

ROUND TEFILLIN, EMPTY SHULS Ari & Ari capture the echoes of Italy's forgotten Jews

Mishpacha מִשְׁפָּחָה

JEWISH FAMILY



"THEY CAME TO STAB ME"

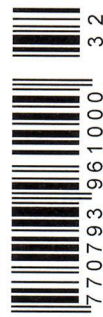
After a summer aiding the rebels, Dr. David Gerbi got a taste of Libyan democracy

ROCKY MOUNTAIN FIRE

Denver's enigmatic Rebbe Shloime Twerski never allowed pain to take him prisoner

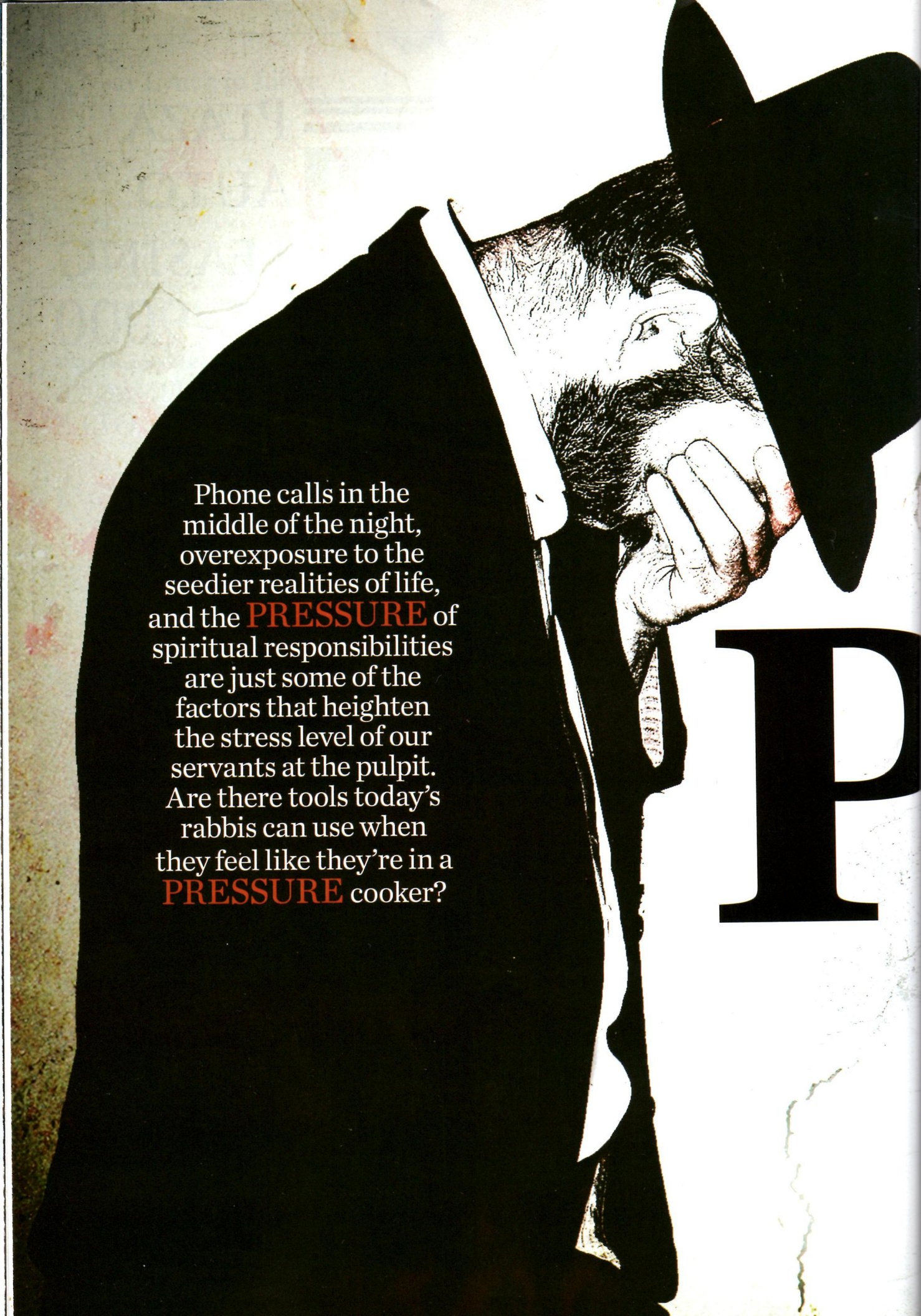
Stretched to the Limit

Can today's rabbis survive the stress of the pulpit pressure cooker?



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Phone calls in the middle of the night, overexposure to the seedier realities of life, and the **PRESSURE** of spiritual responsibilities are just some of the factors that heighten the stress level of our servants at the pulpit. Are there tools today's rabbis can use when they feel like they're in a **PRESSURE** cooker?

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Pressure at the ulpit

Is There a Cure for Rabbinic Stress?

BY **Yisroel Besser**

PHOTOS **Yosef Gottlieb/Kuvien Images**

It was 3:14 a.m.

according to the neon numerals shining on the bedside clock, when the rabbi woke up and reached for the ringing phone. It was a member of his shul, apologizing for the late hour and explaining that this was an emergency. His wife's grandmother had taken ill, and he had a complicated *sh'eilah* involving end-of-life issues and his wife's responsibilities.

"How does your wife feel about it?" asked the rabbi at one point.

"Oh, my wife?" There was a moment's hesitation. "Umm ... I didn't speak to her about it yet. I figured why wake her up if it can wait till morning?"

No Ivory Tower Few professions are as vaguely defined as the rabbinate. The job description doesn't really do justice to the workload and responsibilities, and the expectations of the various clients — in this case, synagogue members — rarely match each other: this one likes a longer *drashah* and that one can't handle it; one thinks the rabbi should *pasken sh'eilos* and stay out of their personal lives and another is insulted if the rabbi forgets to ask about his hernia operation; this one feels that the rabbi ought to be more tolerant and another would appreciate if he could be more outspoken.

So how do they manage, our resilient *rabbanim*, to come to shul day after day, smiles on their faces and energy in their

step? How do they practice and preach and *pasken* and psychoanalyze and provide encouragement and a listening ear to all those in need — each with his own set of expectations?

These are the questions that lead me into a conference room with tables surrounded by *rabbanim*, listening, interjecting, and discussing the points raised by the presenter: renowned psychologist Dr. David Pelcovitz. The session is entitled "Rabbinic Stress," and the good doctor, who is himself a rabbi's son (his father, Rabbi Raphael Pelcovitz, is rabbi emeritus of Kneseth Israel, the "White Shul" in Far Rockaway), is busy inspiring passionate dialogue.

The session is part of a two-day conference sponsored by the Midwest Conference of Agudah Rabbanim. American Midwesterners are stereotyped as unambiguous and straight talking; the rabbis there are no less so. Their words, from around the tables and behind the podium, flow unencumbered by oft-employed clichés, their ideas seeming to land on the table immediately. There is nothing bureaucratic here. This is no ivory tower.

Later, I follow up with Dr. Pelcovitz and several of the participating *rabbanim*, and what becomes clear is that the title "Rabbinic Stress" is much more than a marketing gimmick.

"There is research on this," says Dr. Pelcovitz, "and it turns out that in terms of stress levels, the rabbis rank just below those people living in the communities around Three Mile Island [the Pennsylvania site of a nuclear reactor that experienced



a serious meltdown], where they're in a constant state of pressure."

Okay, so rabbinic stress is real.

But don't many jobs come along with elevated stress levels?

"There's an important distinction between the rabbinate and every other job," Dr. Pelcovitz continues. "And that is that every other job, busy as it may be, is only 24/6. Rabbis don't have Shabbos off, like everyone else."

Dr. Pelcovitz, who is also professor of education and psychology at Yeshiva University, suggests another difference that can make or break a rabbi's emotional equilibrium: "Unlike those in other professions, like plumbers, lawyers, and salesmen, rabbis enter their fields with a very high level of idealism, determined to really make a difference — so it's much more personal that just bringing home a paycheck. If they feel like they aren't reaching people, they take it to heart."

Additionally, Dr. Pelcovitz quotes something he read in the personal diaries of Rebbe Yosef Yitzchak of Lubavitch, regarding a series of visits between his father, the Rebbe Sholom Ber of Lubavitch (the Rashab), and Dr. Sigmund Freud of Vienna, in 1903. The Rebbe found himself in a negative frame of mind, and went to speak with "*harofe* Freud b'Vienna," interested to hear the doctor's perspective.

Parenthetically, Dr. Pelcovitz says, it's obvious that Freud borrowed several ideas from the Rebbe regarding the interconnection between the brain and the heart, the cerebral and the emotional, which he later incorporated into his own works, uncredited. From the Rebbe's writings, it emerges that Freud suggested that the Rebbe's involvement in spiritual healing was likely to cause depression, since there was no developed feedback mechanism for success.

Dr. Pelcovitz explains further. "When a doctor performs a successful surgery, or a journalist writes a good article, he knows, he has fairly instant gratification. A rabbi invests time and energy into working with someone, and it's a slow, steady process with very intangible results. It's not easy to keep going when you don't see success."

I ask the doctor how much of his research is based on his own memories as a rabbi's son. He laughs. "I was fortunate that my father was popular, so it was pretty much just being a target for people's

Dr. David Pelcovitz says that, in terms of stress, the rabbis rank just below those living around Three Mile Island



Pressure at the Pulpit

frustration when the speech went on too long, that was it. Occasionally, people were upset when they were trying to reach my father and the line was busy. In those days there was one phone line and no voice mail — so they would blame us kids for being on the phone so much.”

But on a more serious note, “In school, the teachers would expect a different standard of behavior from us. ‘Is that proper behavior for a rabbi’s son?’ So I guess there is a pressure on rabbinic kids as well.”

Don’t Go at It Alone Today’s rabbis have the added pressure of having to deal with a whole new lexicon of problems — disorders that seem, as one rabbi put it, like someone “shook out a college textbook on the table and all these acronyms came out.” And, he said, the community rabbi is expected to be somewhat familiar with all of them.

At the same time, rabbis have more available resources than in the past, and many of them receive some sort of training in areas of mental health. Dr. Pelcovitz teaches a course in pastoral psychology at Yeshiva University, where he focuses on specific scenarios that the future rabbi will likely see.

And, along with the rise in awareness of disorders in our community, has come a blessing for the rabbi by extension: a rise in the number of professionals able and suited to deal with them.

Today, I am told, most rabbis have a network of *frum* psychologists and psychiatrists that they work with, where they refer the cases that require professional intervention.

Dr. Pelcovitz concurs. “It’s important that the rabbi not try to go at it alone, that he access the local experts in whichever area he’s dealing with.” Most rabbinic organizations, including Agudath Israel’s Department of Community Services, have referral systems in place.

Staying Clean One of the most profound causes of rabbinic stress — besides the daunting, steady workload

— is the fact that many *rabbanim* are forced into exposure to dark realities and truths they wish they wouldn’t have to know. The best and brightest of their respective yeshivos, men distinguished for their *yiras Shamayim* and sincerity, are suddenly thrust into a world of addictions and destructive behavior patterns. How do they keep their own souls from being sullied and maintain purity of mind in the face of this onslaught?

As Dr. Pelcovitz recounts: “I was at a meeting with a great *rosh yeshivah*, and he was forced to listen to some very unpleasant testimony, with all the sordid details. It was late at night, and he said ‘Look, if you need to dirty my *neshamah* with your words, I understand, that’s my job. But please remember that in five hours from now, I’m going to open my siddur and say *neshamah sheNasata bi tehorah hi*, so don’t tell me something that you don’t think I need to hear.’”

Rav Yisroel Menachem Levin of Detroit occupies one of the most historic pulpits in the Midwest, as the successor of his grandfather, Rav Eliezer Levin, legend in the annals of the American rabbinate. Rav Leizer was the *rav* of Detroit for more than a half century, the sole address for all Jewish divorce proceedings in the city — even in the Reform and Conservative communities — and a figure that inspired love and respect in all types of Yidden. His grandson, Rav Yisroel Menachem, has assumed his responsibilities as *mesader gittin*, and he has an innovative way of dealing with the effects of overexposure.

“Chazal say that one who sees a ‘*sotah b’kilkulah*,’ the disgrace of the *sotah*, must separate himself from wine: seeing damage to a Jewish home has a negative impact on us as well, so we need to find a way to combat it.”

As soon as they finish processing a divorce, Rav Levin, his *dayanim* and the *sofer* go into a room and discuss what *middah* — or lack thereof — might have contributed to the breakdown in that particular marriage. Then, they spend time discussing constructive ways to strengthen themselves in that very character trait, working together to grow from

As soon as Rav Yisroel Menachem Levin (R) processes a *get*, he and his *dayanim* meet for their own character-improvement session. (Inset) Rav Doniel Neustadt, chairman of the Vaad HaRabonim of Detroit





“Sometimes, you hear things and you feel like you’re covered in dirt, the only *eitzah* is to hurry to the *beis medrash* and open a Gemara”
—Rav Zev Cohen

the experience.

Rav Zev Cohen, one of the dynamic voices in the Chicago rabbinate, has a method of his own, equally timeless. “Torah is a *mikveh*, it purifies. Sometimes, you hear things and you feel like you’re covered in dirt, from head to toe: the only *eitzah* is to hurry to the *beis medrash* and open a Gemara. That’s the only thing that works for me.”

Not a Luxury The issue of the day for these rabbis who have joined together is not necessarily to hash out the actual problems that find their way to the rabbi’s study, but how to deal with the stress that comes along with them.

Dr. Pelcovitz addresses one of the more obvious suggestions. “Vacation time, or private family time, isn’t a luxury, but a necessity. If you aren’t relaxed, you can’t do your job properly, and if you don’t make time for yourself, you and your congregants will suffer. Before the war, all the *gedolim* took vacations — serious ones, not just for a day or two.”

Later, in private conversation, the doctor reminisces about an innovative bungalow colony where he spent summers as a child. “All the homes were rented by rabbis, for a two-week period, and my father and his colleagues would sit in a large

circle and swap ‘war stories,’ discussing common challenges and frustrations.”

As an aside, on the topic of rabbis and their vacations, he shares a magnificent story about Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky. “My father’s father, Rav Ephraim Pelcovitz, was a Slabodka *talmid* and a *rav* in Bridgeport, Connecticut. When his wife, my grandmother, passed away, he was devastated. It was a very hard, lonely time for him.

“One day, a few months after her passing, the doorbell rings. He opens the door and sees his friend from Slabodka, Reb Yaakov, standing there, suitcase in hand. ‘Listen Reb Ephraim,’ Reb Yaakov says, ‘I’m stressed out and I need a few quiet days away from it all, with an old friend for company. Can I stay here for a bit?’”

Dr. Pelcovitz pauses. “Trust me, Reb Yaakov wasn’t looking for a vacation in ‘beautiful Bridgeport’ — he was coming to give *nechamah* to his friend in a most remarkable way.”

Lonely at the Top The shared laughter and commiseration of this very gathering, the camaraderie of other *rabbanim*, seems to be therapeutic in itself. Dr. Pelcovitz agrees, and adds a thought.

“It’s a very lonely job, the rabbinate, since sometimes the congregants have a hard time relating to the rabbi on a personal level. They don’t want to be his friend, so he has no one to really talk to. This very convention is a huge stress reducer!”

One of the rabbis sitting across from me tells how if his congregants are schmoozing after davening and he approaches, the conversation immediately dies down. “Do they think that the weather doesn’t affect me the same way it affects them?”

But on the other hand, they say, these very congregants who are hesitant to treat the rabbi as their friend seem to need all of his time and energy. They pose the following question: Is it ethical for a rabbi to ignore a phone call?

One rabbi injects a bit of *hashkafah*. “If the Ribono shel Olam wanted us to take every phone call, then He wouldn’t have made such a thing as caller ID.” Laughter. Here, they understand each other.

Rav Zev Cohen suggests that “when you hang up from a phone call with a member, you should feel energized and productive, that you’re helping someone. If it’s sapping you of all your energy and strength, then you have to wonder if you’re wasting your *kochos*, and maybe the caller would be best served by another rabbi.”

Dr. Pelcovitz, moderating the conversation, remarks that there is an oft-repeated maxim in his profession: Ten percent of the people take 90 percent of your time.

Eloquent Rav Efraim Twerski is quick to interject. “Sure, doctor, but you get *paid* for your time!” There is a standing ovation for the rejoinder.

One of the *rabbanim* informs the gathering of a new term: e-available, which refers to the subject’s making himself available to those who would seek him out via e-mail or text



“Not all *rabbanim* have the same responsibilities, but there should be a certain standard. There should be clarity on both sides of the table”

—Rav Avrohom Weinrib

message. Suddenly, technology has created a situation where everyone is expected to be within reach, all the time.

“Look, structuring your time properly is vital in any job,” says Dr. Pelcovitz. “Everyone understands that if you’re in the middle of delivering a *hesped*, your phone is turned off. So don’t your wife and children deserve the same courtesy as that funeral? Why can’t you turn your phone off for them?”

A rabbi sitting near me leans over. “I don’t get why we have to be available for all their *sh’eilos* if they aren’t available for all our answers. I’ll tell you what I mean. A congregant calls me early one morning from a hotel in the Caribbean Islands, he wants to know about using the coffeemaker in the room.

“I told him, ‘Yankel, you didn’t ask me if it’s appropriate to vacation in a place where it’s a battle to watch your eyes from forbidden sights. You didn’t ask me about traveling to a place with no minyan. Now you call me? For this question, I’m not available, sorry.’”

Yet even as technology presents new demands on a rabbi’s time, many see it as a great help. “Texting short answers — ‘yes, there is a *shiur* tonight,’ ‘no, you can’t buy strawberries,’ has made my life much easier.”

Behind Every Rabbi Much of the stress on the rabbinic family, says Dr. Pelcovitz, finds its way to the *rebbeztin*. “In many cases, the *rebbeztins* never wanted that role. But in this profession, her husband’s career choice automatically defines her. It’s almost unfair. Not only does she have to give up quality time with her husband, she also is expected to be socially active, a role model and leader, a teacher and fundraiser and host. It’s tough.”

One of the conference sessions is for *rebbeztins* alone: Dr. Pelcovitz shares research with them. He tells of a study in which people were led to the foot of a mountain and asked to estimate its steepness: then, new people were led to the mountain, but this time, each person had a partner. Again, they were asked to estimate the steepness.

The second group — those who felt that they wouldn’t have to go at it alone — saw the mountain as much less daunting than the first. “The *rebbeztin* at his side can take away lots of stress.”

In many communities, particularly smaller ones, the *rav* and *rebbeztin* are expected to invite member families to join them for the Shabbos *seudos*, something that often comes at

the expense of the children. Dr. Pelcovitz recalls serving as a guest lecturer in one city and being invited to eat the Shabbos meal with the rabbi.

“I was amazed at how he simultaneously managed to keep both his children and me in the conversation at once. He would turn to his son and say, ‘Ask the doctor to tell you a story from his week.’ It can be done.”

A rabbi of one large congregation says that he divides up the Shabbos meals: one is just for family, the other is wide open for guests. “Yes,” calls out another, “I know that even those members who can’t bear to listen to my *drashos* and have no patience for my advice, are great chassidim of my wife’s cholent. They never complain about that!”

On the Table The discussion grows serious as it turns to finances: the great unifying cause of stress everywhere there are human beings.

In this profession it is more pronounced since, as one of my tablemates wryly comments, “There is no such thing as an overpaid rabbi.”

In addition, many *rabbanim* have chosen to serve their flock, fueled by idealism and passion rather than greed. They are unseasoned negotiators, with little feel for the nuances of a contract, and usually sit across the table from a board of directors composed of tough, hardened businessmen.

A very popular and respected rabbi confides in me that he only has one regret about his career, which has spanned many decades. “When I accepted the job, I was thrilled that it came with a house, which belonged to the shul and we were entitled to live in, rent-free. Now, I am older and would love to consider retirement, but I don’t even have a house to live in. It was a mistake.”

I pass this on to Dr. Pelcovitz, who tells me that his father faced a similar situation back in the Five Towns of 50 years ago. “He had devoted *balabatim*, and they told him that even though the shul owned a house, they suggested that he purchase a house of his own: they offered to lend him money for the down payment and encouraged him in that direction. He took their advice and never regretted it.”

Dr. Pelcovitz concedes that the rabbis are at a disadvantage

when it comes to negotiations, and that Yeshiva University's Rabbinic Placement Office offers a contract-negotiating service that has proven to be a "game changer."

Rav Avrohom Weinrib, the talented and energetic director of the Conference of Midwest Rabbanim — and himself one of the respected young *rabbanim* in Chicago — raises a suggestion, offered by one of the participants, that perhaps it's time that Agudah-affiliated *rabbanim* also form such a central office: sort of a union, that can adopt uniform guidelines in how *rabbanim* should be treated.

"Obviously," he says, "not all *rabbanim* have the same responsibilities and duties. Some have Shabbos minyanim and others deliver three *shiurim* each day, but there should be a certain standard. There should be clarity in the expectations, on both sides of the table."

The suggestion is greeted with obvious enthusiasm by the participants. Later, in a private meeting with the representatives of Agudath Israel of America leadership — Rabbi Chaim Dovid Zwiebel and Rabbi Leibish Becker, who have come specially to address the conference — we hear their excitement and commitment to put this on their agenda.

The Best Job Dr. Pelcovitz offers a comforting thought. "Research shows that *rabbanim* experience very high vicarious growth, a deep sense of meaning and satisfac-

tion in what they're doing for people. They believe — and should believe — in the *Hashgachah* that sent them to their specific roles, that they are fulfilling a destiny that this is a Divine calling."

Rabbi Ariel Shoshan, the impressive young rabbi of Scottsdale, Arizona, (and a son-in-law of Atlanta's Rabbi Ilan Feldman, himself son of one of the legends of the American rabbinate, Rabbi Emanuel Feldman) is seated at my table. He listens to the doctor's closing thought and comments softly, "When growth-minded Jews want you to be a part of their lives, it can be stressful, but even more so, it's a privilege. The pleasure of making a difference far outweighs the burden."

Or as Moshe Rabbeinu said to his *talmid*, Yehoshua, when entrusting him with the stewardship of a nation: "*al menas sh'tekabel alecha* — accept this privilege with the knowledge that it won't always be easy" (*Sifrei* 92).

"So, if you live with that knowledge, it means that when there's a 'can't-miss' funeral in a member's family on the day that you're scheduled to leave on a family vacation," says Dr. Pelcovitz to the knowing nods of those around, "you just have to remind yourself that you're lucky, this is your Divine *shlichus*, your job. You are fortunate that your job isn't selling cars or mortgages, but giving people real life — the greatest *chesed* possible. Then maybe you'll be a little less stressed." ●

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