any of their off-color jokes, or from participating in any group mischief. Ironically, when his father left the rabbinate in an unanticipated career change, he described the experience as a "sense of profound loss."

One young woman felt especially proud when as a student in a new school she was recognized as the daughter of a prominent community rabbi. She remembers feeling isolated and resentful,

*Quotations from these interviews are reproduced here verbatim with minor syntactical corrections.

however, when a teacher said to her, following a minor misdemeanor which she committed as part of a group, "I would not have expected this kind of behavior from a rabbi's daughter."

PARENTAL ROLE EXPECTATIONS

It is not only the community whose projections and role expectations children of rabbis have to cope with. Instances of role expectations and required role behavior were often overtly and covertly communicated by parents as well. The expression, "*Es past nicht*" ("It is inappropriate") or "What will people say?" often superseded both reason and personal feelings in determining the permissibility of behavior outside the home. At times, rabbinic children received mixed messages. When a rabbi told his son, "First be yourself, and then you can concern yourself with being the Rabbi's son," the young man felt relieved that his father was allowing him his own identity. At a later point in time, when he was told that it was expected that he be the valedictorian of his class, for "how would it look if the Rabbi's son didn't get it?", he was confused and resentful.

ADOLESCENCE

Developmentally, the issues of identity reach their peak during the *sturm und drang* of adolescence, a time of identity crisis and "individuation." Strategies for dealing with identity issues vary significantly among individual rabbis' children. Observations that clergy children tend to act out normal rebellion or experimental behavior in a more dramatic way than others because they want peers to notice and realize that they are not different, appears to be true for rabbis' children as well. One rabbi's son recalls his conscious and abundant use of verbal obscenities so that others would not suspect him of being the son of a rabbi. More than anything else he wanted to be "one of the boys."

At the other end of the spectrum are those few who fully identify with the role of "rabbi's child," apparently without even the most subtle signs of adolescent struggle. One such young man, the only one in this study who ultimately became a rabbi himself, remembers his adolescence as the time when he first began delivering brief sermonettes to the congregation.

For a significant number of rabbis' children, however, developing a personal identity simply meant telling no one—who didn't already know—that their fathers were rabbis, and developing rela-

tionships outside of the congregation. "For years following my marriage," noted one rabbi's daughter, "I told no one that my father was a rabbi."

RELATIONSHIP TO THE COMMUNITY

Attitudinally, among the most negative experiences reported by children of rabbis were those involving congregants. Relationships with members of the congregation tended to be associated with a sense of pervasive distrust, discomfort, hurt and anger. Sitting amongst members of the congregation, rabbis' children would often feel offended at cynical references and caustic comments critical of their fathers. Most poignant were the instances when a congregant would appoint the rabbi's son as liaison to deliver a pointed message to his father. One rabbi's son recalls being told to "Tell your father not to talk too long today." (He was eight years old at the time.) More than half of the respondents recalled incidents with congregants that were experienced as either intrusive or abusive. In one such instance, a congregant telephoned the rabbi's daughter after Sabbath to tell her that she noticed that morning that her hair was untidy. "Would anyone ever call a dentist's daughter and tell her that?" she asked bitterly. In another instance, a rabbi's son reported on how the president's son would regularly beat up on him, harass him, seek him out, tease and bully him. "My parents simply told me to avoid him," he said. "But they themselves apparently felt impotent to stop him because he was the president's son. To this day I can still feel rage when I think about it."

The often fickle nature of a congregation's allegiance to its rabbi, and the turning tides of community politics, were most often noted as a painful albeit crucial experience for children of rabbis. Congregants were often described dichotomously as either "friends" or "enemies." "The people who enter your home, no matter how friendly or supportive, are never really friends," remarked one young respondent cynically. "They are *Baale Batim* (congregants)." From an early age on, most of the respondents learned that talking to congregants needed to be guided by caution and vigilance. To protect themselves against the possibility of harmful gossip from the congregational network, rabbinic families tend to enforce an especially strict code of security regarding information about the family or information passing through the family. For the rabbinic family, its visibility and vulnerability apparently require firmer boundaries and greater concealment than the average family (Glazer, 1980). Anything less could jeopardize the family's security or community status.

For children of rabbis, this meant special precautions and strict censorship regarding family information. For the average adolescent, telling his closest friend that his father has a temper or that his parents argue from time to time is common, but for a rabbi's child, sharing such information would be unthinkable.

One rabbi's son learned early the lessons of what is permissible to share and the extent to which censorship is required. He was 7 years old when he casually told one of his friends that it was his father's 40th birthday. For reasons still unclear, this was considered restricted information and potentially damaging. As he recalled the incident, he could still feel the tension, anxiety and anger when his parents discovered that he had divulged a family secret.

SOCIAL LIFE

As they grew older, the respondents tended to prefer socializing outside of the community. For many, it would be unthinkable to date a member of the congregation. Not only was dating within the community avoided whenever possible "because one could not be oneself with a congregant," or "because things done or said in private could ultimately become public" with embarrassing repercussions, but because children of rabbis wanted to be seen as real people, separate and apart from their designated role. Not uncommon was the experience of one rabbi's daughter who, in fact, had seriously dated the son of a congregant only to terminate the relationship when she came to realize that her being the rabbi's daughter was for him one of her most attractive attributes. "I suddenly felt as if I were only an extension of my father's profession, and stripped of my own selfhood." She never dated in the community again.

RABBINIC FAMILY DYNAMICS

The most dramatic impact of congregational life on the children of rabbis was reflected in the many descriptions of family life and family relationships. A significant number of respondents (70%) reported that they perceived their fathers as being over-involved with synagogue life, and their mothers over-involved with the children. 20% of the respondents described their fathers as emotionally absent from family life. "He wasn't even there when he was there. His mind always seemed preoccupied."

In several instances, rabbinic children expressed resentment at what they perceived to be differential treatment afforded congrega-

tional children in contrast to themselves. Examples included not being called upon by the rabbi/father to perform or give an answer in class in order that he not appear preferential. The issue of time and the quality of time spent with other children in the congregation was also frequently noted. "I would watch my father speak very patiently to other children. He would sometimes spend hours with them, but didn't really seem to know that I needed him as well. I wanted to be loved by my father who was so accessible to everyone else, but had so little time and interest in me."

As many rabbinic children described their families, it appeared that the most stressful role within the family structure was often that of the rabbi's wife. She tended to be the critical link between children and father, often functioning as both mediator and liaison. Paradoxically, even among those who resented their father's aloofness and distance, there tended to be an idealization of the rabbinic father, and a tendency toward warmth and emotional closeness with the rabbinic mother. As one respondent wrote of her aloof father: "My deep identification with my father . . . has been the cornerstone of my personality. I was both fascinated by and scared of my father. Sometimes he stood in my eyes as the symbol of God with . . . strength and mercy . . . sometimes he was the strict judge who inspired my fearful respect. But . . . he was always the Rabbi par excellence. Unfortunately, we were never close."

Another young woman reflected on her vicarious identification with and obsessive attraction to anyone who had even the faintest resemblance to her father. Through psychotherapy she became sufficiently insightful and aware that she was seeking the affections of a father whom she adored but who had eluded her.

The rabbinic family as a family entity appears very much to revolve around synagogue life. Most often, at one time or another, all family members are recruited to run errands, take telephone messages, serve at an open house or Sabbath tea, as well as conduct Junior services, read the Torah and call members for a daily *minyan* (prayer quorum). The congregation is seemingly woven into the fabric of rabbinic family life. As one respondent put it: "The rabbinate is a family business. It is open seven days a week, 24 hours a day."

In this vein, respondents frequently noted how the urgent needs of congregants tended to intrude on family life. Family dinners, vacations, and Sunday outings were always subject to disruption or cancellation by a phone call requiring the rabbi to attend a funeral, visit a hospital, or negotiate a crisis. Most rabbinic families learned to accept a reality that congregational needs take priority over their own.

Several factors appear critical to the stability of the rabbinic family and the degree of satisfaction with family life for the children of rabbis. As a general rule, family life and individual self-esteem are enhanced when each family member feels valued and rooted in the family structure, identifying with its ideals, goals, struggles, triumphs and disappointments. The rabbinic family experience apparently offers many meaningful opportunities for family members to be part of a joint venture where both conquests and frustrations can be shared.

It seemed apparent from the interviews that to the degree that children of rabbis were afforded an opportunity to contribute to the family calling, did they have a sense of family solidarity as well as enhanced self-esteem.

Another factor involved the family's perception of the locus of stress. So long as stress was perceived as emanating from outside the family structure, emotional solidarity remained strong. Where, however, hurt and stress were perceived as emanating from within the family, from a father, for example, whose responsiveness to the congregation was viewed as a rejection of his own family, then emotional disunity, rooted in hurtful deprivation, eroded family life.

In this regard, what appeared particularly critical for most of the rabbinic children was the ability of the rabbinic parent to separate professional role from family life and within the family context to consider interaction with their children important. In those instances where rabbis were able to be parents without the encumbrances of their rabbinic role, their children seemed better able to cope with the many conflicts and stresses that they normally encountered.

Relatedly, it was not surprising to find that in those rabbinic families with the greatest degree of reported stability and satisfaction, the marital relationship seemed strongest. Where children perceived their parents as being emotionally close, spending time together, and apparently being invested in their marriage, positive ripple effects were felt throughout the family. Conversely, when the rabbinic father was seen as over-involved in the congregation and mother as over-involved with the children, both consequently being under-involved with each other, negative ripple effects reverberated throughout the family. This family structure is simply less efficient in being able to buffer its members from the stressful intrusiveness of congregational life.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Thus, several factors have emerged as critical variables for rabbinic children. Where interpersonal relationships are confounded by pro-

jections and expectations related to their being children of rabbis, their developing identity and emerging selfhood tend to be tempered by ambivalence and conflict. The very special status afforded them as extensions of their father's clerical position excludes them from full acceptance among peers. Isolation frequently becomes the price paid for *noblesse oblige*.

The community, always a significant factor in rabbinic life, tends to affect children of rabbis in several ways. The greater the turbulence, factionalism and instability a community exhibits, the more stress, anxiety and insecurity the rabbinic family will experience. Disillusionment with yesterday's supporters who have become today's detractors tends to make many rabbinic children less trustful of allegiances and more wary of relationships within the community. Never too far from consciousness is the realization that the rabbi serves at the pleasure of his congregation, and that job security, financial stability and a sense of personal well-being are contingent upon the good will of the congregation. Children of rabbis grow up in the ever-present shadow of this reality.

Kagan and di Cori (1962) point out that only "the rabbi who is strong enough can make his own privacy in spite of the demands made upon him by the community." Driven by anxiety and insecurity, however, a significant number of rabbis become over-involved with their congregations and under-involved with their families. They are seemingly unable to divest themselves of their rabbinic roles and relate to their families as husbands and fathers. As a result, feelings of loss and separation often remain unresolved for their children even through adulthood.

Several significant implications have emerged from this analysis. For the rabbi's child, self-esteem is enhanced with the experience of feeling valued as an integral part of the family group in its designated work with the congregation. In positively regarding the function prescribed to the rabbi's child by the family, the role itself takes on greater value. Secondly, if the source of stress is perceived by the rabbi's child as emanating from the congregation and not as a veiled rejection by the rabbinic father, emotional support tends to develop within the family.

Third, the ability of rabbinic parents to separate work from family life creates "community-proof" boundaries. Divesting themselves of the trappings of the rabbinic role appears crucial to development of normal family life with all the needed support it has to offer.

Finally, there is a reaffirmation of the importance of the rabbi's role as husband. Where the marital relationship is strong, the positive effects are felt throughout the family system.

It is interesting to note that the majority of the respondents in this study were either students preparing for a professional career, or individuals professionally engaged in some form of community service. There is an intriguing possibility that children of rabbis who grew up with the ideals of public service, albeit with the insecurity of dependence on a congregation, have chosen careers or avocations that permit for the fulfillment of the service ideal without the insecurity of dependence on others. In a sense, most of the children of rabbis in this study chose to become secular clergy, independent of congregations, but in the service of others nevertheless.

This study, in its attempt to examine the impact of rabbinic life on children of rabbis, has implications not only for rabbinic families, but for all families where stress, vulnerability and insecurity exist as a factor of daily life. It underscores the importance of family boundaries that protect a family from outside intrusion while permitting it to develop supportive cohesion from within. It reconfirms the long known observation regarding the centrality of the marital dyad and its ability to either buffer children from external stress or itself become a source of stress.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Though the respondents studied have appeared openly candid about their life experiences as rabbinic children, no attempt was made to study the impact of these experiences on their lives as adults. Further research exploring the effects of rabbinic life on adult identity and subsequent relationships with mates, children, friends and authority figures, as well as on level of religious commitment, career choice, and communal involvement would be enlightening. Children of rabbis, like all individuals, play out their script of unfinished business throughout adult life. Undoubtedly, discovering the themes of that script would give us more complete understanding of the full impact of clerical life on the children it spawns.

REFERENCES

- Ackerman, N., *The Psychodynamics of Family Life*, New York: Basic Books, 1958.
Ewing, J., as found in *Children in Crisis*, Vol. 1, No. 2, ATCOM Publications, 1980.
Freedman, L., "Role-Related Stress in the Rabbinate: A Report on a Nationwide Study of Conservative and Reform Rabbis," *Journal of Reform Rabbis*, Winter 1985.
Friedman, E., *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue*, New York: Guilford Publications, 1986.
Glazer, N., "The Rabbinate and Its Impact on the Rabbi's Family," presentation at the Harold Gordon Rabbinic Conference of the New York Board of Rabbis, New York, 1980.
Hutchinson, K. and Nichols, W., "Therapy for Divorcing Clergy: Implications From Research," *Journal of Divorce*, Vol. 4, No. 1, Fall 1980.

Irving N. Levitz

- Kagan, H. and di Cori, F., "The Rabbi, His Family, and the Community," *Journal of Religion and Health*, Vol. 1, No. 4, July 1962.
- Klaperman, G., "Exploring The Rabbi's Inner Security," presentation at the Harold Gordon Rabbinic Conference of the New York Board of Rabbis, New York, 1980.
- Minuchin, S., *Families and Family Therapy*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974.
- Moss, D., as found in *Children in Crisis*, Vol. 1, No. 2, ATCOM Publications, 1980.
- Silverstein, B., "The Rabbi's Dilemma," presentation at the Harold Gordon Rabbinic Conference of the New York Board of Rabbis, New York, 1980.
- Singer, H., "Rabbis and Their Discontents," *Commentary*, May, 1985.