

The Roar of the Cat Rabbi: The Vital Role of Introverts in the Congregational Rabbinate

By Rabbi Edward C. Bernstein

I still cringe when I think about that day. I finished a lesson on the weekly Torah portion with the third grade of a local Jewish day school. I then rushed through the hallways to get to my next appointment. While heading for my car, I saw two women from my congregation engaged in deep discussion near the main entrance. Without breaking my stride, I tried to make eye contact with them to acknowledge their presence verbally or non-verbally. I knew that was a good rabbinic thing to do. Neither of them looked my way, so I kept going.

I might not have given that day another thought except a few weeks later I faced an annual review. There were a number of positive comments concerning central areas of rabbinic practice: my sermons were thoughtful and addressed timely topics; my teaching was engaging and learned; my pastoral care during times of crisis was warm and caring; my eulogies consistently captured the essence of the deceased. I sat tall in my chair happy that I was doing the things a good rabbi was supposed to do. Then, the other shoe dropped. My reviewers noted that I often appeared quiet, even aloof, not interested in engaging with congregants on a personal level. When I asked for an example, a member of the review panel cited the two women I saw that day at the Jewish day school. The women were

offended that I did not stop to say hello to them. They felt that I was ignoring them.

“Seriously?” I thought to myself. I responded, “I did not want to be rude to those women. What if I had stopped their conversation? They would have been offended had I interrupted.” My lay leaders weren’t convinced. They made clear that the congregation wanted a social butterfly to burst out of my tight cocoon. At least that is how I heard the feedback.

I am an introvert. There is no doubt about it. I have taken the Meyers Briggs Type Indicator assessment on multiple occasions. Without fail, I score squarely as an “I” for “Introverted,” as opposed to “E” for “Extroverted.” There is no value judgment associated with “I” or “E” or other MBTI personality indicators. The test measures personality preferences with the understanding that while these traits are hard-wired into each individual, awareness of one’s preferences maximizes productivity in interacting with the outside world.

I understand intellectually the value of MBTI as an assessment tool; however, for much of my career, longer than I care to admit, I have been self-conscious of my introversion. I have taken to blaming myself for not being more outgoing. American society’s premium on extroversion as an ideal personality preference stokes my anxiety. “If only I were a backslapping schmoozer, I’d get the respect I deserve in the rabbinate,” I have occasionally muttered to myself.

I have always been drawn to the multi-faceted vocation of the pulpit. I find fulfillment in synagogue life through serving as a Jewish guide for people of all ages. Still, I have had my share of challenges, often related to my introverted inclination and how it is perceived by others. When I receive feedback about my introversion, such as in my annual review, I take it hard, because I know it’s important. As Ron Wolfson writes, “It’s all about relationships.”¹ That is, if Jewish institutions such as synagogues are to remain vibrant in this century, their constituents need to feel like they matter and that others in the community, especially the rabbi, care about them. If my introversion hinders me in this regard, it’s a problem.

Nevertheless, the introverted rabbi need not fear. Gregarious, extroverted rabbis do not have a monopoly on “relational Judaism”

1. Wolfson, Dr. Ron. *Relational Judaism* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2013) 3.

or the pulpit rabbinate. The synagogue membership model is under assault. The Jewish community needs to reach people with different personality profiles and cultivate leaders of different types who can connect with them. Research shows that between one third and one half of people in our society are introverts.² In this moment of truth for the Jewish world, it's all hands on deck. Our multi-faceted community will benefit most from the leadership of both introverts and extroverts. Introverted rabbis bring significant qualities to bear and can draw upon various tools in order to maximize success. We must ensure that such leaders are not left out in the cold.

Conventional Wisdom and Its Limits

Conventional wisdom would divide rabbis into two categories, extroverted and introverted, and assign specific professional positions based on these traits. Extroverts would serve the pulpit and campus Hillels, while introverts would enter chaplaincy and academia. Such conventional wisdom was expressed most explicitly in Rabbi Dan Cohn-Sherbok's 1995 essay, "Dog Rabbis and Cat Rabbis."³

Cohn-Sherbok struggled in several pulpit positions early in his career then shifted to academia where he has flourished for several decades. In assessing his pulpit woes, he writes: "I tried and tried and tried—yet over and over again I failed to satisfy the demands of my congregation. I fell into every trap. I just couldn't be the friendly, enthusiastic, sympathetic, and attentive pastor that my congregation wanted. But I am not a quitter."⁴

He describes his journey to congregations on multiple continents. "I shriveled up inside when I had to act as master of ceremonies. I dreaded bar mitzvahs. I loathed weddings. I detested kissing each lady 'good Shabbos.'"⁵

Cohn-Sherbok contrasts his style with that of a friend serving a congregation:

Unlike me, [Rabbi] Brian [Fox] loves to be with his congregants: he greets them as long-lost friends, not because it is politic to do so but because he genuinely likes them. He kisses all the ladies—from the oldest to the youngest—with gusto. He wishes everyone 'good Shabbos' with relish. He is perfectly at ease with the members of the Temple and they in turn love and value him.⁶

Cohn-Sherbok never uses the terms "introvert" and "extrovert," though he clearly implies them. Rather, he invokes the metaphor of dogs and cats, dogs as extroverts, cats as introverts. Applying this metaphor to the rabbinate, he asserts:

The congregational rabbinate is designed for dog rabbis. A good rabbi must behave like a dog, loving everyone, greeting each person with enthusiasm, rounding everyone up and metaphorically wagging his tail. Right or wrong, this is ultimately what congregants want: a rabbi must be friendly and public-spirited, he cannot be a solitary recluse.⁷

I empathize with Cohn-Sherbok's agony in the pulpit. I endure my own struggles with the public persona that the congregational rabbinate demands. Yet Cohn-Sherbok makes assumptions and generalizations that are neither realistic nor helpful in providing guidance to current and aspiring rabbis in the 21st Century.

Cat rabbis are just as capable as dog rabbis in serving congregations. Also, cat rabbis do not have safe havens in the rabbinate away from the pressures of the pulpit. In a rapidly changing world, every field of the rabbinate requires a wide toolkit of skills. Academia, for example, requires professors to interact with students, navigate internal faculty politics, pitch their scholarship to publishers, supervise department and speak to donors. This is hardly a hermit's existence. As author Daniel Pink writes, "Like it or not, we're all in sales now."⁸ No industry can afford cat-like people who curl up, hide and avoid all interaction. Cohn-Sherbok is correct that it would be inadvisable for a pulpit rabbi to be a "solitary recluse." No one denies that the highly

2 Cain, Susan. *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking* (New York: Crown, 2012) 3.

3 Rabbi Dan Cohn-Sherbok, "Dog Rabbis and Cat Rabbis," *CC-AR Journal*, 42:1 (Winter-Spring, 1995) 21-23.

4 *Ibid.*, 21.

5 *Ibid.*

6 *Ibid.*, 21-22.

7 *Ibid.*, 22.

8 Daniel Pink, *To Sell Is Human* (New York: Riverhead, 2012) 2.

public nature of the rabbinate would not be a good fit for someone at such an extreme end of the spectrum.

Cohn-Sherbok's artificial dichotomy of dog rabbis and cat rabbis became more engrained in public discourse as a result of Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson's 1998 article "My Life As a Dog Rabbi."⁹ He accepts Cohn-Sherbok's basic premise and describes himself as a dog rabbi who enjoys great success and fulfillment from the pulpit:¹⁰

To be a good rabbi, you must love and identify with your congregants. No gift of eloquence, administrative skills or bedside manner can compensate people when they sense a rabbi's disdain, distance, disinterest. When you love your congregants unconditionally you feel their pain. When you go to someone's home who suffered a loss, and you have to be there for them and to help make a Shiva minyan, you cry when you see them crying. When you stand by their hospital bed, it can be wrenching. When you hear their family troubles, your heart can break.¹¹

I agree with Artson completely. The rabbi must be both authentic and present for the congregation. However, both extroverted and introverted rabbis must relate to congregants in the way that Artson describes. Authentic relationships are not the exclusive domain of extroverted dog rabbis. These qualities are equally achievable by extroverts and introverts. They may even come more naturally to many introverts.

In the two decades since Cohn-Sherbok's article appeared, psychological and social science literature has exploded with groundbreaking research on personality traits. Susan Cain's best seller *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking* synthesizes the scientific literature and argues for a fresh look at the significant role that introverts played in history and can continue to play with greater awareness and sensitivity throughout society. The

Jewish community will benefit from looking anew at the strengths of introverted rabbis.

Shy and Introverted Are Not the Same

In the 1990's Cohn-Sherbok and Artson seem to have conflated introversion and shyness when they described the angst of cat rabbis. In light of Cain's research, we must distinguish between the two terms; they are very different. As Cain explains, introverts are neither hermits nor misanthropes, and are not necessarily shy. She writes, "Shyness is the fear of social disapproval or humiliation, while introversion is a preference for environments that are not overstimulating. Shyness is inherently painful; introversion is not."¹²

People often confuse introversion and shyness because they sometimes overlap. Some psychologists map the two tendencies on vertical and horizontal axes, with the introvert-extrovert spectrum on the horizontal axis, and the anxious-stable spectrum on the vertical. With this model, you end up with four quadrants of personality types: calm extroverts, anxious extroverts, calm introverts, and anxious introverts.¹³

Shyness, like any form of anxiety, is an acquired trait that one develops as a result of experience. Anxiety can be overcome by systematic exposure to the source of anxiety in modest doses. For instance, fear of public speaking can be overcome by finding small, friendly venues in which to practice public speaking, like a Toastmasters club. Regular exposure to the anxiety-causing stimulus reduces the fear of personal danger associated with that stimulus.¹⁴

The introversion-extroversion spectrum is different. These traits are hard-wired at birth. Researchers have found that one's place on this spectrum is a function of reaction to stimulation

One can be a shy extrovert who is energized by heavy metal rock concerts but covers from stage fright when called upon to perform. On the flip side, non-shy introverts may keep to themselves, but

9 Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson, "My Life As a Dog Rabbi," *Jewish Spectator*, Spring, 1998, p 13.

10 Rabbi Artson published this article while serving as spiritual leader of Congregation Eilat in Mission Viejo, CA. Since 1999, he has served as Dean of the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies at American Jewish University in Los Angeles.

11 *Ibid.*, 13.

12 Cain, 12.

13 *Ibid.*

14 *Ibid.*, 126-129.

are unfazed by the opinions of others.¹⁵ An introverted rabbi can work the room and schmooze as well as anyone without any shyness; however, that rabbi may tire more quickly than the extrovert.

I straddle the introvert-calm and introvert-anxious quadrants. On one hand, there have been times when I've taken principled stands, spoken out on various subjects and carried out many initiatives of which I am proud. On the other hand, I can think of times when I listened intently to what others said during meetings and took copious notes but refrained from offering comments of my own out of fear that what I had to say would not be considered important or that I would not be able to articulate my case adequately. Awareness that this anxiety is not innate is a huge step forward in managing it. Having uncoupled shyness and introversion as separate phenomena, the question remains how an introverted rabbi can manage the highly stimulating environment of the pulpit and enjoy a successful and fulfilling rabbinate.

On a Mission from God

I am able to function as an introverted pulpit rabbi and do so with great fulfillment because of my deep sense of mission in serving the Jewish people. I am inspired by many examples of introverts—even shy introverts—who demonstrate leadership and make vital contributions to humanity because they tap into their deepest values that propel them into action. Twentieth Century examples of this include Gandhi,¹⁶ Rosa Parks¹⁷ and Eleanor Roosevelt.¹⁸

Within Jewish tradition, starting with the Torah, introverted characteristics are singled out for praise. Jacob was a studious tent dweller, while his swashbuckling twin brother Esau was an active hunter.¹⁹ Jacob pays a heavy price throughout his life for his acts of deception, and the narrative emphasizes “what goes around comes around.” Nevertheless, Jacob is the hero of the story. He experiences profound personal growth. His new name *Yisrael* (wrestling with

God)²⁰ reflects that he has struggled with his youthful missteps. Jacob's introversion, ultimately, is the wellspring of his growth and renewal.

The quintessential introvert in the Torah is Moses. He protested to God that he was “heavy of speech and heavy of tongue”²¹ and not able to carry out God's charge that he appear before Pharaoh and demand that he lead the Israelites out of Egypt. Moses stuttered and expressed fear to God at the burning bush. God does not let him off the hook, and allows Aaron, Moses's brother, to be the spokesman. Moses calls the shots for Aaron, the face of the operation. Before too long, though, Moses grows into his public role. Propelled by righteous indignation over the plight of the Israelites, Moses finds his voice. Moses begins his career as an inarticulate stutterer, yet by the end of the Pentateuch, the entire book of Deuteronomy is, in essence, one long speech! While Moses grows as a leader, his fundamental character never changes. Moses is described later in the Torah as the most humble of men on the face of the earth.²²

Within Talmudic literature, much praise is bestowed on humility and quiet. *Pirkei Avot*, a treasury of rabbinic wisdom, quotes Rabban Simeon son of Gamliel, “Throughout my life, I was raised among the scholars, and I found that there is nothing more becoming of a person than silence; study is not the essence, but action, and excessive speech leads to sin.”²³ Rabban Simeon's father, Rabban Gamliel, was a larger than life figure and domineering personality.²⁴ I imagine his studious son struggling to assert his place in the shadow of his father, offering a generational corrective in leadership style.

One more image of introversion in rabbinic literature is attributed to none other than God in a discussion of the festival Sh'mini Atzeret. After a week of festivity during Sukkot, the rabbis understood the Torah's word *atzeret* to convey stopping or delaying. “I have stopped (*atzarti*) you, from leaving,” [says God].” The Talmud then contrasts the sacrifices between Sukkot and Sh'mini Atzeret. The seventy bullocks sacrificed in Temple times during the seven

15 *Ibid.*, 12.

16 *Ibid.*, 197-200.

17 *Ibid.*, 1-3, 58-60.

18 *Ibid.*, 130-133.

19 Genesis 25: 27.

20 Genesis 32:29.

21 Exodus 4:10.

22 Numbers 12: 3; see also Cain, 60-61.

23 *Pirkei Avot*, 1:17.

24 Mishnah *Rosh HaShanah* 2: 8-9 and Babylonian Talmud, *Brachot*, 27b-28a.

days of Sukkot are in honor of the seventy nations of the world. On Sh'mini Atzeret, just one bullock is sacrificed, symbolizing the relationship of God and Israel.²⁵ It is as if throughout Sukkot, God is working the room of a big party where all the nations of the world are guests. At the end, though, God craves a quiet, intimate conversation with Israel. God has an introverted side, and Shemini Atzeret is its celebration.

The American ideal of extroversion that took hold in the early 1900s²⁶ stands in contrast to Judaism's more introverted ideals. When attempting to translate Jewish ideals into an American idiom an American rabbi, irrespective of individual personality preferences, will face an almost irreconcilable tension. For a rabbi with a greater tendency towards introversion, however, the tension is more profound.

Nevertheless, the cat rabbi need not fear. Introverted leaders such as Jacob and Moses in the Torah and Gandhi, Rosa Parks and Eleanor Roosevelt in the 20th Century all draw from a common reservoir: mission. When a mission rooted in one's deepest values is at stake, the introverted rabbi not only faces the challenges, he or she often excels.

Rabbi Jack Bloom defines the rabbi's mission as a "Symbolic Exemplar" who stands for something other than one's self, specifically the totality of Jewish tradition.²⁷ According to Bloom, "It is this symbolic exemplarhood that enables the rabbi to be taken seriously in the first place and the myth that surrounds this symbolic exemplarhood provides much of the rabbinic power to touch individual lives and direct the future of the Jewish community."²⁸

I was inspired by positive Jewish experiences as a teenager to dedicate my life to serving the Jewish people. I understood intuitively in high school and college that I longed for the symbolic exemplarhood of the rabbinic mantle rather than another form of communal service. Now that I have served in the field for fifteen

25 Babylonian Talmud, *Sukkah*, 55b.

26 See Cain, 19-33 for a history of the shift in American consciousness from an ideal of character to an ideal of personality.

27 Rabbi Jack. Bloom, *The Rabbi As Symbolic Exemplar: By the Power Vested in Me* (Binghamton, NY: Hayworth Press, 2002) 136.

28 *Ibid.*

years, I believe that symbolic exemplarhood provides me with the enormous satisfaction I derive from my service. I wake up every morning committed to serve the Jewish people.

Bloom notes that symbolic exemplarhood is a double-edged sword. Just as Moses frequently expresses frustration with the burdens of shepherding a stiff-necked people through the wilderness, the rabbi as symbolic exemplar also confronts professional hazards. The pulpit rabbi encounters isolation and alienation that are endemic to the field. Criticism comes from all sides. The rabbi's family, not to mention the rabbi, lives behind a glass wall.²⁹ These are serious challenges for anyone entering the field. Introverts and extroverts alike are equally vulnerable to burnout. Therefore, in order for the challenges of the rabbinate to seem worth it, the benefits must outweigh the costs. The rabbi as symbolic exemplar is on a mission from God.

A sense of personal mission is a powerful force and propels the most unlikely players to make significant and lasting contributions for the causes about which they are passionate. Dr. Adam Grant refutes conventional wisdom in his thorough analysis of givers and takers, particularly in the work place.³⁰ Takers care more about personal benefit from their jobs, while givers care more deeply about serving other people. Through exhaustive research, Grant shows that givers often achieve more measurable success than takers. In other words, he disproves the infamous adage attributed to Leo Durocher, "Nice guys finish last."

An important factor in predicting a giver's success in relation to a taker is the giver's sense of mission. Grant performed an experiment with students working in a university call center whose job was to cold call alumni to solicit donations to the school. Like most telemarketing jobs, university solicitations are often thankless; prospective donors repeatedly hang up on callers. Initially, takers outperformed givers, closing gifts by a three to one margin. The result surprised Grant; he figured since the givers knew that the funds they raised were going to student scholarships they would be more highly motivated. Grant's hypothesis was not wrong, though. He made one change, and

29 *Ibid.*

30 Adam Grant, *Give and Take: A Revolutionary Approach to Success*, (New York: Viking, 2013) 162-165.

suddenly the givers outperformed the takers. The key was reading to the callers letters from students who wrote about the significant impact that the scholarships had in enabling them to attend college. When the callers were introduced to a student beneficiary in person, revenue soared even more. All callers improved, but the givers improved most dramatically. For givers, monetary compensation for their time was insufficient. Positive feedback that they made a difference for other people is their greatest reward.³¹

Society imposes biases and stereotypes on the giver-taker spectrum and the introvert-extrovert spectrum. Takers and extroverts are both generally perceived as stronger and more likely to succeed, while givers and introverts are generally perceived as weaker and less likely to succeed. Thankfully, research shows that such assumptions are false. The common thread between these two pairings is that a strong sense of mission propels the stereotypical weaker party onto equal and often stronger footing with the stereotypical stronger party.

When I remind myself of the larger mission to which I am committed, I am more likely to step out of my introverted comfort zone. In order to achieve the goals and objectives of the rabbinate, I willingly subject myself to higher levels of stimulation than I might otherwise. In the three pulpits in which I have served, my mission-driven perspective has borne fruit in various ways including: spearheading a family retreat weekend, organizing and leading congregants on a trip to Israel and soliciting gifts and bequests to support congregational programs. All of these are vital to sustaining a vibrant congregational atmosphere.

Based on my experience and the burgeoning literature on introversion, deep commitment to mission is a greater predictor of success in the rabbinate than personality traits. Mission is a significant motivating force, but is only part of the story.

Focus

An introverted rabbi often draws upon another key leadership quality—focus. In the first decade of the 21st Century, there was a competition among Wall Street investment banks for a prestigious

piece of business. Members of the winning team celebrated and bedecked themselves in matching baseball caps and T-shirts emblazoned with the letters FUD for Fear, Uncertainty, and Doubt. The letters FUD had been crossed out with a red X. The statement was clear: to win business was to vanquish FUD.³² For Susan Cain, these Wall Street bankers were the ultimate extroverts. The behavior advocated by their regalia was a major factor in the global financial meltdown of 2008. According to Cain, the financial services industry is dominated by extroverts who took inappropriate risks that brought about the Great Recession. Evidence shows that introverts on Wall Street offered warnings, but they were ignored. Jack Welch, former chairman of General Electric, has a slightly different perspective. He told Cain that “the extroverts would argue that they never heard from the introverts.”³³

There is no difference between introverts and extroverts in terms of intelligence: both score equally well on IQ exams. Differences, however, are found in an area of brain research called reward sensitivity. Dopamine is the neurotransmitter—more commonly known as the reward chemical—released in response to anticipated pleasures. “The more responsive your brain is to dopamine, or the higher the level of dopamine you have available to release, some scientists believe, the more likely you are to go after rewards like sex, chocolate, money, and status.”³⁴ Research finds that extroverts’ dopamine pathways appear to be more active than those of introverts.³⁵

Extroverts are not only more likely to take risks than introverts, they are more likely to speed up and take more risks after initial failure. Extroverts, therefore, are said to have a high degree of reward sensitivity. Introverts, in contrast, tend to downplay reward and scan for problems. In sum, introverts are geared to inspect; extroverts are geared to respond.³⁶

Cain’s analysis of the Great Recession reminds me of a challenging incident in which I confronted reward sensitivity. I was

32 Cain, 164.

33 *Ibid.*, 173.

34 *Ibid.*, 160.

35 *Ibid.*

36 *Ibid.*, 166.

working with a synagogue search committee to fill a professional staff position. One candidate made a particularly strong impression. Before offering the job, we checked references. I contacted rabbis with whom the candidate had worked in the past. Some raised serious concerns about the candidate's qualifications and advised not to make this hire.

I informed the committee what I learned. They heard my concerns, but they liked the candidate and were eager to conclude the lengthy search process. We made the hire. Within weeks, it was clear that the new staff member was not a good fit. After about six months, the employee was relieved of all duties, and the synagogue bought out the contract. Needless to say, it was a highly embarrassing situation for all involved and for the congregation.

In retrospect, it seems that the allure of an attractive new face stoked the reward sensitivity of influential extroverts on the committee. I focused on important concerns when I reported the candidate's unsatisfactory references, yet I was not heard. It weighs heavily on me that we could have spared the candidate and the synagogue much heartache by not making the hire in the first place had I asserted more strongly my reservations.

Focus, along with mission, is an important leadership quality that introverts who are geared to inspect often bring to the table. It is vital for the multi-faceted role of congregational service. A focused rabbi is a "canary in a coal mine" who guides others from danger. At the same time, such focus is of little use if the rabbi is not heard. The rabbi must trust his or her gut in order to be heard and maximize influence. Therefore, an introverted rabbi must draw upon a set of tools in order to reap the benefits of mission and focus.

Toolkit

In this age of social media clutter, with people and organizations vying for our attention, it's easy to assume the best way to be heard is to shout everyone else. I take a different view. Now more than ever, our society and the Jewish community will benefit from more consciousness of the gifts that introverts possess. Introverts need to be heard. Furthermore, as Daniel Pink notes, "We're all in sales now." The pulpit is the retail end of the business of selling Judaism

to our flock. Introverted rabbis can be heard by adopting various tools to articulate our values-driven perspective without burning out from attempts to copy extroverts.

In finding our voices, it is helpful for introverts to realize that we all fall on a spectrum. The world isn't as neatly divided into two groups of extroverts and introverts as one might think. Most people fall somewhere in between. Daniel Pink and Adam Grant have provided us with the convenient term ambivert, a person with both introvert and extrovert characteristics.³⁷ In a study of software sales representatives, extroverts slightly outperformed introverts, but they were both beaten soundly by ambiverts. As Pink writes, "[Ambiverts] know when to push and when to hold back, when to speak up and when to shut up."³⁸

We need more calm introverted pulpit rabbis with tools who can stretch toward ambiversion. An effective pulpit rabbi needs to navigate the delicate balance between inspecting and responding. An overly extroverted rabbi might talk too much and listen too little. Such traits could drive people away. In contrast, an overly introverted rabbi (perhaps one who lands in the introvert-anxious quadrant described above) would be too timid to initiate contact with congregants and engage them in Jewish life.

There should be neither shame nor stigma attached to introverted preferences. At the same time, knowing that I fall somewhere in between polar opposites of introversion and extroversion is liberating. I am not chained to a particular set of behaviors by virtue of innate personality preferences, and most people are not either. Related to this point, Cain notes two important truths: 1) Our inborn temperaments influence us regardless of the lives we lead; and 2) We have free will and can use it to stretch and shape our personalities. She calls this pairing the rubber band theory of personality.³⁹

In my congregational service, I stretch and contract my inner rubber band to suit the needs of the moment. I accept that I don't have to be the loudest, most forceful speaker in the room in order to influence others. I might have a different style than extroverts, but I

37 Pink, 81-84.

38 *Ibid.*, 84.

39 Cain, 117-118.

can still be heard. I communicate my thoughts in writing. I reach out to allies to help advance my ideas. Of course, when I have to, I speak up, driven by the call of my tradition to serve the Jewish people. I find that when I recognize and utilize various tools at my disposal to stretch my internal rubber band, I am more successful in executing my larger mission.

Dr. Ron Wolfson is among the most inspiring spokespersons for reimagining and transforming the 21st Century synagogue into a center of welcome and warm relationships. Wolfson has appeared in synagogues across the country and inspired thousands of lay members, clergy and professionals. He is a highly engaging, energetic speaker who models a culture of welcome. Wherever he speaks, he personally greets every person in the congregation. He starts with a simple, “Hi, I’m Ron!” When speaking at a meal, he opts not to eat; rather, he works the room. Wolfson tirelessly engages one person after another, and each connection energizes him more. In other words, Wolfson is the quintessential extrovert.

For a rabbi on the more introverted end of the spectrum like me, Wolfson’s personal style could be intimidating. After all, if congregants are smitten by his style, as they usually are, won’t they expect their rabbi to be like Ron? Perhaps, but Wolfson himself comes to the rescue.

Wolfson has been able to reflect on his own personal social gifts, break them into digestible parts, and make the art of relationship building accessible to all people. For example, he offers seven tips for great greeting. These include specific pointers on personal presence, body language and appropriate things to say. His prescription to say specific words such as “Welcome” and “Shabbat shalom” are empowering to those who might not mingle naturally. Wolfson also includes introducing new people to others and thanking them for coming.⁴⁰ Wolfson lovingly guides the introvert towards Daniel Pink’s ambiversion. Simultaneously, his tools remind the extroverts that they have to listen, care and be authentic. Wolfson steers extroverts towards ambiversion as well.

One Wolfson-esque practice I adopted recently has worked wonders. Our ritual committee recommended that at the end of

Shabbat morning services (our most attended service of the week), the rabbi and cantor walk down the center aisle and greet congregants at the rear of the sanctuary as they exit to *Kiddush*. It was suggested that the receiving line of the rabbi and cantor would enhance our culture of welcome and create a friendlier adjournment to *Kiddush*.

Within short order, I realized the additional advantage of this practice for me as an introvert. It is a tool in my toolkit for meeting people in a structured setting. I greet everyone who passes by. If a congregant begins a conversation that I can tell will take some time, I ask this person to wait until everyone else passes then focus on him or her. Though I still circulate among tables while people are eating during *Kiddush*, I feel less pressure to hit every table and greet every person. For many congregants, if not most, the initial contact with clergy after services conclude is sufficient. For those who need more time with me, the receiving line gives me a basic sense of who needs more attention at *Kiddush*. After the last person has passed, I’m able to enjoy a few quiet moments for myself and regroup. Cain refers to such a break as a “restorative niche,” a quiet pause from stimulation.⁴¹ Those precious moments give me the energy boost I need to return to *Kiddush* and mingle with my congregants.

Another favorite tool of mine is my Torah tie collection. Over the years, I have accumulated themed neckties that I connect to the weekly Torah portion, Jewish holidays and other special occasions. They act as great props for conversation starters. When meeting people, we often discuss the tie-Torah connection, which often leads to a more extensive conversation. I had been doing this tie shtick for several years before I discovered that according to psychologists a prop job is a common trick among introverts for engaging in conversation and building relationships.⁴² More recently, I have taken to blogging about my ties each week and enjoy a global audience.⁴³

The Internet is another useful tool to level the playing field between introverts and extroverts. Granted, the Internet has cluttered our universe with information overload in a way that has raised the collective noise level. It has become more challenging to be noticed.

40 Dr. Ron Wolfson, *The Spirituality of Welcoming: How to Transform Your Congregation Into a Sacred Community*, (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2006) 69-70.

41 Cain, 219-220.

42 Marti Olsen Lancy, *The Introvert Advantage*, (New York: Workman Publishing Company, 2002) 184-185 (iBook edition).

43 For examples, see www.rabbielbernstein.com or on Twitter, #TieBlog.

Advantage extroverts. On the other hand, social media provide outlets of expression to introverts that did not previously exist. For introverts, the Internet is a vehicle for thoughtful curating of ideas and an outlet for building connections.⁴⁴

In the Jewish world where community building and in-person relationships lie at the heart of our existence, social media platforms are not a substitute for relationships, but a tool for building and strengthening them. In my congregation, my professional colleagues and I participated in the Darim Social Media Bootcamp. Our focus was using social media outlets, such as Facebook, to enhance the culture of welcome in our congregation.⁴⁵ For me, as a rabbi who tends towards introversion, social media allows me to connect with others and share my creativity in ways I could not have previously imagined.

The Roar of the Cat Rabbi

The dog rabbi/cat rabbi dichotomy proposed in the mid-1990s was a false dichotomy then and remains so. The Jewish community needs maximal inclusion and openness towards different models of leadership. Introverts should not be stigmatized or excluded from leadership opportunities to serve the Jewish people.

Seminaries should teach aspiring rabbis about different personality traits and guide them towards applying their personal gifts in any leadership situation. At the same time, they can coach students on how to stretch their inner rubber bands in order to master the art of relationship building.

Congregations must recognize that many introverted rabbis have made significant contributions to the congregational rabbinate over the years and have inspired many thousands of Jews to engage more deeply in Jewish life.⁴⁶ Lay leaders should recognize that rabbis on the more introverted end of the spectrum often are motivated into service

44 Aryeh Bernstein, "Virtual Strength: How the Internet Fosters Community," *Sh'ma: A Journal of Jewish Ideas*, June, 2014, 5.

45 Edward Bernstein, "Using Social Media to Strengthen Culture of Welcome," *JewPoint0: The Official Darim Online Blog*, May 29, 2013, www.darimonline.org.

46 Susan Cain dedicates her book to the memory of her grandfather, Rabbi Israel Schorr (not named in book), who led an Orthodox congregation in Brooklyn for more than six decades and whose funeral brought throngs of people into the streets. She describes his introversion as the source of his success. See Cain, 267-268.

by a deep sense of mission and are adept at intense focus on vital issues. To the extent such rabbis may still need to develop tools to cultivate relationships more effectively, congregations should nurture and support their rabbis in this effort. They must recognize that most rabbis fall somewhere on the spectrum in the large area of ambiverts. Therefore, rabbis have flexibility to stretch their relational skills while still remaining authentic to themselves. Congregations may consider investing in an executive coach for their rabbis in order to hone their relational tools.

Finally, introverted rabbis should not sell themselves short. The stigma associated with introversion is false. Rabbis on the introverted end of the spectrum possess special gifts that are vital to the rabbinate including caring, compassion, keen listening skills and deliberate decision making. It may be time to retire the cat rabbi label. Perhaps it is apt to remain in the feline family, though. A lion has always been a symbol of courage and quiet dignity. When necessary, the lion springs into action to land its prey. Otherwise, they quietly observe the animal kingdom. If cats are introverts, lions are ambiverts. It's time for the cat rabbi to roar.

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