

עליה ALIYAH

A Congregation's
Rabbinic Search Guide

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Preface

You are embarking on a challenging process which will hopefully bring great benefit to your congregational community and provide a source of great satisfaction for your search committee. This guide is intended to make the process as efficient and anxiety-free as possible. Each situation is unique, yet there is something to learn from collective experience in helping congregations find their rabbi. This guide reflects the accumulated advice gleaned from both laity and rabbis who have gone through the process of looking for a rabbi.

By the early Middle Ages, the most common term for a synagogue was *kehillah kedosha* “a sacred community.” The search committee’s task of finding a rabbi may appear to be secular or mundane. But the term *kehillah kedosha* reminds us that the task before us may be the ultimate religious purpose, to secure a spiritual leader to guide us on the path to becoming a sacred community.

It says in Genesis 28:16: “Surely, the Lord is present in this place, and I did not know it.” Judaism teaches that we can find holiness in the mundane tasks of the world. By agreeing to serve on a rabbinic search committee, you are doing God’s work. Searching for a rabbi is not another business task for the synagogue, it can be a path to make God’s presence felt in our lives. If you follow these guidelines, based on the experience of many others, not only will you be successful in finding a rabbi, but you will feel that you have carried out a *mitzvah*. As you begin this religious task it is appropriate to recite the *Shehechyanu* blessing:

ברוך אתה ה' אלקינו מלך העולם שהחינו וקיימנו והגיענו לזמן הזה
*Praised are You, Adonai our God, who rules the universe, granting us life,
sustaining us and enabling us to reach this holy occasion.*

How might you make this is a sacred journey? 1) Study a text together. Begin every search committee meeting with a *d'var Torah* by a member of the committee. 2) Do a *mitzvah* together. Do an act of *gemilut hesed* as a committee. For example, your synagogue may be one organization that takes turns providing services at a homeless shelter. Let the search committee volunteer as a unit to represent the community. 3) Wear a kippah at all meetings and when discussing your plans and reviewing resumes. 4) Put ritual items and Jewish books out on the meeting table. For example, put out a small basket of dried fruit for *Tu B'shvat*. 5) Use careful language and have respectful deliberations. Even in heated conversation, be aware of the prohibition against *lashon harah* (hurtful speech).

This excursion can be a difficult, long, and tedious process. However, if you keep in the back of your thoughts the importance of the physical and spiritual benefit the results will bring your community, you will be able to overcome any issues your congregation might face. A successful process will not only get your congregation a rabbi, but help it grow and mature.

A congregation’s process of selecting a rabbi has four distinct periods: 1) self-reflection and preparation; 2) the search process; 3) transition; and 4) first year. A congregation will always experience all four stages, but not always in sequence. However, it is critical to pass through each stage completely and thoroughly, understanding the needs and demands of each period, and in each step of the process, the presence of God will be felt



Search Preparation & the Polarity Model

Many synagogues fall into the trap of using a “business model” for their rabbinic search, because they view their rabbi as their CEO. The language of business has permeated synagogue culture in recent years, and some synagogues have said they must act more “business-like” by, for example, developing a mission statement or developing a “financial plan.” Because most of our congregants are much more familiar with business models of language, these are often employed in the rabbinical search, which becomes a search for a senior executive rather than a spiritual and religious leader.

When looking for a religious leader your search needs to approach the task differently, by using a values-based evaluation system called a Polarity Model. Your rabbinic search committee must focus on what your candidate’s vision and values are. For example, you should examine what a candidate’s idea of *tikkun olam* is. Consider a candidate’s interpersonal skills and community building aspirations. Like a school principal, a religious leader builds community by creating meaning, articulating values and directing the purpose. **What matters the most in the synagogue world is the opportunity to serve others, create a sacred, caring community, fight passionately for a cause and find meaningful ways to connect to God.**

Synagogues, of course, use financial considerations in their planning but they emphasize tradition, rituals, symbols and customs when making decisions. Many of the duties carried out by a rabbi cannot be justified by any kind of financial yardstick because they are based on a religious value system with dreams and ideas as the main characteristics. Rabbis need to be mindful of synagogue management constraints, but they are religious leaders first. You are looking for a person who will help you grow religiously both as individuals and as a congregation.

A rabbi’s key role is what Rabbi Jack Bloom, z”l, calls being a “symbolic exemplar,” a religious symbol. Rabbis, whether off or on the *bimah*, represent the Divine. Clergy evoke the Presence whenever and wherever they are present. Many congregants see in the rabbi their pathway to God and their avenue and opportunity for chastisement and redemption. As a result, the search committee should evaluate the religious authenticity of the candidate by asking how the candidate sees their rabbinic role as a calling.

Oversight of the Process – USCJ, the RA Career Center, and the Joint Placement Commission

When a congregation enters the search process, tension and anxiety are high and congregations may be comforted by renewing ties with the national and regional offices of [USCJ](#) and the RA. However, it is the Rabbinical Assembly Career Center and the Joint Placement Commission (JPC) that specifically look after the placement process. USCJ can serve as a valuable resource to congregations during the rabbinic search. The Career Center strongly recommends that the congregation contact USCJ at the inception of the search process. USCJ can offer valuable guidance, particularly from the congregation’s perspective. We ask you to be in touch with your [USCJ Synagogue Consultant](#) immediately if you have not done so already. They will help you get started by visiting with your search committee and reviewing your documents.

The JPC is the only advisory group and decision-making body with regard to pulpit rabbinic placement in the Conservative Movement. It is a partnership of the Jewish Theological Seminary, the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies, USCJ and the Rabbinical Assembly. The JPC’s major obligations are to monitor the rabbinic search processes and to administer the [Placement Code](#). The JPC brings order and dignity to the process by maintaining a set of regulations and



parameters both for rabbis seeking a congregation and for congregations in search of a rabbi. These rules and regulations, carefully conceived, are continuously evaluated. Their goal is to provide the best opportunity for congregations and rabbis to meet and affect a lasting relationship. They are published so that all who participate in the process can be well informed about procedures and ethical policies. Transparency of the process is a core value. There is a procedure for exceptions to these rules for good and sufficient cause. Please be in touch with the Career Center if you would like to inquire about an exception to the rules.

The RA Career Center counsels both rabbis and synagogue search committees, creates programs on transition issues and the dynamics of leadership change, and serves as a resource for the broad process of integrating a new rabbi into a congregation. Emily Hendel, Director of Career Services, speaks about issues of placement and career search at national conferences and webinars of both USCJ and the RA. The Career Center is here to assist rabbis in understanding the placement process and has a strong responsibility to congregations that are searching for rabbis. Congregations are just as anxious as rabbis, and the Career Center is always available to congregations and search committees to answer questions and to be responsive to situations as they develop. Because telephone time is limited, it is best to make as many inquiries as possible by email, referring all routine matters and requests to the Director of Career Services, Emily Hendel: phone (212) 280-6052; email ehendel@rabbinicalassembly.org. The Career Center office is open from 9:00 am-5:00 pm, Monday through Friday ET. We close one hour before sunset on Friday in the winter months.

Self-Reflection

Most non-profit organizations, including synagogues, spend little time being reflective. However, it is imperative that a congregation self-reflect and evaluate its current situation before beginning the search for a new rabbi. Sitting down to fill out the congregational questionnaire is often the first time a synagogue committee reflects as a group on the needs and aspirations of their congregation. Some synagogues do go through a process of reflection, but it rarely impacts the everyday life of the congregation or congregants.

Most congregations do an inadequate job of filling out the congregational questionnaire. When asked, "What are you looking for in your new rabbi?" many answer, "a *mensch*," "a spiritual leader" or "someone charismatic." These descriptions are inadequate because platitudes cannot serve as guidelines to help the congregation distinguish between candidates. **The motto of the RA Career Center is, "You are not looking for the best rabbi, you are looking for the best rabbinic fit for your particular congregation."** Since you probably will meet several candidates, each of whom fulfills only part of your rabbinic "wish list," a consensus of your congregation's values, strengths and priorities will make your decisions about candidates easier.

The period of looking for a rabbi can be a very fruitful time for your congregation to learn about itself. As your congregation transitions from one rabbi to the next, it is a propitious time to examine the past, study the congregational system, evaluate past achievements and suggest future direction. Draw on the present and the past to create the future. Intentional self-reflection is a process that can help affirm positive behaviors and acknowledge other patterns that should be changed. When searching for a new rabbi, the more willing you are to be introspective about your congregation's culture, the readier you are to ask hard questions, and the more reflective you are about spiritual directions, the more accurate your understanding will be of your congregation. The more you understand your congregation, the easier it will be to find a rabbi who is a great match for you.



For you to complete your search successfully in one placement season, a congregational reflection needs to be founded on intention, honesty and public discussion. Intention means approaching this task with discipline. In addition, when the reflection is without discipline it often only reflects an internal conversation and not the insights of those on the outside. How has the community changed? How has the town changed? What do outsiders think of you? With discipline, an organized inquiry will ask hard questions of insiders and outsiders. For example, a congregation may know it requires a rabbi who is comfortable with pastoral care and youth work but is awestruck after a particular candidate delivers an inspiring sermon on their *Shabbat* visit. They may be the best public speaker among the applicants, but they may not be the right match for this low-key synagogue seeking a rabbi who emphasizes individual pastoral work with congregants. If a congregation has acted with discipline and intention, it will recognize this.

Self-reflection must also be honest. We need to ask good and hard questions of ourselves and our institutions, and give good and honest answers. When you engage in reflection it is critical to describe your synagogue as it operates now, not as you wish it to be or as you hope it will become. Be candid about all aspects of your congregation. It is important to be as honest as possible, because one of the criteria in choosing your rabbi should be what strengths and experience they may bring to improve those areas of your synagogue life that need to be strengthened. It is wise to remember that you are looking for the rabbi that will fit well with your history, culture and past accomplishments. Only when a synagogue has a realistic grasp of its situation can it find a rabbi who will meet its real needs.

The committee must be intentional in seeking the most accurate picture of the synagogue, not just the image of the few. The reflection needs to be public and communal, so it accurately reflects the congregation. The Career Center recommends collecting information from a series of small public meetings usually called focus groups. The best method is for the search committee to meet personally with as many constituent groups of the congregation as possible. These focus groups will provide a much fuller and more honest picture of the congregation's past and present congregational needs than congregational surveys. Social scientists agree that organizational surveys often elicit the extreme points of view – the anger of the most dissatisfied and the blind infatuation of the highly satisfied. Focus groups provide an opportunity to forge a consensus of priority and a consensus of direction. Congregations say focus groups are the most helpful and powerful experience of the search process. They invite “buy-in” and participation from the entire community. After several public meetings, a pattern of satisfactions and concerns will emerge. An intentional, honest and public process will help you find the right match for your community.

Job Description vs. Role of a Rabbi

A detailed “job description” for a rabbi is often unhelpful. First, there are too many variables in the congregational rabbinate, so a general job description is inaccurate. The tasks of the rabbi vary by congregational size, history and location and by interest and background of the rabbi. The RA Career Center suggests that a congregation identify and prioritize three or four general rabbinic roles, rather than to try and detail specific tasks. A “role” is the general function that a rabbi will provide for the congregation. Some congregations feel overwhelmed by the number of resumes they receive and are unable to take a clear path. The RA Career Center has [published a list of rabbinic roles](#) and explanations to help congregations prioritize and organize. By identifying roles that are key to your synagogue's future, you can assess candidates in light of those roles and your path will become clearer and focused.

A successful rabbi is expected to be a leader. The role of the rabbi is to make a difference in the life of the congregation and the lives of individual members. Specifying a set of tasks the rabbi



must fulfill tends to put the rabbi inside a box that limits creativity, initiative and statesmanship. Reflecting on different rabbinic roles allows the congregation and the rabbi to see the religious leader as a whole. Setting role priorities provides the opportunity for a big picture view.

There are times in a rabbi's work when one or another role and area of responsibility takes precedence, either because they are a rabbi's strength or because they are a synagogue's mission and culture. For each member of the search committee and of the congregation, one particular aspect of the work of the rabbi may be more important than all the others because of the memory of their rabbi growing up. Additionally, rabbis each have an image of their role in the congregation. It is a process to find a consensus among the members of the search committee about which roles of the rabbi are most important to the congregation at this time in its history. The goal is to develop an understanding of the central roles the incoming rabbi needs for the congregation's future well-being, and to articulate them to the candidates and the rest of the congregation.

Diversity of the Rabbinate

The modern Conservative rabbinate comes from diverse backgrounds. Graduates of our seminaries are various ages, sexes, gender identities and expressions, and races. Some are starting a new career, and others are beginning their first career. They come from around the world and they have varying family units. The Career Center believes strongly that congregations do themselves a disservice if they insist that their next religious leader fulfill an antiquated stereotype. If you focus on such extraneous characteristics, you severely limit your options. Remember your reflective process and the priorities you decided upon for your religious leader and then consider which candidates meet those needs and are the best fit.

The Career Center's [Statement of Diversity and Inclusive Hiring Practices](#) can be found on our website, and it is distributed by email to each new congregation who registers for the Placement site. While the Career Center does not expect your congregation to engage a particular candidate solely for the sake of diversity, you should expand and broaden your search as you seek the right candidate, not narrow it. It is the policy of the Career Center that a congregation cannot refuse to interview a rabbi on the basis of their sex, gender identity or expression, or other extraneous factors. There is an expectation that congregations will elect rabbis to serve them exclusively on the basis of their qualifications and experience.

Naturally, diversifying the idea of what a rabbi might look like may raise questions in the minds of some congregants. The experience of the Career Center is that a public forum is an opportunity to allow congregants to voice these concerns and to allow the search committee to respectfully address their issues. It is the job of the search committee representative to try to move the conversation from inchoate assumptions about their ideas of the rabbinate to the articulation of more specific concerns that can be more readily addressed. In the final analysis, not everyone can agree on every aspect of a rabbinic search. Some individuals' long-held assumptions may not turn around in time for the hiring of a new rabbi.

An interview committee sometimes asks different questions of candidates based on their physical characteristics. It is important that interview committees review their questions carefully before undertaking to interview candidates to ensure that all candidates are treated equally in the interview process. The [US government has declared](#) that certain questions are illegal to ask a candidate in a business setting. Although there is a [ministerial exception](#) to this rule that includes rabbis, if you ask such questions, candidates may feel that their boundaries have been violated. It is illegal to ask questions relating to a candidate's age, race, ethnicity, color, gender, sex, country



of national origin, birthplace, religion, disability, marital or family status or pregnancy. Keep this in mind as your search committee prepares questions both for legal purposes and to ensure the comfort of the interviewee.

Update Your Online Presence

Your rabbinic candidates will be searching for your congregation online. As part of your search preparation, you need to update your website so the information is current. You should also perform a search for your congregation online to investigate your congregation's public reputation. Be aware of what it says on websites such as Facebook and Yelp.



The Search Process

Beginning the Online Search Process – An Overview

Conservative congregations looking to engage a new rabbi post their jobs through the RA Career Center and do not need to place any outside advertising. This ensures that congregations will engage rabbis that have a strong commitment to Conservative Judaism and have been trained in a way to best meet the needs of a Conservative synagogue. Congregations [electronically sign an agreement](#) that commits them to this covenant. Every RA member internationally will see your congregation's listing.

To start your rabbinic search, you need to register on our [e-placement online system](#). To register, go to www.rabbinicalassembly.org. At the top of the page, click on "quick links" then on the drop-down menu, select "congregations." Fill out the registration form with all the appropriate information. The asterisk (*) indicates required fields. Enter your own email and password as a log-in, and record it, because you will need it later to access your account. If you have used an email address for an RA account for any purpose before (like ordering books), you will need a new email address. When you are ready, click "I Agree, Register" indicating you have accepted the "Placement Code of Conduct."

A congregation needs to be in good standing with USCJ to be approved. Once USCJ confirms the congregation's status, the RA Career Center approves your registration. This process is generally completed within two business days.

While you wait to be approved, you may download several resources from the [Documents Page](#): 1) The "[Model Engagement Agreement](#)" is the mutually accepted standard contract advocated by USCJ and the RA since 1991. It may be modified to meet individual and congregational needs. 2) The [Diversity and Inclusive Hiring Statement](#). 3) A "[congregational questionnaire worksheet](#)," which you will be emailed when you are approved, as well. The completed questionnaire is the foremost source of facts, values and stories about your congregation to the rabbis. It is helpful to review these questions as soon as possible.

Once you are approved, work with your search committee to fill out the congregational questionnaire. The form is now completely online. You can use this worksheet as a draft, but it will all need to be transferred before posting. If you prefer to complete it online from the start, you can work on it slowly and save it as draft until it is complete, then click submit. **PLEASE NOTE: there are now character limits. If you wish to use this worksheet, please double check your characters so you will not be cut off when transferring it to the online form.** Characters include spaces and punctuation.

Here is a [video tutorial to walk you through the process](#).

You may work on and submit your questionnaire 24/7. The RA Career Center will review your submitted questionnaire, making certain that all of the questions have been answered completely. The Career Center will simultaneously e-mail the incumbent rabbi to confirm the availability of the position so that the search can begin. The incumbent rabbi must confirm via e-mail that they are leaving and that all is squared away between the rabbi and congregation.

Congregational questionnaires are generally approved within 24 hours and your congregation's main contact is notified via email. Once a congregation's questionnaire is approved, it is immediately available for viewing to all rabbis in the Rabbinical Assembly.



The Questionnaire

The [questionnaire](#) is your first contact with potential candidates and the foremost source of information about a congregation. It presents your synagogue's characteristics to interested rabbis and serves as a "congregational resume." Rabbis take questionnaires very seriously and read and screen them carefully. A wise congregation understands this and responds appropriately. The questionnaire gives your first impression and your first opportunity to market yourself to individual rabbis.

You may find the questionnaire lengthy at first. Your committee must work hard and deliberate deeply to fill it out. Rather than see the length as an obstacle, frame it as an opportunity to do the proper preparation work for the search. See the questionnaire as a guide, expand it as necessary to complete the picture of your congregation. The questionnaire should fully tell the story of your congregation's achievements and contributions. As your committee wrestles with the questions, your congregation's strengths and needs should become clearer.

It is critical that the information in the questionnaire (especially opinion questions) reflect a congregational consensus, not the opinion of a few individuals. A questionnaire filled out by one individual will appeal to a candidate who matches the expectations of one individual, not the full range of the congregation. The more specific information you provide the candidate about your congregation, the more helpful you will be, and the deeper their understanding of it. This understanding helps to clarify if an individual would be comfortable as the rabbi of your community and prevents wasting time on the part of the congregation and the candidate.

The RA Career Center requires that you supply a specific compensation number based on experience. If you leave this question blank, the questionnaire will not be processed. We understand the wish for the widest latitude in financial matters, but candidates need to know the compensation to determine whether it is appropriate to apply. Additionally, a preconceived and stated salary creates accountability on the part of the employer and gender equity in hiring. Congregations should be aware that when the compensation is not competitive, rabbinic candidates generally decline to apply. Sometimes the chair of the search committee will say, "if the right candidate applies we will find additional resources to increase the compensation." While this statement may be true, experience shows that this does not help attract additional candidates. Listed compensation packages should be viewed as estimates. Once the position is offered; there will be further negotiations about both salary and benefits.

You should use the questionnaire as a template. Fill it out as-is, with no changes to the questions. If there is a question you do not understand, feel free to reach out the RA Career Center staff. They are happy to review the document to make sure it presents your congregation in language that rabbis appreciate and will discuss it with the chair of your search committee. When you have finished a first draft of the questionnaire, distribute a copy to all members of your search committee and to the incumbent rabbi to elicit their reactions. At this point, you should also be in touch with your [USCJ Synagogue Consultant](#).

Receiving Resumes & Rolling Referrals

Once your questionnaire is posted, the opening in your synagogue will be on the RA Career Center Job Board on the member's section of the RA website. The online job board is visible 24/7 for RA members in Europe, Israel and South America, and North America.



Rabbis interested in applying to your congregation will send resumes electronically through the e-placement system, with the option of submitting a short note. Additionally, rabbis have the option of including a cover letter with their submission. All resumes will be forwarded by e-mail to the main contact designated on your original registration page. The resume will be an attachment to a formal email from the RA Career Center. The Career Center website is the only agent in the Conservative Movement that is permitted to forward a resume to a congregation and all contact between rabbis and congregations must be initiated by and through the Career Center.

A rabbi can apply to any position listed on the RA Job Board to which they are eligible by seniority. There is no minimum or maximum number of resumes that a congregation may receive. This open and rolling application system has advantages as well as disadvantages. While it means your congregation receives many resumes, the process may take more time than you first anticipated. The number of resumes a congregation may receive varies. A small congregation (250 units or less) receives five to ten resumes on average. Highly desirable congregations often receive between eight and fifteen resumes.

Your congregation may receive resumes as long as your position is listed, but we strongly recommend a self-imposed cutoff date so that the process may proceed in a timely fashion. We recommend that a search committee no longer accept resumes after the congregation has been listed for three months, or when telephone interviews have been concluded.

Reviewing Resumes

Next, your search committee must review all the resumes you received. Remember, a resume presents a general outline of a candidate. You can only discover detailed information in an interview. You should send a letter of acknowledgement to each rabbi whose resume you receive. When you acknowledge the receipt of a resume promptly, you set a positive tone for future communication and build good will. The email should include a description of your planned procedure. This is a professional responsibility of your congregation.

A search committee is not obligated to interview all candidates who have submitted resumes. By the time you are receiving resumes, your search committee should have already established clear preliminary grounds for elimination or acceptance. A resume serves as a vehicle to determine whom your committee wishes to interview. Most congregations grant a phone interview to all applicants. When you complete this initial screening, it is necessary to inform all candidates whether they will be given further consideration. Within two weeks of receiving a resume, you should be able to decide whether you will move forward with that candidate.

Position Status

There are four possible statuses for a position on the RA Career Center job boards: Open, In Review, In Discussion, and Closed. A congregation "in review" is no longer accepting new resumes but has not yet made any decisions about candidates. Once a congregation is "in-review," it will not receive any more resumes through e-placement. When a congregation has made an offer to a rabbi and the rabbi has accepted, it should be listed as "in discussion" to indicate that contract negotiations are under way. Again, a congregation listed as "in discussion" will not receive more resumes through the website.

Do not delay your process. Good candidates will be pursued by many congregations. Remember, the search committee should endeavor to make decisions in a timely fashion. Please communicate with the RA Office to indicate how you would like your status updated. The congregation will



continue to be listed as "Open" on the job board until you indicate otherwise.

Length of Search Process

Our experience is that the properly prepared congregation with accurate self-perceptions and a healthy process will conduct a search in six months or less. Most congregations and rabbis conduct their employment search decisions six months to a year before the end of a rabbinic contract. As a result, most rabbis and congregations post questionnaires in late winter (December or January) and should conclude before Passover in the spring. Sometimes in congregations where the rabbi is retiring, or a decision is reached particularly early, a congregation may be listed in September or October. However, **even with an early listing, the active placement season when most resumes are sent, is still from December to April.** Even if congregations start late in the "Placement Season" they can be through active consultation with the RA Career Center. When searches do take two seasons it is generally because the expectations of the congregation were out of line with reality and congregations were too picky. There is no exact timeline for search, and while the Career Center can only suggest parameters, everyone agrees that shorter is better than longer. The goal is for the shortest search period possible, within one placement period.

Disclaimer and Reference Checking

The Career Center does not prescreen resumes and reference checking is the sole responsibility of the congregation. The Career Center advocates that all references be checked in detail and that you consult multiple sources. The decision of who is a good match for the congregation belongs to the congregation itself, as it does to the rabbi. Each congregation will establish criteria that work for it.

The Career Center job boards are solely a referral service. By sending a rabbi's resume to a synagogue for consideration, the RA Career Center does not make any representations of the rabbi's ability or character. Resume referral does not constitute a recommendation of endorsement of candidacy. No recommendations are ever made or withheld about individual candidates. Questions relating to judgments about the rabbi's suitability for the position applied for or overall performance as a rabbi must be considered and resolved by the individual synagogue to which the rabbi has applied. **The fiduciary responsibilities of synagogue leadership that applies to all areas of congregational life apply here very specifically. It is solely the responsibility of your synagogue's Search Committee or designees to actively screen, confirm and validate whatever information is given it by candidates, both in writing and in any other form, before entering conversations, deliberations and negotiations with a rabbi. Current and past officers of the congregations who are familiar with the rabbi's work are great sources of information.**

In addition, there may be facts about particular rabbis that are known to parts of the RA but are not known to the Career Center. Various issues about a rabbi's performance or conduct may be brought to the attention of the RA, and some of these may result in disciplinary action being taken by the Va'ad HaKovod or other arms of the Assembly. Some of these disciplinary actions are confidential, and would not be disclosed to the JPC or to other members of the RA. Accordingly, by sending a rabbi's resume to a synagogue for consideration, the Career Center expressly does not represent that the rabbi has not been subject to discipline by the RA for performance or conduct that might be relevant to the synagogue's decision making process. While the RA encourages rabbis applying for positions to discuss any potentially relevant circumstances, including any disciplinary history, synagogues should be aware of the possibility



of such a history, and decide for themselves the manner, if any, in which they choose to address the issue with candidates they are considering.

Search Committee Logistics

A rabbinic search committee should have a chair who is organized, responsible, respected, and committed to the tenets of Conservative Judaism. This individual should know how to run an effective and efficient meeting. If your congregation is typical, every congregant will want to be a member of this committee. Most rabbinic search committees are made up of individuals representing many different points of view, with veteran members and new members, older members and younger members, including select past presidents. Not every position and every issue within the synagogue needs to be represented on the committee, but it is important that the committee members be sensitive to all synagogue constituencies and congregational issues.

Committee meetings should be held in a fixed place which is secure so that records may be kept for members of the committee to review at their convenience. The preferred place for meeting is the synagogue because it adds to the stature of the occasion. The committee should be meeting and organizing long before you invite candidates to be interviewed.

Although there is no perfect number, most committees function best with between eight and twelve members. Although a smaller committee makes decisions more easily, a larger committee's decision-making process allows different points of view to be given fuller consideration. A smaller subcommittee should do the actual screening and interviewing. In reflecting on failed searches, committees often say their main mistake was having too large of a committee. When a committee is too large, it not only hinders operations, but is off-putting to the candidate. The perfect search committee is a well-conceived mix of wide consultation and executive decision-making. The search committee is not autonomous, but acts based on information and input from the Board and the entire membership. It is crucial to the process that the authority delegated to the search committee be made clear to all involved parties so they may proceed smoothly with their work.

The incumbent rabbi or the rabbi emeritus should have the opportunity to meet at a mutually convenient time with the search committee to share their views and to meet with possible candidates if warranted but should not participate in interviewing a prospective rabbi. The outgoing rabbi should be kept informed of the search process. The outgoing rabbi can help with details and help define issues but should not be an active member of the search committee. Other synagogue personnel, such as the executive director, educational director and cantor, should not serve on the search committee or be present at an interview. At a suitable time, when a rabbi becomes a serious candidate for a post, it is appropriate for the candidates to meet all the key synagogue professionals so the candidate may be oriented to the specific culture and issues of the synagogue.

There is one major exception to this rule: when a congregation is searching for an assistant or associate rabbi, it is imperative that the senior rabbi be on the committee and be present for all interviews. The senior rabbi, in fact, should be the prime interviewer and decision-maker with input from the committee. The senior rabbi must always have the right to approve or disapprove of their assistant. The congregational questionnaire has additional spaces for separate questions about the role of the assistant rabbi.

Before interviewing candidates, the search committee should meet so its members can get to know each other and discover each other's concerns and attitudes. What resources do the



members bring to this process? The committee should meet to discuss the nature of the synagogue and the rabbinic leadership it is looking for in the future and lead the congregation's self-reflection process. With input from the congregation, the search committee must determine the culture, identity, and priorities of the synagogue before it can make the right match to lead the congregation into the future.

It is helpful to establish ground rules for meetings and interviews. For example: Under what norms of behavior does the committee want to operate? How will different points of view be heard? How often will the committee meet? How will the committee as a whole be sensitive to divergent interests within the congregation? How will the committee make decisions? What happens when committee members have missed a meeting with a prospective candidate? Who will be taking notes? How will the meeting be concluded? These rules need to be considered and clarified. If you establish clear ground rules, your committee will function well no matter what the size.

The congregation needs to set aside a budget for the committee. Today, a rabbinic search costs between \$10,000-\$20,000, which covers travel and related expenses of candidates and partners, plus miscellaneous items that will come to the attention of the committee. It may cost a good deal of money to interview several worthwhile candidates. However, even if a congregation is under economic constraints, this is not the time to be shortsighted. Money you spend on the rabbinic search is a worthwhile investment in the future of the congregation.

Search Committee Expectations

A committee member has a serious responsibility – the future spiritual and religious direction of the synagogue is in the committee's hands. It will take many long hours of hard work to find the right rabbi and congregants who are not members of the search committee may be jealous, which often leads to criticism of the committee. Members of the committee will have to agree that discussions with a candidate are confidential. Members of search committees often feel the task is much bigger than they ever imagined, yet the process can also be exhilarating. Perhaps the most difficult issue the search committee will have to face is the fact that no candidate will fill every individual's needs and expectations of a rabbi. No candidate can be perfect. Each candidate will have his/her own strengths and unique qualities. The committee will need to weigh the differences and learn to have realistic expectations.

Most committees are surprised by how long and complex a task this is. Congregations do find rabbis, but the trip can be more like a winding country path than a newly paved superhighway. Be patient but also be confident - even the smallest congregations have a 90% success rate of finding a rabbi in one placement season. Rabbis are just as eager to reach the conclusion. The process works best when you make decisions about candidates as soon as possible. Anything that you can do to expedite the process, as long as the process is respected, benefits both candidates and congregants.

Synagogues expect to be "buying" because the congregation is acquiring a new rabbi. However, it is critical to also expect to be "selling" and for a congregation to market itself. The rabbinic candidates need to know the advantages of moving into your community and becoming part of your synagogue. Many congregations realize too late that it is a two-way process. Congregations must realize that candidates have choices.

The committee should prepare a packet of information for interviewees. It should include a synagogue history, a copy of a local Jewish newspaper, several issues of the synagogue bulletin,



descriptions of your programs, the synagogue budget, pamphlets about Jewish resources in the community and information about the local Jewish schools. In addition, it should contain a written description of the synagogue's process and timeline for selecting a rabbi. Material from the local Chamber of Commerce is also helpful. Congregations are advised to send this in advance of the interview so that a candidate can ask informed questions at the interview. This packet gives you the ability to present the full range of opportunities in your area and place the congregation in the context of the larger community.

Synagogues expect the candidate to have all the positive traits of their former rabbi and none of their flaws. Congregations expect their candidates to be a perfect fit for their situation. We are reminded of the humorous description of the perfect rabbi: "He should relate well to young people, be under 30 years of age and have 25 years of experience. They should be an effective leader, but let the lay people run the congregation. And have a degree in electronics." Many congregations expect more than is possibly realistic and institutional loyalty and pride prevent the congregation from seeing itself accurately and honestly. Often, if the search takes an excessively long time or is stretched over two placement seasons it is not because of a dearth of qualified candidates but because the congregation's expectations of rabbinic candidates is unrealistic. For the search to be successful, the congregation needs to align its assessment of the candidates with a realistic appraisal of the kind of candidate the synagogue can actually attract.

While synagogues often assume a new rabbi will have the qualifications and experience of the departing rabbi, rabbis are looking to move up the ladder. For the rabbinic search to be successful, your congregation needs to appreciate that a majority of candidates will be coming from a synagogue smaller than yours and will want to grow into the larger position.

Congregations often assume they are experts in their search for a rabbi. This attitude of wanting to operate alone can be a congregation's biggest error. A search for a rabbi is unlike anything else in the Conservative Movement. The Rabbinical Assembly employs two full-time professionals who look after the process on a daily basis. Your congregation has searched for a rabbi perhaps twice in 30 years while the RA oversees 80-100 searches every year. They are available to help you understand "rabbinic culture" and increase your chances for a successful search. In addition, a congregation's USCJ Synagogue Consultant can visit, consult and be supportive. There is no need to feel alone in the search process.

Rabbinic Family Needs

Remember that the congregation is dealing with a rabbinic family; consider the needs of the candidate's partner and family. In most instances, the rabbi will be relocating to a new community and if the candidate is partnered, the partner will have concerns that need to be addressed and questions that need to be answered to fit into the new community. Generally, the partner will seek work and continue employment in their chosen career. Congregations are wise to anticipate this need and provide informational interviews, possible contacts and necessary support for the partner. In order for the search to be a success, the search committee cannot underestimate the needs of partners, because partners are integral to the rabbi's decision-making and ultimate success. There is a fine line between asking questions to interview the partner and asking questions and seeking information in order to be supportive. Once you are seriously interested in a candidate, meeting the needs of the partner will convince the candidates that your congregation is a good match for the rabbi.

Rabbis with school age children will worry about their children's Jewish education. Jewish high school education is a paramount concern. Similarly, if there is no day school or day high school,



this situation can impinge upon the attractiveness of the community to the candidate. A small community with no day school should readjust its perception of its ideal candidate and change its expectation of the demographic of the candidates who will apply. Experience suggests that these communities attract older rabbis with older children, or rabbis without children.

When a rabbi with a young child first interviews with a congregation, the congregation should reserve a space for the rabbi's child (or children) immediately with the local Jewish day school, or make certain the day school will make a place for a rabbi's children. After negotiating with a rabbi and agreeing to a contract, the congregation may find that the rabbi is unwilling to come because there is no appropriate schooling for their children. Be aware that there is a shortage of classroom space and curtail this problem by reserving spots.

Communication

Congregations make decisions about whether to pursue candidates on a regular basis and should communicate the outcome of each set of decisions to the candidates, the RA Career Center and your USCJ Synagogue Consultant as soon as possible. They must also communicate with their congregation members at large. Congregations should send regular reports on the status of all prospective candidates to the Career Center. Open communication with the RA will help to direct and encourage more candidates to apply or encourage the candidates in consideration to wait for an update.

Communication with Candidates

It is most important to be in ongoing contact with your rabbinic candidates. Candidates feel anxious about the search for a new position. It is a trying experience and a vulnerable time for them and their families. The most difficult part of the process for the candidates, however, is receiving no news at all about a congregation's search. Some congregations do not regularly communicate with their candidates, causing rabbis needless anxiety.

Experience indicates that committees swing between activity and inactivity. Sometimes there are periods of ponderous introspection when progress and communication slow down while committees sort out issues and make decisions. During these slow periods, we suggest sending out a simple note stating, for example, "Our committee is now reviewing all candidate referrals before we move to the next step in the process. We will be inviting three rabbis to the congregation for *Shabbat* during the month of April. We will be in touch with you again in two or three weeks with our decision. We enjoyed meeting you."

A congregation does itself a major disservice when it develops a reputation for not being in touch with candidates. Candidates interpret the silence as a lack of care, or that a search has moved on, when neither assumption may be true. The search committee should have a corresponding secretary, or perhaps a group of two or three members with the mandate of corresponding with candidates on a regular basis. As a matter of efficiency, we recommend that the burden of corresponding with candidates not be the responsibility of the chairperson, who has enough to do without this added task. We recommend that all communications be straightforward and sent at regular intervals, perhaps once per month. A candidate should be informed that they are no longer under consideration, and the tone of your communication should reflect the quality and concerns of your congregation and its election process. The Career Center has [examples of these letters](#) for you to use. Candidates who are still under consideration should also be kept regularly informed. Let the candidate know when they can expect to hear from you again. At the conclusion of an interview, be sure to state a follow-up date and stick to your deadline. Viable candidates need to



know their status in a timely fashion to guide them in any discussions they may be having with other congregations.

The RA Career Center also advises rabbis to be in touch with congregations on a regular basis. The Career Center suggests that rabbis conclude each interview by asking when they will hear from the congregation again, and if it is alright to follow up and inquire if they have not received communication at that point. If a candidate is no longer interested in a congregation, they should inform the congregation in writing.

Do not hesitate to be in touch with a candidate if you have not yet made a final decision. It is a small Jewish world and often a rabbi will find out through their contacts in the community. It is ironic that sometimes candidates find out more from a synagogue website than they do from direct communication from the search committee. The more you reach out to all the rabbis involved in the current stage of your search, the happier they will be, and the more positive your reputation will grow.

Communication with the Congregation

The search committee is also responsible for communicating regularly with the congregation. A sub-committee of the larger search committee should be in charge of this task, as well as having a point-person for contact if congregants have suggestions or issues to discuss. We suggest that communication be regular and should use multiple mediums such as the congregational bulletin, pulpit announcements and special letters, when appropriate. Most congregations now post this information on the congregation's website. Some congregations have created a regular monthly column that appears in the synagogue bulletin and the synagogue website. The process of searching for a rabbi is important to all members of the congregation. Keeping the congregation informed in a timely fashion will help build confidence in the process and reduce anxiety. Please remember that some of the material you received must remain confidential. The nature of the process is public, but names of candidates and their resumes should be kept confidential unless granted explicit permission.

Search Difficulties

Occasionally, congregations have difficulty attracting qualified candidates. There are several reasons this happens and some factors you may not be able to change (for example, lack of day schools in the area). However, many issues can be resolved. There are five major issues that prevent congregations from finding a rabbi: unrealistic congregational expectations or unclear priorities, congregational conflict, compensation, housing, and quality of life.

Unrealistic Expectations, Unclear Priorities and Conflict

The overwhelming reason that a rabbinic search stalls is because the search committee has failed to prioritize the roles of the rabbi, failed to agree upon them, and failed to disseminate those priorities to the candidates. Each member of the search committee should be able to articulate the same set of priorities. Clarifying your top three priorities prior to the beginning of the search will help find the best candidates. Be sure the committee agrees and that one member does not disagree and articulate their own personal expectations to candidates. This leaves an impression that the committee is unsure of what they are looking for.

Search committees must remember that the synagogue is being interviewed by the candidate. If the candidate cannot determine the priorities of the congregation, the candidate will be reluctant



to move forward with the process. Sometimes a congregation must revisit its expectations and make adjustments, then the candidates who have already applied may become viable possibilities.

Great candidates seek to avoid congregations where conflict is palpable. Be aware of how your words and actions are perceived. Avoid criticizing other members of the search committee or berating the chairman. Beware of the tendency to appear divided over the departure of the recently fired or retired rabbi. Your congregation should present a united front, and a desirable place of employment.

Compensation and Housing

Rabbinic salaries are becoming more and more competitive; the higher the compensation, the better the candidates. An adjustment mid-search to appropriate competitive levels is sometimes too late. There is often a dispute between a congregation's budget committee and the search committee because the two values of sound financial stewardship and fair compensation are in conflict. Strike a delicate balance here; looking for a deal may cause a candidate to go to another congregation where their services are more highly valued.

Housing for a rabbi and rabbi's family is a practical and emotional issue. Rabbis expect to be able to walk to synagogue from their new home, and housing around synagogues often costs more than a rabbi's compensation would allow them to afford. While every housing market is different, rabbis and their families need adequate space and privacy to thrive. Congregations must think creatively about ensuring their new rabbi will be able to find an appropriate home. More information on compensation and housing issues can be found later in the negotiations section. Be aware that these are two of the largest sources of conflict and may discourage great candidates.

Quality of Life

Congregations must have realistic expectations of a rabbi's time constraints and the rabbi's desire to spend time with their own family. For example, a congregation must understand and respect the value of a true day off. Secular professionals have a two-day weekend, yet congregations expect the rabbi to have just one. A rabbi needs time to de-stress and should not be expected to work on a day off. Congregations must respect and protect the boundaries of the rabbi.

Quality of Jewish life is also a concern for candidates. The congregation must offer access to Jewish amenities that will appeal to a candidate. These amenities include availability of kosher food, proximity to a *mikvah*, access to a Jewish Day school, and other Jewish children to play with the rabbi's children on *Shabbat* afternoon. You must work to provide Jewish resources in a timely, cost-effective way.

Interim Rabbis and Waivers

If a congregation is not successful in finding a rabbinic leader, then a congregation may explore the option of an interim placement, or with permission of the JPC, may request a waiver.

Interim placements are posted on the same job board as permanent positions, but an interim tenure is limited to one year. An interim rabbi can offer observations about congregational issues that need to be addressed and will be a non-anxious presence in a time of transition. An interim rabbi is a highly skilled, experienced rabbi who will function as a healer, a change agent, and a transition consultant. An interim rabbi is usually a retired rabbi or a rabbi looking for a limited



engagement with a congregation. Although an interim rabbi serves an important purpose, they may not be considered for the permanent position. While the interim is in place, the congregation must continue to look for a permanent rabbi.

Compensation for an interim rabbi should be equivalent to the compensation of the prior rabbi because the work is equivalent to the permanent position but only lasts a short duration. When a congregation engages the services of an interim rabbi, the congregation is obligated to enable the rabbi to attend the annual interim rabbinic training provided by the RA Career Center.

A congregation cannot consider non-RA rabbis without permission. However, in special circumstances, a congregation may request a waiver from the placement rules. A congregation may request the form from the Director of Career Services, Emily Hendel, via email ehendel@rabbinicalassembly.org. Waivers are not granted automatically; once completed and returned, each waiver is evaluated. The Joint Placement Commission reviews each request on a case-by-case basis, considering multiple factors including length of search process and number of applications.

Although a congregation may obtain a waiver and be allowed to employ a non-RA rabbi, it may not be in the interest of the congregation. Engaging a non-RA rabbi often means the congregation is distancing itself from the institutions and personalities of Conservative Judaism and tends to create inevitable conflict over time. The role of the rabbi is to reach their congregants. Thus, congregants slowly and gradually move toward that rabbi's philosophical and denominational leanings, which causes tension between congregants and the leadership of the congregation who desire to maintain a commitment to Conservative Judaism. If your congregation is facing conflict and considering a waiver, call the RA Career Center or USCJ for advice.



Interviewing Candidates

After reviewing resumes, interviewing candidates is generally done in three phases: the preliminary telephone screen, the extended video or telephone interview, and the in-person visit.

Phase 1: Preliminary or Screening Interview

We encourage your search committee to have fifteen-minute screening interviews by phone with all candidates who apply, rather than eliminating candidates without serious consideration. The goal of this brief call is to connect with the candidate and to eliminate those who are clearly outside the parameters of your congregation's priorities.

The Career Center suggests the following four questions for this stage:

- In five minutes or less, tell us about yourself (“elevator speech”).
- What is it about our congregation that resonated for you and made you apply for this position?
- How do you view the status of Conservative Judaism today? What will make the Conservative movement thrive in the future?
- What questions do you have for us?

Phase 2: Telephone or Video Interview

An hour-long telephone or video interview is an initial way of determining whether a candidate should be invited to your community for a personal interview and avoids travel expenses. You should set up telephone interviews in advance so all parties are ready and prepared. Though six to eight people from the search committee may be on the line, only one or two should ask questions, which you should prepare in advance. The interview should be limited in length, with a suggested maximum of one hour. A telephone interview is an opportunity to determine if the candidate's general background and experience match your congregation's major priorities. The goal of this second phase interview is to determine whether you connect with the candidate and they merit an in-person interview. It is not an appropriate time to discuss finances. Also, the candidates should be allowed some time to ask questions about the congregation.

The process of telephone interviews may take many weeks or even months. As previously mentioned, communication is key, and the search committee has an obligation to speak with candidates at regular intervals. Do not wait until all calls are complete to communicate interim decisions. Inform candidates if they are no longer in consideration, or if they should continue to wait for your final decision.

In many instances, video interviews now take the place of the regular telephone interview. Remember to prepare in the same way you would for a face-to-face interview. Also, if you are new to the technology, be sure to practice so you will look professional and competent. Test all your equipment including your webcam, speakers, and microphone, and use a fast internet connection so there is no lag on the video. If you plan on conducting many video interviews, it is worth investing in a new HD webcam. When on a video interview, remember to engage the candidate with direct eye contact and your full, focused attention. Also, be aware of colors, as brighter colors and patterns may be distracting to the candidate. Lastly, be cognizant of your surroundings and remember that the candidate will see everything in the background. Lighting is important so that you can be seen and large shadows do not detract from the interview.

Second-round interviews are a good time to include open-ended queries:



- Tell us why you became a rabbi.
- Describe the process by which you would make a religious decision for the community. Give an example from your previous congregation.
- How did you work with lay leadership to make a religious decision?
- After reading our congregational questionnaire, what do you feel are our three most important priorities?

If after a telephone interview, the committee feels a sense of chemistry and connection to the candidate, it is time to schedule a personal interview immediately. The search committee should begin personal interviews at their first opportunity. Inevitably, due to the nature of rolling referrals, the committee will conduct telephone interviews and on-site interviews simultaneously.

Phase 3: Personal Interviews & Congregational Visits

In-person interviews should be at least 2 hours in length and should include questions that have been prepared in advance. The best searches ask the same set of basic questions to all the candidates. The Career Center has a [list of recommended questions](#) to choose from. Ideally, the entire committee will be present, but if members cannot be present, they should be made aware of the candidate's qualities at a later time.

At this third stage interview, the goal is to determine the candidate with the best qualifications, personality, and vision to serve your specific congregation at this specific time. The best way to do this is by using questions based on the Role of the Rabbi. It is appropriate, if you wish, to ask in advance that the rabbi begin the personal interview with a short *d'var torah*. Remember that a good interview is like a good conversation; there should be give-and-take, questions from both the candidate and the congregation. It is important to allow the rabbi an opportunity to interview you. At the end of the interview, you may wish to ask the candidate for a list of references.

Some search committees find it helpful to their interview process to either visit the candidate's current congregation, or have the candidate visit their congregation for an extended personal interview. Visiting a candidate's current congregation is sometimes the most helpful indicator of a rabbi's suitability for a congregation, to see what the rabbi has built and under what circumstances. Please understand that the presence of your committee will certainly be noticed and may adversely affect the rabbi and their relationship with their congregation. An unannounced visit is a violation of rabbi-congregational ethics. The rabbi may ask you not to visit, or ask you to come at a time when your presence will be less noticed. All visits should be arranged with the express consent of the candidate.

Frequently, the final stage in your election process will consist of a visit of the candidate and partner to your congregation for a *Shabbat* experience. Generally, two or three finalists are invited for face-to-face meetings with the entire congregation. If there is only one candidate, your congregation might feel it was denied participation in the selection process. Ultimately, your search committee will recommend only one candidate to the board, and congregational input is a key factor in that recommendation.

These visits may be on weekends or weekdays, but it is important to be consistent with all candidates or it leads to unfair comparisons. On *Shabbat*, the congregation has an opportunity to meet and interact with the rabbi, and the rabbi can get a sense of the religious orientation of the congregation. While the candidate is in the community, the search committee should provide the partner with resources and information on housing, cultural life, and employment in the



community. Also, you should be prepared to discuss the quality of the various schools in the area that the rabbi's children might attend, if applicable.

A *Shabbat* visit is generally structured and planned in advance. There should be no surprises for the guest rabbi and all expectations should be clear. It often begins with an invite to the rabbi and partner for an informal Friday night dinner at a congregant's home with some members of the search committee. Then, the prospective rabbi leads the Friday night service and preaches, and following services, the rabbi has a chance to interact with congregants. On *Shabbat* morning the rabbi should again lead and preach and have an opportunity to meet congregants at the *kiddush* following. The congregation and the search committee should allow the rabbi and partner time to relax over lunch, which should *not* be another time for another set of questions directed to the rabbi. You may want to give the rabbi the opportunity to *daven* or read *Torah*, and at some point during the weekend, the congregation will probably want to ask the rabbi to teach. It is best to conclude the candidate's presentation in the early afternoon before becoming too repetitious.

In recent years, the central piece of the weekend experience has shifted from a focus on the sermon presentation to a public question and answer session. As a rabbi's role has expanded from only preaching, the prominence of the question session has increased. Typically, this is done after *kiddush* and consists of fifteen to twenty questions selected by the search committee, and a maximum of two hours. Unscreened questions from the floor should be discouraged by the moderator because they tend to cast the congregation in a poor light. These types of sessions are usually well-attended and provide an excellent opportunity to learn about the candidate.

It is an expected rabbinic courtesy for the guest rabbi and the congregation to inform the current rabbi that a candidate is coming for *Shabbat*. The candidate and the incumbent should confer before *Shabbat* to review the style of services and traditions that need to be maintained. The current rabbi, the congregation, and the guest rabbi all need to understand that this *Shabbat* is an opportunity for the candidate to display their talents and abilities. Most often, the incumbent will excuse himself or herself from the regular weekend responsibilities to make the candidate comfortable. All these matters should be arranged before the visit to ensure that parties have the same expectations.

After the candidate leaves, the search committee should take time to digest and review the interview and discuss the candidate. If the committee wants additional information, it is appropriate to call the rabbi to respond to specific questions that may have been raised or to clarify their answers. Personal visits by rabbis to the congregation may occur over a long period of time. The chair of the committee should inform the candidate about the next step in the process and when the rabbi can expect to hear from the committee again. A congregation should not wait until all the personal interviews have been completed to be in touch. It is considerate to write each candidate you interview to thank the rabbis for their time and presence. Remember that communication with candidates is key, even if a final decision has not yet been made.

Checking References

Checking references is a delicate matter because sometimes the rabbi will not inform the entire congregation of their intent to search or leave. A rabbi's relationship with their congregation can be adversely affected when inquiries are made by other congregations. Usually, a rabbi will inform the officers of the current congregation that they are looking at new pulpits, but even so, the rabbi wishes not to upset a good relationship.

Although the RA Career Center suggests full transparency on the side of both the rabbis and the



congregations, please be sensitive and maintain confidentiality when checking references on a candidate. A congregational search committee should contact references presented by the rabbi first. If you wish to contact people whom the rabbi has not suggested, it is important for the rabbi to know that you are doing so. Please be mindful when calling references; it is good practice to secure permission from the rabbi before calling anyone in the rabbi's present congregation.

Checking references too early may not be helpful to a congregation's search process. When calling references, people respond more meaningfully to specific questions, and interacting with the rabbi before speaking to references will help you formulate helpful questions. It is best to check out candidates' references after a face-to-face interview, and to use the referral check to fill in gaps of information. When checking references, no single person's comments should be determinative. Try to find a pattern that emerges about a rabbi and keep checking references until the portrait is consistent. Remember that it is your responsibility to check references and interview a candidate as completely and as thoroughly as possible.

Travel Arrangements and Reimbursement

Congregations generally cover the rabbi's travel and hotel expenses for *Shabbat* visits. Please be aware of personal religious observances and make arrangements accordingly. Candidates should not be expected to travel on *Shabbat* and require kosher meals. It is proper to invite a candidate's partner to accompany the candidate on a congregational visit, since the partner will be involved in making the final decision. However, the partner is not to be interviewed like a candidate. If you have the wisdom to extend this invitation, then the congregation is responsible for the partner's expenses as well. Some rabbis with young families might prefer to come without partners or children. If so, arrangements should then be made for the partner to come at a different time to get a sense of the community and the congregation. If rabbi and partner come *with* their children, the congregation should provide childcare at no cost to the rabbi.

One of the most stressful elements of the search for the rabbi may be when the rabbi needs to be away from their own congregation, especially over a *Shabbat*. The RA and USCJ have agreed that congregations should expect their departing rabbi to spend some *Shabbatot* away at interviews and it should not count against vacation time. This is a normal part of the process, just as it will be necessary to free up time on the new pulpit to allow a candidate to preach and teach.

Sometimes a candidate or congregation must cancel a visit that has already been paid for. Congregations interview multiple candidates, and rabbis interview at multiple places. Your congregation may make a decision before the other candidates visit, or you may have planned for a rabbi's visit far in advance and the rabbi receives a job offer from another congregation first. Although such events happen in the natural course of search, the other party will feel upset or angry. To ameliorate anxieties and harsh feelings, the Career Center suggests transparency. For example, if a candidate is considering another offer, the candidate should call the search committee and ask if the *Shabbat* visit should proceed as scheduled. The congregation should make the decision to move forward. If the congregation cancels, it is a "cost of doing business." If a congregation finds the right candidate, it is better to end the process than to go through the formalities of interviewing people it will not hire. If the rabbi cancels the interview because they choose another congregation, they should not be castigated for their decision. The Career Center suggests that the candidate reimburse the congregation for 50% of travel expenses.

Decision-Making & Differentiating Between Candidates

The design of the ideal search process should be a well-conceived mix of solid preparation,



wide consultation and focused decision-making by the search committee. Keep complete records of your conversations and take extensive notes. Some congregations find it helpful to evaluate each candidate in three or four areas of priority and then make a comparison between candidates. Remember to discuss them in relationship to each other, and not to a fictional and hypothetical “perfect” rabbi. The committee should reach an agreed ranking of candidates in order of preference. The search committee should have the authority to recommend one final candidate to the board and the congregation. Recommending two or three candidates greatly lengthens the time of decision-making and forces the board to repeat the work of the committee, undermining the process.

After a lengthy search process, a first-choice candidate may reject a congregation's offer. Please understand that rejection does happen from time to time to both rabbis and congregations. If your chosen rabbi rejects your offer, take a deep breath and move on. The committee will need time to grieve and experience disappointment, but then it needs to reenergize and complete its task of choosing its religious leader. Once an offer is accepted, both the congregation and rabbi must stop interviewing further. You may only continue to interview candidates if you are transparent and both parties agree. Both the congregation and the candidate should be in touch with the RA Career Center as soon as an offer has been made, and again when the contract has been signed, so that the congregation's status can be adjusted.

Writing Sample / Video-Audio Taping

It is appropriate to request written material from candidates because rabbis are often called upon to communicate both orally and in writing. Previously written material may be requested, but it is not proper for your committee to ask for anything to be written specifically for it. Search committees that are eager to evaluate a rabbi's teaching ability should ask candidates to teach when they come for an interview but should not request a recording of a previous lecture or sermon because they may not all have professional technology available to them. The Career Center does not suggest the use of photographs or videotapes during an interview because they do not convey a full portrayal of the candidates. Audio-taping of an interview for purposes of later recollection upsets candidates, is distracting, and can distort their interview. A secretary should take detailed written notes for later review by members of the committee who have missed the meeting or if there is a dispute as to what a candidate said.

Interview Topics and Questions

Remember that in a business setting, certain questions may be illegal to ask a candidate. [For example, in the United States](#), questions involving age, race, ethnicity, color, gender, sex, country of national origin, birthplace, religion, disability, marital or family status or pregnancy cannot be asked. Although there is a [ministerial exception](#) to this rule that includes rabbis, if you ask such questions, candidates will feel that their boundaries are violated. The Career Center's professionals are available to consult with search committees about the appropriateness of any line of questioning.

Search Committees should be straightforward and inform candidates about any complicated situations, and how the congregation is working to ameliorate it. Candidates will do their own research into the congregation's history, talk to previous rabbis, talk with the RA and conduct online searches. Committees should be prepared for candidates to be aware of contradictions, perceived slights with the previous rabbi, and problems in the community at large. Having a checkered past is generally not enough to prevent candidates from applying, but how congregations reveal this information will influence the candidate's perception. It is common for



your search committee to feel rushed at the interview. As a result, committees often ask too many questions, and do not leave enough time for the candidate to ask their questions. However, time is better spent giving the candidate space for their questions. Good questions by the candidate are often just as important to understanding the candidate than their answers to your questions.

It is always better to delay discussion of financial details until later in the process. There is a temptation at the interview, especially by representatives of the finance committee, to pop the salary question. In the synagogue world, the usual practice is to first agree on a candidate, and then to negotiate terms.

Interview Week for Graduating Seniors

The placement process for all senior rabbinical students is directed by the RA Career Center. The Career Center coordinates and organizes a centralized “[Interview Week](#)” that enables congregations to meet with all interested members of the senior classes of both JTS and the Ziegler School. Being present at Interview Week greatly increases your probability of a successful search. To be eligible to attend, congregations must have their questionnaire listed on the job board and must be registered for the event. Only A-size congregations (250 units or less), congregations of any size looking for assistant rabbis, and institutions are eligible to attend.

Interviews are held during the second week in February, Monday through Thursday. Historically, it has been held in New York City or Los Angeles, California. It is best to sign up for Interview Week by the end of January so students have time to read your application and study your congregation. In advance of the week, you will receive the candidates' resumes. In fairness to your congregation or organization, and in fairness to the members of the class, search committees are expected to interview all candidates who sign up. Interview slots are 50 minutes long, and may run back to back, with 10-minute breaks between candidates. Rabbi Schoenberg, the Global Director of Rabbinic Career Development, is available for consultation throughout the week. Additionally, the Career Center hosts a hospitality suite for the participants.

Although rabbis in the field are eligible to apply to “A” congregations and assistantships, only senior students are present during Interview Week. Most congregations finish interviewing rabbis from the field before Interview Week and then interview the students for the four weeks after interview week. Exact dates and blackout periods are updated annually and [posted on the RA website](#).

An entire search committee should not attend the event. You should limit your delegation and carefully choose the members of the search committee who are to represent the congregation. It is advisable for two members of the search committee to attend. If the committee delegation is too large, the 50-minute interview slot will become less productive. Your representatives should have a strong commitment to the congregation and know your needs. For assistantships, the senior rabbi should attend along with one or more laypeople.

Although these interviews are time-limited, prepare for them in the same manner you would any other interview. Remember that first impressions count! Be well-organized and bring an information packet describing the general community and congregation. We appreciate that seeing many candidates in one day for only 50 minutes is exhilarating, but also exhausting and difficult. Congregations find Interview Week to be a joyful experience and are thrilled to see the bright future of the Conservative Movement.



Negotiations and Empowerment

To begin a successful negotiation, the congregation should appoint a small group of two or three people to negotiate with the candidate. While a single negotiator may take the discussions too personally, a committee of more than three is unnecessary and intimidating to a candidate. A small group ensures there are witnesses if there is confusion later. This committee generally consists of people with specialty in finance and negotiations and are not the same people as the search committee. The Career Center strongly recommends negotiations take place in person and not over email.

Negotiation parameters such as timing for commencement and conclusion of discussions should be agreed upon and set at the beginning. Clarify where negotiations will take place, and what is going to be negotiated. Be clear if the discussion will only include base compensation, or will include a discussion on benefits, housing, and length of contract. Generally, financial details are confirmed within two weeks of an offer. Leave precise contract language to a later time and to legal professionals.

The most important issue to clarify is the authority of the negotiating parties. The board should give the negotiators the authority to agree on compensation and benefits with the rabbi. It is imperative that this group be empowered by the full authority of the board, so that the terms they agree to with the rabbi will reflect the commitment of the board. It usually leads to feelings of anger and frustration if the board or the rabbi unilaterally reopens the process of negotiating or changes the financial arrangements after the negotiating committee and the rabbi have reached an understanding. To negotiate in good faith, the board should give the negotiators instructions, including parameters for the negotiations, and accept their work when it comes in within those parameters. The goal should be a negotiation that is done fairly, in a timely fashion, with clear guidelines and building good will for the joint future of the rabbi and congregation. Finally, all interim and partial understandings should be memorialized in writing so there are no misunderstandings by either party.

Financial Preparation

Negotiations always begin with the reality of congregational life and budget, and the financial health of the institution. Non-profit institutions rarely indicate publicly that they are doing well financially. Consultant Lyle Schaller pointed out that it is normal for a congregation to carry debt just like a homeowner has a mortgage. It is a very normal way of doing religious soul business. An honest, open discussion should include the financial condition of the synagogue; it is appropriate for the rabbi to ask questions about the budget and financial condition. The rabbi may ask to see a copy of the congregational budget.

Review your congregation's questionnaire for the already-published salary. It is unethical to ignore the stated figure, and it must be respected. Judaism stresses honesty in financial matters. Your listed compensation in the questionnaire is a sacred commitment and it is the figure where negotiation begins. You do not want to make your new rabbi feel uncomfortable and tricked by beginning negotiations below the stated amount.

If it has been some time since you engaged a rabbi, or if this is your first time on a rabbinic search committee, compensation ranges may be higher than you expect. Research your salary figure by speaking to local synagogues or calling USCJ and the RA for comparable compensation figures. Rabbis expect to receive more compensation than in their prior position, which at times can be more than the congregation had been paying its departing rabbi. It is the synagogue's



responsibility to pay a competitive wage.

Contract and Benefits

Compensation and benefits are the last items to be finalized in a contract after all other employment issues have been worked out. Only when the two parties have made a commitment to each other is it appropriate to discuss finances. After many years, both the RA and USCJ agreed to [one model contract](#), available on the RA and USCJ websites. It is a guideline that includes topics to be discussed and serves as a checklist for both parties. All congregations are expected to use this document, as it reflects wisdom, practical experience and generosity of spirit. Total compensation is generally composed of many elements. The general equation includes base salary, pension, housing allowance, social security (the amount paid by the employer), medical and dental insurance, disability, life insurance, RA dues and other professional organizations, book allowance, annual convention fees, and continuing education allowances. The congregation should be as flexible as possible in its negotiations because the needs and requirements of each rabbi will vary. For many rabbis, the most important benefit is pension contributions.

Both the RA and USCJ agree that a congregation will pay for packing and moving costs for the new rabbi and family.

Housing

Housing is a sensitive and complex issue and is often a place where negotiations can break down. Rabbis and their partners need to see a congregation's parsonage early in the process and not in the final stages so they can evaluate if it is appropriate for their needs. Housing is both a rational and emotional issue and must meet the needs of the rabbi, partner, children and the congregation. The congregation should be as flexible and as thoughtful as possible to meet the needs of their new rabbi and their family, which may be different from the former rabbi and their family. Congregations with a parsonage may need to consider making housing improvements or changes to fit the needs of a new rabbi. For example, the new rabbi may have a large family while the existing parsonage contains only two bedrooms. Of course, normal maintenance like cleaning and painting should be done before the new rabbi arrives as well.

Over the last ten years, rabbis' views of housing have changed and today, most rabbis expect to purchase their own home. Only a small minority prefer to live in a congregational parsonage. Naturally, when a rabbi purchases a home, appropriate housing compensation is expected to enable the rabbi to meet home ownership obligations. As housing prices have risen, it has become common in high cost of living areas for congregations to provide interest-free loans to rabbis to help with a down payment or to share equity in the congregational parsonage. Sometimes, congregations make low-interest loans from endowment funds or interest-free loans that are forgiven after a certain number of years. It is often advantageous for a congregation to enable the rabbi to purchase a house because it quickly builds the rabbi's loyalty to your congregation. Sometimes congregation and rabbi agree that purchasing a home is a condition of a second contract.

Third Party Negotiators

Most rabbis will negotiate their own contracts. It is quite common, however, for some rabbis to seek counsel of both an accountant and an attorney to review documents. The Wall Street Journal reported that using "lawyers as a go-between in pay discussions can help executives save face and avoid acrimonious discussion." As is becoming more popular in the business world, more rabbis



are seeking outside counsel for contract negotiations. Some congregations balk at this. Please understand that rabbis represented by counsel are able to focus on the spiritual, special relationship so strongly desired by both congregation and rabbi. Most congregations, schools, and organizations understand that the rabbi is an educator or spiritual leader first, and an executive second.

Negotiations Conclusion

Conclude the negotiation by being gracious and generous. You want to begin a relationship on an upbeat, positive note. Write a letter summarizing the negotiations before the contract arrives. When the discussions have concluded, the parties should commit the arrangement to writing in a formal way. Employment negotiations can be stressful for all concerned and decisions should not be taken personally. Once this stage is concluded, all parties should put this phase behind them.



PLACEMENT RULES

Rabbinic Eligibility

1. A rabbi must be a member in good standing. Dues must be paid in full and a dues declaration for the current year must be on file in the RA business office.
2. A rabbi must not have ethical, halakhic, or placement violations.
3. A rabbi must not have pending inquiries by the *Va'ad HaKavod*.
4. A rabbi must be contractually eligible for placement, either because the rabbi is in the last year of a contract, or has written permission of present employer, or the congregation has not renewed the rabbi's contract, or the rabbi is in the two-year window of opportunity.
 - a. The two-year window states: "[T]he Rabbi may seek or consider a change in pulpit during the twenty-four (24) month period preceding the expiration of [their contract], or, during the period of time coinciding with the last one-half (½) of the term of [the contract], whichever period is less."
 - b. Before a rabbi leaves a congregation under this window of opportunity the rabbi must give the congregation no less than six months' notice.
5. A rabbi must electronically acknowledge that they are bound by the Placement Rules.
6. A rabbi must upload a resume to their online profile.
7. A rabbi must upload a personality inventory, known as My Rabbinic Voice.

Congregational Eligibility

1. Members must be in good standing of USCJ.
2. Congregations must complete registration with E-Placement.
3. Congregations must complete a questionnaire.
4. All matters of termination between the congregation and the rabbi must have been resolved and mutually agreed upon, or in the process of resolution by an agency of dispute resolution recognized by the Rabbinical Assembly.

Graduating Student Eligibility

A graduating student must:

1. Upload a resume to their online profile.
2. Upload a personality inventory, known as My Rabbinic Voice.
3. Electronically acknowledge that they are bound by the Placement Rules.
4. Complete and electronically sign an online membership application.

Special Placements

Assistants

- All assistant positions must be listed with the RA Career Center.
- Assistants cannot automatically become senior rabbis of the congregations they are currently serving.
- All rabbis qualify to be assistant or associate rabbis. An assistant rabbi in a category D congregation will be eligible to assume the senior rabbi position after completing six years of service in that congregation as the assistant.
- The JPC and RA Career Office must be informed of an upcoming role transition and a congregation must go through the proper placement procedures including recognizing seniority requirements.



Interim

- Interim placements extend only for 1 year.
- An interim rabbi agrees that they cannot be a candidate for the full-time permanent position

New Congregations

- Any rabbi wishing to start, create, or develop a congregation (defined as any community of worshippers) must receive permission from the Joint Placement Commission, whether or not there is remuneration involved.

Seniority

Category	Congregational Size (in member units)	Current Year of Service Required to Apply to Congregation	Year of Service Commencing When Rabbi Assumes the Pulpit
AA	Assistant Rabbi	Ordination pending	Commencing first year of service (Newly ordained)
A	Up to 250	Ordination pending	Commencing first year of service (Newly ordained)
B	251-500	Currently in the second year of service	Commencing third year of service
C	501-750	Currently in the fourth year of service	Commencing fifth year of service
D	Over 750	Currently in the ninth year of service	Commencing tenth year of service

Rules of Placement

All candidates for placement, including congregations and rabbis, must agree to the rules of placement, including the agreement to use E-Placement exclusively in the search process. The use of any other search vehicle by the rabbi or congregation will be unacceptable unless a waiver is obtained in advance from the Joint Placement Commission. Any requests for waivers from the Placement procedures described, by either a congregation or rabbi, must be submitted electronically to the RA Career Center.

Note: The following governs the relationship between the Joint Placement Commission, rabbis, and congregations:

Neither the Joint Placement Commission nor the Global RA Career Center may be party to a contract between a congregation and a rabbi and are to be held harmless for any claims arising from such a contract. In the case of a contract dispute between the congregation and the rabbi, the Placement Commission's function is only to give guidance and counsel. Rabbis and congregations participating in any matter before or with the Joint Placement Commission or the Rabbinical Assembly acknowledge by their participation that neither the Joint Placement Commission nor the Global RA Office owe any duty of care or fiduciary responsibility to the rabbi or the congregation.



Statement on Diversity and Inclusive Hiring Practices

Shiv'im Panim la'Torah. "There are 70 faces to Torah." -BeMidbar Rabbah
13:15

Religious communities depend heavily upon the leadership skills of both volunteers and professional staff. These people must have integrity, intelligence, faith, knowledge and creativity. They must be humble and kind, yet also bold and assertive when necessary to help their organizations address challenges and seize opportunities to advance its mission.

Who is the best qualified Jewish professional, whether rabbi, cantor, educator, administrator or fundraiser? The answer to this question depends largely on the particulars of the job and of the organization, but one thing is clear--there is no single demographic profile of a successful Jewish professional. Too often Jewish organizations have forgotten this simple fact, setting aside the most talented people in favor of ones who conform to preconceived profiles of Jewish leadership. This tendency to look at the container rather than at its contents hurts both organizations and professionals.

The North American Jewish community has become beautifully diverse, yet its professionals, especially its clergy, have often been expected to look like the leaders of past generations. For us to succeed, we must draw upon the talents of all of our people, lay and professional, and become discerning judges of leadership potential. Congregations and other communal organizations that focus on external characteristics severely limit their options. Congregations, schools, and organizations that instead embrace the diversity of today's Conservative clergy will encounter Torah in its many glorious forms, its traditional "70 Faces."

Just as our communities are more diverse than ever before, so too do our clergy and other professionals reflect this diversity of gender, generation, health and relationship status. They are partnered and single, and of all ages and physical abilities. They are men, women, and gender-nonconforming. They are gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer, and straight. Our communities and our trained professionals include people from varied backgrounds of race and ethnicity; some leaders come from entirely Jewish families, and others come from interfaith families or are themselves Jews by choice.

Within this diversity, we are blessed that each rabbi and cantor has a unique story, perspective, and set of skills and goals. They are united in their love of Torah, their deep spiritual grounding in Jewish practice, and their excitement to serve God and the Jewish people as rabbis. We are blessed that our Jewish people and clergy embody the fullness of today's household of Israel. They should be welcome as both members and potential leaders of our religious communities.

Communities and organizations often assume that the demographic profile of their professional leadership will automatically attract (or repel) potential constituents or members. They may not even be conscious of their inclination to interview, for example, only young or married individuals, thereby missing out on the talented people who might be the perfect match for their community. They also often assume the way candidates will balance work and family life based on their gender, rather than asking how they plan to juggle their various responsibilities. Surprisingly, communities often give scant attention to the religious and educational philosophy of their prospective leaders, focusing instead on vague and subjective qualities, such as charisma.

How then should a community seek its religious leaders? First, the community should clarify its values and its mission, and then it should ask what leadership qualities are most valuable for the



task. The search committee should be charged to look broadly for these leadership qualities and not assume that they can be found in only one demographic profile. Committees should be proactive in meeting candidates of different genders, generations, sexual orientations and backgrounds. They should not assume that their community is “not ready” to welcome a professional whose profile is dissimilar to that of the previous person. If there is a specific halakhic or job-related qualification that would exclude some candidates, this should be made explicit in the job description. One of our great strengths as a religious movement is that we are pluralistic. We often respect the wisdom and authenticity of various positions even when selecting one particular policy to practice. Particularly when hiring rabbis and cantors, it is common for differences of religious perspective and policy to emerge. This is an opportunity to study issues together in an atmosphere of mutual respect so that it can become clear whether the match is likely to succeed.

Some of the most challenging differences of opinion in recent decades have surrounded the expansion of eligibility for admission to rabbinical and cantorial school and then to the professional rabbinate and cantorate. The Conservative Movement welcomes different voices on these matters and views the diversity of opinions and practices within our congregations as a strength. At this point, the vast majority of Conservative congregations identify as egalitarian, a substantial number of our clergy are women, and a growing number are members of the LGBTQ community.

Congregations and other communal organizations are strongly encouraged to meet with an array of candidates and to be open to the possibility that the best professional for their organization may not conform to their past assumptions of the profile of a religious leader. They should recall the ancient teaching that Torah has (at least) 70 facets and enriches our lives through vessels of all kinds. So too will our communities be best served when they seek leaders for their intellectual, spiritual and social skills, celebrating the diversity of the people who have been inspired to serve God and the Jewish people with all their heart, soul and might.



Focus Groups

Objective: To create the congregation's priority list of tasks both for the lay members and the incoming rabbi; to continue the "opinion" part of the questionnaire.

Process: Introspective work on the part of the search committee at one of its first meetings.

Meeting Format: Meet at the synagogue with invited search committee and selected board members

A. Introduction (5 minutes)

Explain to the group that in order to be listed for placement, the congregational questionnaire must be filled out. Part I is factual, e.g. how many membership units are we?

Part II is a consensus description by people who know the current situation of the congregation well.

B. Core Process (45 minutes)

Divide the group into four sub-groups and ask each sub-group to answer its questions.

Group I	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What are the three primary values of our synagogue at present? - What differentiates our congregation from the closest other synagogue? Closest Conservative synagogue?
Group II	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What three strengths are most important to us in our new rabbi? - What should be the three most important priorities of our rabbi? - What are the three activities we least want the rabbi to be involved in?
Group III	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What are the three most important issues to confront our synagogue? - In what areas do we think our synagogue should be more involved within the next five to ten years? - In what areas of Jewish living do we think our synagogue needs to be more challenged to grow by our next rabbi?
Group IV	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What are our congregation's strengths? What are we most proud of? - What are our congregation's weaknesses? - What is the one thing that should never change? - The single most important issue a rabbi needs to know about our congregation?

C. Report Back (40 minutes)

Each group takes ten minutes to report its finding to the whole group.

D. General Discussion (20 minutes)

The group leader allows for an open-ended discussion and reaction to the four reports.

Recommendations and changes may be made to the original reports.

E. Wrap Up (10 minutes)

1. Thank the participants.
2. Remind everyone that this is a process and invite them to continue to offer input into the process.
3. Based on this exercise, our knowledge of this synagogue and of its present strengths and weaknesses, as well as the needs we have in the next five to ten years, summarize the congregational priorities and formulate its three most important qualities.
4. Tell them that we will be summarizing the results of the focus group and reporting them to the congregation. The information will also be added to the congregational questionnaire and communicated to all of the rabbinic candidates.



Letters to Rabbis

Non-Rabbinical Assembly Rabbi

Many of you will receive unsolicited resumes from non-Rabbinical Assembly rabbis who learn of the availability of your congregation. As you know, they may not be considered for your pulpit. We suggest you send them the following letter:

Dear Rabbi,

Thank you very much for your resume. Clearly, you are a serious and talented rabbi. However, because we are a United Synagogue congregation, and bound by the procedures of the Joint Commission on Rabbinic Placement, we will only consider candidates who are members of the Rabbinical Assembly. Hence, we cannot consider your candidacy. We wish you well in your search.

Sincerely,

Rabbinical Assembly Rabbi

If your congregation is not interested in a candidate that it has already met or interviewed:

Dear Rabbi,

Thank you for your interest in our congregation. We are impressed with your credentials, experience, and qualifications. You are a serious and talented rabbi. We enjoyed meeting you (talking with you).

However, we have decided not to pursue you as a candidate for our pulpit at this time. This decision was a difficult one for us because of your fine background. We wish you well in your endeavors.

Sincerely,

To confirm receipt of a rabbi's application without details:

Dear Rabbi,

Thank you for your interest in our congregation. We are currently in the processing of receiving and reviewing resumes. We will be in touch again once our search committee meets.

Sincerely,

To confirm receipt of a rabbi's application with specific details:

Dear Rabbi,

Thank you for your interest in our congregation. We have our next search committee meeting on __DATE__, where we will be reviewing applications. After that meeting, we will be in touch regarding next steps and further interview process.

Sincerely,



Questions for Candidates

Choosing a rabbi to lead a congregation is a process. It includes a careful self-assessment by the congregation, a review to determine what the congregation expects the rabbi to do and a prioritization of the skills it requires. The JPC, a working group with representatives from USCJ and the RA, developed this guide for search committees. If you have questions, please call your [USCJ Synagogue Consultant](#).

Step 1 - First Conversation – Phone Call

The goals of this brief screening call are to:

- connect with all candidates,
- eliminate those who are clearly outside the parameters of a good match

There should be a first conversation with each candidate who submits an application. This initial interview should not take more than 15 minutes. It should be done in small teams (2-3 people) not by individuals. We urge that every candidate be called to allow the congregation to have a sense of the wide range of individuals who are interested in coming to serve. This conversation can be done by phone, computer or in person at Interview Week.

This is an opportunity to make sure that you are interviewing potential spiritual leaders who are as diverse as the members of your congregations. In order to attract, understand and meet the needs of your diverse community, your clergy and other professionals should reflect this diversity. For example, committee members should be of varied family composition, gender identity and gender expression, generation, sexual orientation, etc.

Suggested questions:

- In five minutes or less, tell us about you.
- What is it about us that resonated with you and prompted you to apply for this position?
- How do you view the status of Conservative Judaism today? What will make the Conservative movement thrive in the future?
- What questions do you have of us?

Step 2 - Second Conversation – Phone or Video Call

The goals of this step are to:

- allow the whole committee to learn about each candidate.
- identify those who will be called for an in-person interview.
- allow candidates to ask questions about the congregation.

This interview is with the whole committee. The interview should run no longer than one hour, by telephone or computer. Before beginning the series of second conversations, the congregation needs to identify its priorities for their rabbi. This is the time to raise issues which could be deal breakers (see below). It is not possible to ask all these questions during this interview. The committee should select appropriate questions that are important to your congregation and ask the same questions of all candidates.

Suggested questions:

Who are you?

- In five minutes or less, tell us about you and why you became a rabbi.
- What two or three rabbinic accomplishments have given you the most satisfaction?



- Please describe what being a Conservative Jew means to you. How does it impact your personal observance? What you will expect of the congregation? Who would we be together?
- After reading our congregational questionnaire, what do you feel are our three most important priorities?
- Describe your view of the rabbi's role in recruiting and engaging members.
- Describe how you plan to balance the demands of your extended work day and time for your personal life.
- No one works 24/6. What are your hobbies and interests? How do they impact your rabbinate?

Worship

- Many congregants want dynamic, fulfilling experiences at services. Tell us how you would be a spiritual leader of worship.
- Describe the values you feel underpin *tefillot*. Describe a *Shabbat* morning service you would lead based on those values.

Pastoral

- Our congregants have indicated that being a pastoral rabbi is a primary role for our rabbi. Describe how you see pastoral responsibilities within the scope of your position.

Halachic process

- Describe the process by which you would make a religious decision for the community. Give an example from your previous congregation. How did you work with lay leadership to make a religious decision?
- We are looking for a religious leader for now and for the future, though we cannot know what the future will bring. Can you give us an example of how you make decisions that require considering changing Jewish law? How will you shepherd us when it comes to making a religious decision?
- Describe how your approach to Jewish law impacts the kind of *halakhic* decisions you make.

Fundraising

- Like all congregations, we're in need of funds. In the past we've done the following successful fundraisers [describe]. Describe how you see the rabbi's role in fundraising and development activities.

The questions you need to ask - deal breakers.

These are the questions which speak to the heart of the congregation, either core values which the congregation cannot compromise or realities of the congregation which are not likely to change. There should be no more than three categories. Each question should begin with you clearly stating your value or situation. Examples of these kinds of questions:

- We understand and appreciate the value of a day school education. The drive to the closest day school takes 40 minutes one way. Would this be an obstacle to your continued interest in our congregation?
- *Kashrut* is important to our synagogue and our community, although some kosher food is available on a limited basis. A local supermarket gets a meat delivery once a week on Thursday. Would this be an obstacle to your continued interest in our congregation?
- There is no *mikveh* in our local community. Our prior rabbi used the *mikveh* in our capital city, over an hour away from here. Would this be an obstacle to your continued interest in our congregation?



- Our congregation is well established as a fully welcoming place for the LGBTQ+ community, including the full range of life-cycle events. Would this be an obstacle to your continued interest in our congregation?

Summary question for this section:

Based on what you know about us now, what would prevent you from taking this job if offered?

Denouement

- Why are you the right rabbi for our community?
- Do you have any questions for us?

Step 3 - In-Person, Mutual Interview

The goal is to determine the candidate with the best qualifications, personality and vision to create the sacred community that you envision. Is this the right match for both of us? What will we be together? Members of the search committee should be joined by others from the congregation to meet with the rabbi for an in-person visit.

You should determine which questions from steps one and two should be asked again. Ask questions by topic. For example, ask a series of questions about Israel, God, egalitarianism or *keruv*. Be sure to include questions that address the priorities you previously set by reviewing the rabbinic role exercise. Each interview session should be limited to approximately one hour; if longer sessions are planned, take a ten-minute break after an hour before resuming the discussion. Be sure to ask the summary questions noted for step 2:

- Why are you the right rabbi for our community?
- Do you have any questions for us?
- Based on what you know about us now, what would prevent you from taking this job if offered?

For finalists, you should also ask yourselves, “Is this the right match for both of us? What will we be together?”



The Role of The Rabbi

The rabbi's role is a composite of many tasks and responsibilities. Congregations often ask to see a "job description" for a rabbi, but a rabbi is a generalist. There are times in a rabbi's work when one or another area of responsibility will take precedence, and there are certain roles that predominate either because they are a rabbi's strength or because they are a synagogue's mission or culture. The Career Center has found it more helpful to congregations in the search process to develop a list of general rabbinic roles rather than a specific detailed description. To see the rabbi as a whole religious leader, you must be able to express the particular roles inherent to a rabbinic calling. As the economy has tightened, congregations report the wisdom of this process. Some congregations feel overwhelmed by the number of resumes received and unable to see a clear path. If, at the outset of your preparation, you have isolated **three or four roles** as important to you, you are able to keep them in mind as you interview, and periodically go back to them to assess candidates. These critical roles will become the anchor to your rabbinic search.

Rabbi as Pastor

The rabbi sees their major role as visiting the sick and comforting the bereaved. Many people come visit this rabbi for pastoral counseling. This rabbi is a counselor, healer and a caretaker known for their ability to listen and to care. This rabbi may be a spiritual guide and a teacher of values. This rabbi pays close attention to those on a religious journey and may have an extra degree in counseling.

Rabbi as Teacher

This rabbi loves to teach and acts as an educator in every possible setting. The synagogue looking for this rabbi has a great adult education program. This rabbi sees their own study as an important element of the rabbinate and their sermons are model lessons. This rabbi is well known for being conversant with text.

Rabbi as Administrator

This rabbi organizes, administrates, and manages a productive and effective organization. They supervise a staff that might include other rabbis, cantors, school principals and other professionals. They are a resolver of disputes.

Rabbi as Social Activist

This rabbi is an agent for change in society. The social action committee is very active, and the rabbi takes a leadership role. This rabbi participated in causes such as the Women's March and the March for Our Lives. They served on the Resolutions Committee for the Rabbinical Assembly and volunteered at the US border helping immigrants.

Rabbi as Social Exemplar/Role Model

The rabbi lives their rabbinate every moment. They understand that where they shop and how they raise their children is carefully observed by their community. They walk the walk. The rabbi is a role model who communicates authenticity. They understand and use their power as a "symbolic exemplar."

Rabbi as Visionary Leader

This rabbi is always one step ahead of their community and sees beyond the moment. The rabbi can articulate a compelling vision for the future. The rabbi strives to lead the community to a new place and a new purpose. The rabbi is at the forefront the change ethic.



Rabbi as Community Personage

This rabbi is the community's first citizen, active in community and Jewish organizations. This rabbi represents the religious community to first responders, on the city's interfaith council, perhaps on government boards. They thrive on politics. They teach the community the values of their synagogue community.

Rabbi as Worship Leader

The rabbi is comfortable leading the congregation in religious services and the congregation feels comfortable as the rabbi conducts services. This rabbi loves ritual and ceremony and is very knowledgeable about synagogue practice and practical *halakhah*. This rabbi takes preaching very seriously.

Rabbi as Spiritual Guide

This rabbi is very concerned about the inner spiritual journey of congregants. Individual religious experience is more important than the communal worship. The rabbi might have trained as a spiritual mentor.

Rabbi as Fundraiser

This rabbi is comfortable discussing finances and sees their role as marshalling people to fund important synagogue activities. They are an effective solicitor. This rabbi sees that the relationship between sacred means and sacred ends is a responsibility of the rabbi.

Rabbi as Employee

Every rabbi works for an institution and needs to know and understand governance and how a board works. The rabbi needs to be comfortable with the lay-professional dynamic. Above all, the rabbi needs to accept direction from others, accept supervision and acknowledge evaluation. The rabbi meets regularly with the lay leadership to discuss expectations.

Rabbi as Working Scholar

The presence and the respect a rabbi generates through their work is grounded in the knowledge that the rabbi is conversant with classic Jewish texts and uses them in their teachings, conversations, and writings, etc. The rabbi must maintain scholarship through personal continuing Jewish studies.

Rabbi as Community Builder

This rabbi is a symbolic leader who emphasizes selected attention and signals to others what is of importance and of value. This rabbi creates a space where people can gather safely to share common purposes and common symbols to foster a group identity. Individuals are encouraged to share their personal narratives in respect and supportive environments often through text study. As a result, these participants feel understood by and connected with other members of the community.

Rabbi as Mara D'atra

This rabbi is the ultimate religious authority. They make binding religious decisions for the congregants. The rabbi's role is to be the *halakhic* decider for individuals and for the community as a whole.

Based on the work of Margaret Fletch Clark, "Ten Models of Ordained Ministry", as quoted in Pastoral Stress, by Anthony G. Pappas; Rabbi Matthew Simon wrote an initial draft; created by Rabbi Elliot Salo Schoenberg for work with congregations. Revised October 2018.