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Who are Boston's Jewish leaders?

Answers as varied as community

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Who is a leader?

Is it someone that stands at the pulpit? Sits in the board room? Marches on the street?

Through the years, Jewish leaders have been kings and prophets, Talmudic scholars and grand rabbis. Who are they today?

Ask Boston rabbis and directors of communal organizations, and many will shy away from specifics – not just because the answers may have political ramifications, but also because it's hard to pick just one.

Despite those who bemoan the loss of the great leaders of the past – like rabbi Stephen Wise and Abraham Joshua Heschel – great Jewish leaders are still alive and well. Just ask Barry Shrage.

“There are outstanding rabbinic leaders in town,” said Shrage, president of Combined Jewish Philanthropies. Just as there are great intellectual leaders, scholars and activists both locally and nationally, he added.

Although “social networking” is now part of the shared vocabulary, great leaders have always brought people together – whether it was Heschel, the late Lenny Zakim or a local rabbi who recently helped secure a new building for his congregation, Shrage said.

“[Leadership] is all about ideas and building the relationships that are required to make those ideas happen,” Shrage said.

But while the tenets of leadership have not changed, the challenges facing leaders have.

There are “seismic shifts” happening in the Jewish community these days, said Rabbi Ronne Friedman of Temple Israel, the venerable Reform synagogue in Boston. Old communities are evolving and new communities emerging. Jewish identity is shifting and Jewish leaders have to apply new tools and talents.

Decades ago, a rabbi at Temple Israel or Temple Ohabei Shalom in Brookline was ascribed power because of the pulpit he held, not the reputation he achieved – and yes, it was always a “he,” according to Ellen Smith, a professor of Jewish history at Brandeis University.

The rabbi was one of the few Jewish resources in the community. If there was a question about theology, it went through the rabbi. Jewish history? Through the rabbi. Social justice? Ask the rabbi.

“The rabbis were once the master of place and master of the community,” said Arthur Green, former dean of the rabbinic school at Hebrew College in Newton.

But today, it’s a different world.

Most major universities have a Jewish studies department; hundreds of Jewish history books have been written by Jews and non-Jews alike; questions of social justice are often answered by lawyers and political scientists. And then there’s that little thing called the Internet.

“We live in a Home Depot culture,” said Rabbi Benjamin Samuels of Congregation Shaarei Tefillah, a Modern Orthodox shul in Newton. “There is a do-it-yourself mentality; people own their own Judaism.”

As the role of the rabbinate changes, some say that rabbis are becoming more afraid to speak out on controversial or political issues.

“People are afraid of alienating donors, getting enmeshed in a public quarrel,” said Dartmouth Jewish studies professor Susannah Heschel, whose father, Abraham Joshua Heschel, marched with Martin Luther King. “There is a desire to step away from something controversial.”

But others, including Shrage, disagree. “Everyone will think three times before taking a step forward,” he said, “but if anything, there was more conformity [in Heschel’s time].”

The challenges outside of the synagogue are also changing.

Judaism is no longer the defining community affiliation, especially in cities like Boston with a younger population. Young Jews may still sign up with USY and other temple youth groups, but they are more likely to be involved with any number of school-related clubs. For exercise, there’s not just the JCC, there’s also the YMCA or myriad fitness clubs.

“We live in the contemporary era of choice,” said Mark Sokoll, CEO of the Jewish Community Centers of Greater Boston. “Everything about the world we live in is driven by choice.”

One of the biggest challenges facing Jewish leaders today, said Sokoll, is persuading people to choose Judaism. “Jewish identity used to be inherited, but now it is not just inherited, but constructed,” he said.

Leaders today have to find ways to help people construct a new Jewish identity – and that no longer means just attracting people to synagogues.

Karla Van Praag is the executive director of the Jewish Organizing Initiative, which trains young Jews to take leadership roles in both Jewish and secular organizations. She said that 20- and 30-something Jews are forging new communities.

“There is more of a focus in young people to think about who their community is,” Van Praag said. “It’s easy to feel isolated and there is a need to feel connected, people hunger for it.”

This 20-something generation as we know it didn’t exist in the first half of the 20th century. Where once a young Jewish couple would get married, have babies and join a temple – all before age 30 – now many people don’t even consider marriage until that age.

These young people are turning to their own Jewish organizations, such as Havurah on the Hill, a monthly Shabbat service for young professionals that meets at the Vilna Shul on Beacon Hill, and the Moishe/Kavod House, a spiritual and social action community in Brookline. Both organizations are based around the idea of communal leadership, of “people before programs” as Van Praag put it.

“We are living in more of a bottom up culture,” said Rabbi Jonah Pesner, who works with Jewish Organizing Initiative fellows and is director of Just Congregations.

Pesner leads the fellows in a study of Exodus, citing examples of leadership and social justice. One leader in particular that Pesner discusses is Jethro – Moses’ non-Jewish father-in-law. Jethro teaches Moses to set up a network of leaders to share his burden.

“I think that we have moved from a Stephen Wise system to a Jethro system,” he said. “Without a whole system of shared leaders, the Moseses can’t be effective.”

Rabbi Samuels of Shaarei Tefillah points to another story in Exodus as he reflects on changing notions of leadership.

It is one not about how leaders lived, but how they died. Moses, Aaron and Miriam all died in the desert, before reaching their goal.

“The generation entering Israel was different from those of the Exodus,” Samuels said. “Every generation needs a new type of leadership. The models of the leaders of old won’t work in the present.”

What do you think?

Who do you look up to as today’s Jewish leaders in Boston. Email your answer to SteveM@thejewishadvocate.com. Put LEADER in subject line.