

Leadership Council for Conservative Judaism

Inclusive Hiring Practices Statement

Rabbi [Judah] teaches, "Look not at the container, but at what it holds within."

--Pirkei Avot 4:27

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 organization address its 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 forget 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 American Jewish community is becoming increasingly diverse, yet its professionals, especially its clergy, are often expected to look like the leaders of past generations. In order 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. Rather they should look for the rabbi, cantor, educator or administrator who is the best fit for their current situation.

Our communities include women and men who are single and partnered of all ages and physical abilities. So too do our clergy and other professionals reflect this diversity of gender, generation, health and relationship status. Nuanced labels of gender and sexual orientation continue to evolve--all of our people are part of the household of Israel and should be welcome as both members and potential leaders of our religious communities. Our communities and our trained professionals include people from varied backgrounds of race and ethnicity; some leaders come from entirely Jewish families, but others come from interfaith families or are themselves Jews by choice. These diverse factors should not be allowed to mask the underlying values that motivate their work. Do their Jewish values and behaviors match those of your community? Will they be challenging, supportive, diligent and inspiring leaders?

Communities often assume that the demographic profile of their professional leadership will automatically attract (or repel) potential 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 that women and men will balance work and family life differently rather than asking all candidates 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, and a substantial number of our clergy are women. Over the past few years, our American seminaries have also welcomed openly gay and lesbian students, and we are now proud to include talented rabbis and cantors of different genders and sexual orientations. These people include some of the most learned, reverent and kind clergy available.

Congregations and other communal organizations would be well advised to meet with diverse 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 God’s instruction to the prophet Samuel when he was searching for the next King of Israel: God does not look at appearance or stature, but at the heart. 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.