



# Religious / Community Leaders

## Rabbis

The word *rabbi* originates from the Hebrew word meaning teacher. The term has evolved over Jewish history to include many roles and meanings. The basic role and function of *rabbis* developed in the Pharisaic and Talmudic era, when learned teachers came together to codify Judaism's written and oral laws. The first use of the title *rabbi* appears in the *Mishnah* in reference to Yohanan ben Zakkai who lived in the early to mid-first century CE.

In more recent times, the duties of a rabbi have become increasingly similar to those of Christian Protestant clergy, and has resulted in the use of the term *pulpit rabbis*. In 19th-century Germany and the United States of America, rabbinic activities such as sermons, pastoral counseling, and representing the community, all increased in importance. Today, the title *rabbi* usually refers to those who have received rabbinical ordination and are educated in matters of *halacha* (Jewish law). They are the ones knowledgeable enough to answer *halachic* questions. Most countries have a chief rabbi they rely on to settle *halachic* disputes.

In present times, the *rabbi* serves the community as an educator, social worker, and preacher, and also occasionally conducts prayer services. The *rabbi* is not required to lead prayer services, as any knowledgeable member of the congregation may do so.



Figure 26: First woman ordained as a *rabbi*, 1935, Germany

Regina Jonas

Regina Jonas in a photograph presumed to have been taken after 1939. Her stamp on the back of the photograph bears the compulsory name of "Sara," which all Jewish women had to bear after 1939 and reads "Rabbi Regina Sara Jonas."

The Conservative, Reconstructionist, and Reform movements began to grant women rabbinical ordination in the last few decades. Orthodox congregations do not ordain women as *rabbis*. They follow the stricter interpretation in the *Talmud* prohibiting women from serving as witnesses or judges.

Change has also occurred with respect to the training and ordination of LGBTQ *rabbis*. In the early 1980s, several *rabbis* openly declared themselves to be gay. Then, in 1984, the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in the United States became the first to accept and ordain *rabbis* without regard to their sexual orientation. In 1988, Stacy Offer became the first openly lesbian *rabbi* employed by a reform Jewish congregation in Minneapolis. In 2006, Elliot Kulka came out as transgender 6 months before his ordination in 2006.

Together, most of the Jewish denominations, with the exception of Orthodox Judaism, ordain openly LGBTQ Jews. This is true of Reconstructionist Judaism, Jewish Renewal, Reform Judaism, and Conservative Judaism who collectively represent the majority of Canadian and American Jews who belong to a synagogue.

## Rebbe

*Rebbe* is the term used in a Hasidic community to refer to their spiritual leader and guide. Sometimes *rebbe* is translated as *grand rabbi*, but the word literally means *my rabbi*. A *rebbe* has the final word over every decision in a Hasidic person's life. A *rebbe* is also considered to be a *tzaddik*. The position is usually hereditary.

Outside of the Hasidic community, the term *rebbe* may be used to refer to one's personal *rabbi* or any *rabbi* with whom a person has a close relationship.

The term *rebbe* should not be confused with the term *reb*, which is a Yiddish title of respect similar to the term *mister* in English.

## Cantors

In Judaism, a *cantor* (also known as *hazzan* or *chazzan*) is primarily someone who leads the congregation in prayer along with the *rabbi*; however, they may have other duties. Contemporary cantors in the Reform and Conservative Jewish worlds are usually trained in the musical arts or have attended *cantorial* school. Professional *cantors* who have attended *cantorial* school are ordained. But there are also some *cantors* from the community, who are not professionally trained, with a deep knowledge of the prayer services.

In some situations, the *rabbi* might fill both the roles of *rabbi* and *cantor*. Volunteer *cantors* and *rabbi/cantor* prayer leaders are especially common in small synagogues. In Hasidic congregations, the cantor is always the *rebbe*.

In Orthodox Judaism, a *cantor* must be male, however, in Conservative and Reform Judaism a *cantor* can be either male or female.

In addition to leading prayer services, in the Reform and Conservative Jewish worlds, *cantors* have a variety of responsibilities that vary from synagogue

to synagogue. Some of these duties may include teaching *bar/bat mitzvah* students to read from the *Torah*, teaching members of the congregation how to participate in prayer services, leading other life-cycle events, and working with the choir.

As ordained clergy, Reform and Conservative cantors can also perform pastoral duties such as conducting weddings or funeral services.

## Gabbai

A *gabbai* is a lay person who volunteers to perform various duties in connection with *Torah* readings at religious services. To serve as a *Gabbai* is a great honour, and the position requires a thorough knowledge of the *Torah* and the *Torah* readings.

A *gabbai* may do one or more of the following:

- choose people who will receive an *aliyah* (the honour of reciting a blessing over the *Torah* reading)
- read from the *Torah*
- stand next to the person who is reading from the *Torah*, checking the reader's pronunciation and chanting and correcting any mistakes in the reading

## Kohein

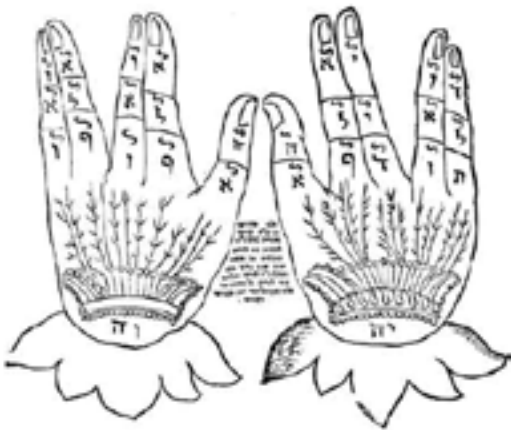


Figure 27: *Kohanim* Blessing

Hands are depicted in the position for *kohanim* blessing. The hands are divided into twenty-eight sections, each containing a Hebrew letter. Twenty-eight, in Hebrew numbers, spells the word *koach* = strength. At the bottom of the hand, the two letters on each hand combine to form יהיה, the name of God. The hands of the *kohanim* are spread out over the congregation, with the fingers of both hands separated so as to make five spaces between them.

The *kohanim* are the descendants of Aaron, chosen by God at the time of the incident with the Golden Calf to perform certain sacred work, particularly in connection with the animal sacrifices and the rituals related to the Temple. In *Rabbinical* Judaism the role of the *kohanim* has diminished significantly in favour of the *rabbis*; however, Jews continue to keep track of *kohein* lineage.

*Kohanim* are given the honour of the first *aliyah*, the first opportunity to recite a blessing over the *Torah* reading, on *Shabbat*. As well, at certain times of the year they are also required to recite a blessing over the congregation.

The term *kohein* is the source of the common Jewish surname Cohen although, in practice, not all Cohens are *koheins* and not all *koheins* are Cohens. Katz is also a common surname for a *kohein* (it is an acronym of *kohein tzaddik*, that is, righteous priest), but again not all Katzes are *koheins*.

## Levi

Historically, the tribe of *Levi* had a special role in the community and the temple, as they were to perform specific sacrificial rights. In *Rabbinical Judaism*, as there is no temple, their importance has drastically diminished. But as with the *kohanim*, Jews continue to keep track of their lineage. *Levites* are given the second *aliyah* on *Shabbat* (i.e., the second opportunity to recite a blessing over the *Torah* reading), which is also considered an honour. The common Jewish surnames Levin and Levine are derived from the tribal name *Levi*, but not all Levins or Levines are *Levites* and not all *Levites* have surnames that suggest the tribal affiliation.

## Tzaddik

The literal meaning of the word *tzaddik* is righteous one. The term is used to refer to a person who is deemed to be a completely righteous individual, and generally also indicates that the person has been deemed to have spiritual or mystical powers. A *tzaddik* is not necessarily a *rebbe* or a *rabbi*, but the *rebbe* of a Hasidic community is considered to be a *tzaddik*.

## Sharing Responsibilities

Jewish ceremonies are relatively inclusive and non-hierarchical. Most or all of the functions of *rabbi*, *cantor*, or *gabbai* may be shared among the members of the congregation. In denominations where the *Torah* is read only by men, as in an Orthodox synagogue, the only requirement is that those who read from the *Torah* are over the age of 13 and have had their *bar mitzvah*.

If an Orthodox synagogue were to lack a *rabbi* for a ceremony, the *cantor* or *gabbai*, or any other Jewish male over the age of 13, could lead the ceremony. In Conservative and Reform synagogues, these functions may be, and often are, performed by women, with no restriction on their participation in any ceremony or recognition in any role.