

# THE PARNASS, THE GABBAI, AND THE RITUAL COMMITTEE

by Eliezer Segal, PhD

The institution of a “ritual committee” or “religious affairs committee” is a distinctive feature of the modern synagogue, in that it compartmentalizes religious ritual as but one function among the various social, cultural and philanthropic activities that take place under the synagogue’s roof. In pre-modern Jewish communities, when most of those other functions were performed by separate organizations, the running of the synagogue was entirely a matter of religious ritual.

Though I have been involved in the ritual administration of Congregation House of Jacob-Mikveh Israel for some two decades, I possess little information about how these matters were conducted before that time. At any rate, many of the issues that require administrative guidance in a traditional synagogue emerge naturally from its basic functions and *halakhic* parameters. There are certain matters that inevitably have to be dealt with in any synagogue.

Not surprisingly, the ultimate authority in all major decisions on Jewish religious law is vested in the congregation’s rabbi who should be consulted about doubtful cases. Much of the job of a ritual committee consists of implementing the rabbi’s policies.

The individuals who are charged with administrating the day-to-day activities of the synagogue go by a number of different titles. In the HOJMI by-laws he is called a *parnass* and in current usage the most popular designation for that position is *gabbai*. Both these Hebrew words hearken back to ancient times when they referred to offices of more substantial communal authority. The *parnass* was expected to take charge of financial affairs (often out of his own pocket) while the *gabbai* was collector and distributor of communal charitable funds. In the modern synagogue, the *gabbai*’s responsibilities are largely confined to running the worship services and are often performed behind the scenes, for example by making sure



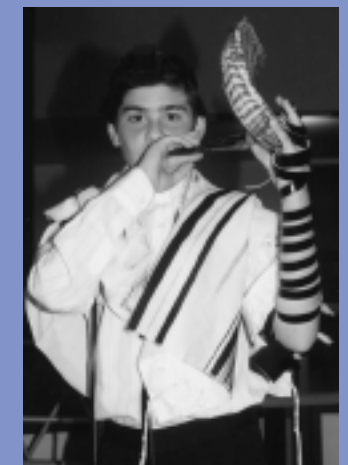
Gabbai Eliezer Segal, 2009

Source: Larry Katz



Sam Wainer, Benji Weizman and Phillip Wolf, on the occasion of Benji becoming a Bar Mitzvah, 2008

Source: Sandra Morton Weizman



William Katz blowing the shofar,

c. 2000. Source: Larry Katz

that the Torah scrolls are rolled to the proper columns or that the appropriate lamps on the memorial boards are lit up for a *yahrtzeit*.

The job description will of course vary with the specific realities of the synagogues. Thus, if there is a professional cantor or Torah-reader on staff, then nobody has to decide who will lead the prayers. However, in today's HOJMI, where services are conducted by lay congregants, the *gabbais* are responsible for selecting the prayer-leaders according to diverse standards of *halakhic* preference, musical competence or diplomatic considerations.

Probably the most demanding task on the *gabbais'* agenda is the assigning of "*aliyot*," choosing the individuals who will be called up for the congregational reading of the Torah. The fundamental guidelines for the distribution of *aliyot* are determined by *halakhah*. Where possible, the first *aliyah* must go to a Kohen and the second to a Levite, while the remaining readings are available to "normal" Jews. In many cases, the *halakhah* or customary usage dictate entitlement to an *aliyah*, as in cases of a religious celebration (a bridegroom or a bar mitzvah) or the commemoration of a *yahrtzeit*. Occasionally, the *gabbai* has to deal with situations when there are not enough *aliyot* to go around. Communities observe different policies on the question of adding to the minimum number of *aliyot* stipulated by Jewish law.

While in earlier times synagogues often gave members *aliyot* based on their prominence in the congregation, the purpose of a religious worship service is to express our devotion to the Almighty, and not to give public expression to the social status of the community's members.



The "Sermanograph," a wooden contraption with hand-painted numbers is manipulated by a pulley which permits its operator to display the correct page number in the prayer book to assist congregants to find their place. Unique to HOJMI, it was invented by former Congregation President, Ilan Serman, and proudly bears his name.



Ilan and Leoni Serman, c. 1999  
HOJMI Sisterhood