

# Independent Clergy Find Place in Community

ERIC SCHUCHT | JE STAFF

It's fairly typical for a rabbi to seek out a congregation to call home. But for some, a pulpit rabbinate isn't for them.

Greater Philadelphia is full of clergy who are independent, working as freelance entrepreneurs. These rabbis and cantors officiate life cycle services for the unaffiliated and fill in for others when unavailable. Whether by choice or happenstance, this career path allows for a sense of freedom and flexibility.

"I like to think I have all of the joys of being a pulpit rabbi and never have to show up at a board meeting," Rabbi David Levin said.

He decided to go the independent route after struggling to find openings at area synagogues. Typical jobs involve filling in for other rabbis at ceremonies like weddings, funerals and memorial services. Unlike a congregational rabbi, Levin will adjust his services to the needs of his clients, whether Conservative, Reform, Renewal or anything in between. His intention isn't to compete with or replace congregational rabbis, but to work in cooperation as a part of the same team.

"It's not a zero-sum game where my winning means the congregational rabbi loses a member. But it's an opportunity for me to give a positive experience to that person and invite them into considering community in a more traditional format," Levin said. "So I'm working with my friends in the pulpit, and ultimately we're all working together in service of the Jewish people. And as long as I keep that as my North Star, then I can walk in and out of a synagogue and feel like I'm doing something positive for all of us."

Levin said a lot of his clients come as referrals from other rabbis. Others, like Rabbi Lynnnda Targan, more actively advertise their services on personal websites or in *The Guide to Jewish Greater Philadelphia*. She sought out a freelance rabbinate believing it to be a better fit. Targan said she enjoys the ability to better control her schedule.

"When you're a pulpit rabbi, sometimes you have to make choices that are very difficult to make," Targan said. "As a community rabbi, I'm a little bit more in charge of my time and space, and that's working for me."

It's common for funeral homes to send unaffiliated Jewish families toward Levin and Targan to perform rites. Other clients will seek out a rabbi specifically, like Rabbi Rayzel Raphael. She got into that line of work after serving as rabbinic director of the Interfaith Family Support Network JFCS in Philadelphia for about 12 years. When the position was eliminated, she began a private practice.

"I really loved the work, and so I wanted to figure out how to keep doing this," Raphael said. "It came out of a passion for the work and the necessity to make a living."

A lot of the weddings she officiates are for unaffiliated or interfaith couples. Some are coming from out of town for a destination wedding and don't know where else to turn.

Raphael said many want the option to pick and choose which Jewish traditions they embrace and how they'll express them. For one wedding the couple asked her not to have any mention of God. Targan has had a similar experience when serving the unaffiliated. She said some people who aren't religious will request to have a Jewish wedding as their deceased parent would have wanted.

Others desire something more straight to the point.

"Short and sweet is often what they'll say to me," Targan said.

Being a cantor, Hazzan Naomi Hirsch has had a different experience than others in the independent circuit. She first got into freelancing as a means to support herself by teaching Hebrew, bar mitzvah lessons, singing instructions to rabbinic students and rabbis who want to perform *nusach*. From there, she branched off into performing other rituals. Hirsch said her goal when serving the unaffiliated is to act as a bridge to



▲ Rabbi Rayzel Raphael performing a wedding

Courtesy of Rabbi Rayzel Raphael

Jewish heritage and get people more involved in Jewish life.

"It is important for people to celebrate life cycle events in community, but the world has changed and belonging to a congregation, while still an important foundation of Jewish observance and practice, isn't always possible for people," Hirsch said. "It's important to reach out to people who are unaffiliated, allow them to have community, and it often does lead them to affiliate."

Levin, Targan and Raphael all expressed a desire to encourage the unaffiliated to affiliate. They see their services as a means for people to connect to the broader Jewish community.

"My goal is to always make people feel welcomed in the Jewish community," Raphael said. "And for those who have interfaith families, they don't always feel connected to a congregation. So I do weddings to be that friendly face of Judaism that welcomes them in so perhaps somewhere down the road that they would consider affiliation."

For many, freelancing is a balancing act because it can't fully support them financially. It isn't always a steady income, so those who pursue it often supplement it with other work. Or, as Levin puts it, "cobbling together one's rabbinate."



▲ Rabbi Lynnda Targan at the wedding of even Sclarow and Lori Buzgone  
Photo by Larry Targan



▲ Rabbi Lynnda Targan at the wedding of Heather Sanislo and Eric Lubowitz  
Photo by Lynda Berry



▲ Rabbi Rayzel Raphael  
Courtesy of Rabbi Rayzel Raphael

Raphael works part time at Darkaynu in Warrington and is a musical performer, having produced several religious-themed albums. Targan has taught in the graduate program at the Florence Melton Adult Mini-School at Gratz College and has conducted workshops and writes; she is working on a book. Levin lectures and leads classes.

On the other hand, freelancing allows for interesting and unique experiences. Targan once was flown to France to officiate a wedding. Another time, she officiated a surprise wedding where no one but the

bride and groom knew. Both Raphael and Hirsch have worked on cruise ships performing High Holiday services. Experiences like those are part of what motivates clergy to pursue an independent rabbinate.

“We all have to create our own lives, and to create a life of service. This is the best way that I know how to do that for myself and the community,” Targan said. “By and large, I’m living a life of service, and this is the way I chose to serve.” ❤️

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