
Rabbis

(0*NET 21-2011.00)

Significant Points

- Ordination usually requires completion of a college degree followed by a 4- to 6-year program at a Jewish seminary.
- Job opportunities for rabbis are expected in all four major branches of Judaism through the year 2012.

Nature of the Work

Rabbis serve Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist, and unaffiliated Jewish congregations. Regardless of the branch of Judaism they serve or their individual points of view, all rabbis preserve the substance of Jewish religious worship. Congregations differ in the extent to which they follow the traditional form of worship—for example, in the wearing of head coverings, in the use of Hebrew as the language of prayer, and in the use of instrumental music or a choir. Additionally, the format of the worship service and, therefore, the ritual that the rabbi uses may vary even among congregations belonging to the same branch of Judaism.

Rabbis have greater independence in religious expression than other clergy, because of the absence of a formal religious hierarchy in Judaism. Instead, rabbis are responsible directly to the board of trustees of the congregation they serve. Those serving large congregations may spend considerable time in administrative duties, working with their staffs and committees. Large congregations frequently have associate or assistant rabbis, who often serve as educational directors. All rabbis play a role in community relations. For example, many rabbis serve on committees, alongside business and civic leaders in their communities to help find solutions to local problems.

Rabbis also may write for religious and lay publications and teach in theological seminaries, colleges, and universities.

Employment

Although the majority of rabbis served congregations representing the four main branches of Judaism, many rabbis functioned in other settings. Some taught in Jewish studies programs at colleges and universities, whereas others served as chaplains in hospitals, colleges, or the military. Additionally, some rabbis held positions in one of the many social service or Jewish community agencies.

Although rabbis serve Jewish communities throughout the Nation, they are concentrated in major metropolitan areas with large Jewish populations.

Training, Other Qualifications, and Advancement

To become eligible for ordination as a rabbi, a student must complete a course of study in a seminary. Entrance requirements and the curriculum depend upon the branch of Judaism with which the seminary is associated. Most seminaries require applicants to be college graduates.

Jewish seminaries typically take 5 years for completion of studies, with an additional preparatory year required for students without sufficient grounding in Hebrew and Jewish studies. In addition to the core academic program, training generally includes fieldwork and internships providing hands-on experience and, in some cases, study in Jerusalem. Seminary graduates are awarded the title Rabbi and earn the Master of Arts

in Hebrew Letters degree. After more advanced study, some earn the Doctor of Hebrew Letters degree.

In general, the curricula of Jewish theological seminaries provide students with a comprehensive knowledge of the Bible, the Torah, rabbinic literature, Jewish history, Hebrew, theology, and courses in education, pastoral psychology, and public speaking. Students receive extensive practical training in dealing with social problems in the community. Training for alternatives to the pulpit, such as leadership in community services and religious education, is increasingly stressed. Some seminaries grant advanced academic degrees in such fields as biblical and Talmudic research. All Jewish theological seminaries make scholarships and loans available.

Major rabbinical seminaries include the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, which educates rabbis for the Conservative branch; the Hebrew Union College—Jewish Institute of Religion, which educates rabbis for the Reform branch; and the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, which educates rabbis in the newest branch of Judaism. Orthodox rabbis may be trained at The Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary and the Beth Medrash Govoha Seminary. The number of Orthodox seminaries is relatively high, but the number of students attending each seminary is low. In all cases, rabbinic training is rigorous. When students have become sufficiently learned in the Torah, the Bible, and other religious texts, they may be ordained with the approval of an authorized rabbi, acting either independently or as a representative of a rabbinical seminary.



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Newly ordained rabbis usually begin as spiritual leaders of small congregations, assistants to experienced rabbis, directors of Hillel Foundations on college campuses, teachers in educational institutions, or chaplains in the U.S. Armed Forces. As a rule, experienced rabbis fill the pulpits of large, well-established Jewish congregations.

Job Outlook

Job opportunities for rabbis are expected in all four major branches of Judaism through the year 2012. Rabbis willing to work in small, underserved communities should have the best prospects.

Graduates of Orthodox seminaries who seek pulpits should have opportunities as growth in enrollments slows and as many graduates seek alternatives to the pulpit. Rapidly expanding membership is expected to create employment opportunities for Reconstructionist rabbis. Conservative and Reform rabbis should have job opportunities serving congregations or in other settings because of the large size of these two branches of Judaism.

Earnings

In addition to their annual salary, benefits received by rabbis may include housing, health insurance, and a retirement plan. Income varies widely, depending on the size and financial status of the congregation, as well as denominational branch and geographic location. Rabbis may earn additional income from gifts or fees for officiating at ceremonies such as bar or bat mitzvahs and weddings.

Sources of Additional Information

Persons who are interested in becoming rabbis should discuss their plans with a practicing rabbi. Information on the work of rabbis and allied occupations can be obtained from:

- ▶ Rabbinical Council of America, 305 7th Ave., New York, NY 10001. Internet: <http://www.rabbis.org> (Orthodox)
- ▶ The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 3080 Broadway, New York, NY 10027. Internet: <http://www.jtsa.edu> (Conservative)
- ▶ Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, One West 4th St., New York, NY 10012. Internet: <http://www.huc.edu> (Reform)
- ▶ Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, 1299 Church Rd., Wyncote, PA 19095. Internet: <http://www.rrc.edu> (Reconstructionist)