

“The Perfect Rabbi”

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A couple of months after I came to Beth Emeth, we were standing in the receiving line following the service when, in front of the many people who were waiting to say, “*Shabbat shalom*” to me and the Senior Rabbi, one of the long-term congregants greeted me with, “*You know, Rabbi, when you first came here, I didn’t like you.*” She was a regular, in fact a member of our choir, and she always took the opportunity to tell me, “*You know, Rabbi, when your first came here I didn’t like you.*” After the fifth or sixth time I pulled her aside and said, “*Ann, you still don’t like me!*” and from that moment on we had a

pretty good relationship. The trouble was others heard her and the buzz had begun.

Please note, Ann had started her comment with, “...*when you first came here*” but my cousin who is a retired rabbi in Baltimore told me about the woman who thoroughly disliked – in fact, hated is the better word – every rabbi she ever knew *before* they ever met, indeed before he even showed up in town for the first time! She was always his nemesis.

And then there was the woman who resigned from my congregation because, as she told the office manager, “*The Rabbi doesn’t even know the names of my children!*”

I thought that was most interesting, and in the next breath I named each of her kids...and there were four of them.

At one point I knew the names of every single child in our religious school.

There are no perfect congregants. Ann, the first woman I mentioned, didn't like me because she and her husband were social friends with the wonderful man under whom I served for ten years as his Associate. In her eyes there were no other rabbis in the world who could compare to him. And while he truly was amazing, her attitude was not healthy, especially since she didn't think who was standing around to hear her before opening her mouth.

The second one, my cousin's good friend who, by the way, never liked him even after a couple of decades, disliked anyone in an authority position. In so many words she told him so; she projected her anger at her father on every rabbi. She took every opportunity to put my cousin down, to get him "canned," and while it didn't work as he was in that pulpit for forty years, it did create tensions in the congregation. She poisoned the well.

The third was intent on resigning not because I didn't know those names; rather it was because she wanted to be in the congregation her friends belonged to. Better tell a lie and possibly create more animosity (because you had better believe she gave that phony excuse to more people

than just that one woman), than just say the reason outright. There's nothing wrong with changing affiliation for social reasons! There is something wrong putting the blame in the wrong place.

These are just three examples. There are more, and each one of these congregants alone adds some measure of toxicity to a congregation.

Now I know it will be hard for you to believe this, but there aren't any perfect rabbis. Even Moses, called *Moshe Rabbeinu*, Moses our Rabbi, the greatest leader we have ever known – at least according to tradition – pleads with God to enter the Promised Land...and God says no.

According to a *midrash*, a rabbinic legend, Moses even says, “*Bring me into the land as a beast of burden. Bring me into the land as a bird but let me enter.*” There was one giant Divine “NO!” And why? Because Moses didn’t contradict the daughters of Jethro when they referred to him as an Egyptian. We’re told Moses also disobeyed God, hitting the rock for water to quench the thirst of the Israelites instead of speaking to the rock, the means commanded by God. *Moshe Rabbeinu*, Moses our Rabbi, was imperfect. Some think the reasons stated were absurd considering the deeds he performed for our People to release them from slavery, and later on their trek through the wilderness. It didn’t matter. We’re told that God wanted to show that no one is above the command of

God; no one is perfect if he or she scoffs at the instruction.

Now please understand that there's a light side to the "Perfect Rabbi," something you might have seen over the years. I want to read it to you now.

The results of a computerized survey indicate the perfect rabbi preaches exactly fifteen minutes. He condemns sins but never upsets anyone. He wears good clothing, buys good books, drives a good car, and gives about \$50 a week to the poor. He is 28 years old and has preached for 30 years.

He has a burning desire to work with teenagers and spends all of his time with senior citizens.

The perfect rabbi smiles all the time with a straight face because he has a sense of humor that keeps him seriously dedicated to his work. He makes 15 calls daily to congregation families, shut-ins, and the hospitalized, and is always in the office when needed.

If your rabbi does not measure up, simply send this letter to six other synagogues that are tired of their rabbi, too.

Then bundle up your rabbi and send him to the synagogue on the top of the list. In one week, you will receive 1,643 rabbis and one of them will be perfect.

Have faith in this procedure. One congregation broke the chain and got its old rabbi back in less than three weeks.

A wonderful rabbi I knew over the years was also a magician for children's parties. Many parents hired him though there were probably other magicians who practiced their trade with greater proficiency. Why did they select him? Because his business card didn't read, "Arthur, the Greatest Magician." Rather it read, "Arthur, the Pretty Good." And what he heard from some of those parents, especially those who knew what his day job was, is that those four words allowed them to teach something important to their children, and to others – children and adults – that even magicians, even rabbis, aren't perfect.

As I mentioned, the interim rabbi has a job to do beyond rabbinic duties we're all familiar with. I'll know I was successful not if a score of new families affiliate with the congregation; not if any assistance I give in fundraising brings in a boatload of money; not if hundreds show up at Shabbat services...though all the above would be feathers in my cap.

No, my success would be measured by your careful focus on who you are as a congregation, your history on many levels, your vision of what Beth El can become, and how you – not the next guy or gal – can be an instrument to bring that shared vision – emphasis on shared – to fruition. And above all, to help you find a rabbi who

shares in that vision. That rabbi will hopefully be “pretty good.” That rabbi will surely not be perfect.