

THE RABBINIC CRISIS IN AMERICA'S HEARTLAND

What congregations tell us about the urgent need for a stronger rabbinic pipeline, and what that means for rabbinic education

THE COLLEGE FOR CONTEMPORARY JUDAISM

“

At a moment in history when Jews are searching for moral and ethical clarity and leadership, we need more rabbis in the pipeline, and we need the quality of that pipeline to rise to meet the moment.

— STUDY PARTICIPANT

America's heartland is facing a growing rabbinic leadership challenge, one that puts the strength and future of Jewish life across the region at risk. A new study of rabbinic searches in the Midwest, South, and Mountain West, home to nearly 40% of American Jews, reveals formidable challenges for non-Orthodox congregations in attracting a strong pool of viable candidates and securing the rabbis they need to help their communities thrive.

The study makes clear that we need to educate more rabbis, yet it also reveals much more. Congregations need learned rabbis who can do more than lead services, deliver sermons, and provide pastoral support: they need leaders who can build community, engage families and younger generations, develop lay leaders, and strengthen institutions. Geography is also critical: where rabbis are willing to live and serve significantly affects the pool of viable candidates.

94%

of congregations searching since 2020 encountered at least one **major or minor** challenge or skills deficiency

77%

said their **geographic location** was a challenge

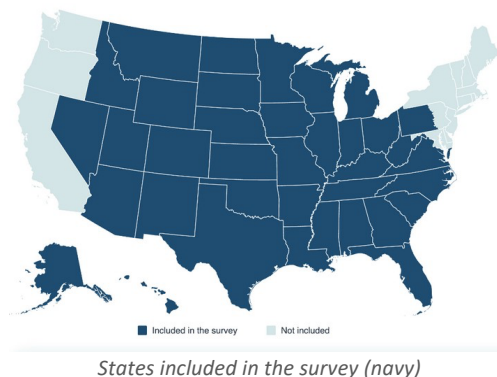
77%

had **too few viable applicants** in searches since 2020

39%

of applicants to Reform congregations since 2020 (**26% of all**) came from the now-closed **HUC–Cincinnati**

About the study. Dr. Ira M. Sheskin of the University of Miami developed and conducted the study. Nearly 800 non-Orthodox synagogues, virtually every congregation in the Midwest, South, and Mountain West, were invited to participate, and half responded—an exceptionally strong rate. **To our knowledge, it is the first comprehensive study focused specifically on congregations’ experiences searching for and hiring rabbis.** It builds on ATRA – Center for Rabbinic Innovation’s November 2025 study, *From Calling to Career*, by bringing the congregational perspective to some of the important questions it raised. Fielded online July 7 – August 14, 2026; of 787 congregations invited, 397 responded.



FINDING 1

The recent challenge has been a shortage of viable candidates

Since 2020, heartland congregations searching for rabbis have faced a highly constrained market. Although almost all searches ended in a hire, many congregations reported choosing from a small pool of applicants, often ones who did not match their needs. In other words, successful hiring rarely meant having a strong range of choices.

- **73%** encountered at least one major issue in their search; **94%** at least one major or minor issue (geography, lack of qualifications, compensation, etc.).
- **55%** reported a viable applicant pool smaller than expected, including roughly one-third who said it was **significantly smaller**.
- **41%** received three or fewer applications in their most recent search since 2020, including 4% that received none; small congregations averaged fewer than three applicants.

“

There were not enough candidates to choose from, and not all of the candidates we did get were viable options. It became ‘one of these candidates would work’ rather than ‘we have a tough decision to make.’

— STUDY PARTICIPANT

Implication. Congregations need a deeper pool of candidates who are both prepared for the demands of contemporary rabbinic leadership and well-suited to the communities they would serve.

FINDING 2

The closing of the heartland's last historic center of rabbinical education in Cincinnati threatens to further shrink an already limited pool

Graduates of Hebrew Union College's now-closed Cincinnati campus made up **39% of all applicants to Reform congregations** searching for a rabbi since 2020, and **26% of applicants to all congregations**: fully one-third of applicants to small congregations, and 22–24% of applicants to medium and large ones.

SHARE OF THE APPLICANT POOL

39% / 26%

of all **applicants** to Reform congregations / to all congregations since 2020 were HUC–Cincinnati graduates.

SHARE OF CONGREGATIONS REACHED

65% / 44%

of Reform congregations / of all congregations received **at least one application** from an HUC–Cincinnati graduate.

A second, different measure shows how widely that pipeline reached. **65% of Reform congregations and 44% of all congregations** searching since 2020 received at least one application from an HUC–Cincinnati graduate, more than from any other seminary. Its closure removes a significant regional source of newly ordained rabbis, as well as a student-rabbi pipeline that had supported smaller and harder-to-staff congregations.

“

With seminaries closing/consolidating, particularly with the closure of my alma mater, HUC in Cincinnati, small congregations in the middle of the country are being abandoned by movements/institutions of US Jewry.

— STUDY PARTICIPANT

“

We relied on student rabbis from HUC in Cincinnati. When they closed the program, we were forced to hire a part-time rabbi.

— STUDY PARTICIPANT

52%

of congregations that desire rabbinic leadership expect to conduct a rabbinic search within the next five years, pointing to sustained demand for rabbis across the heartland.

Implication. The loss of HUC–Cincinnati has eliminated a significant source of rabbis and student rabbis for the heartland at a time when demand is substantial, putting further pressure on an already constrained regional pipeline.

FINDING 3

Geography is a major issue

Where rabbis are willing to live and serve matters enormously. Since 2020, **77%** of congregations conducting a rabbinic search have identified geographic location as a major or minor challenge. When asked, unprompted, to name their single biggest hiring challenge, **more than a third** mentioned geography or related location challenges, more than any other issue.

“

Convincing people to come to a mid-sized Midwestern community was our biggest challenge.

— STUDY PARTICIPANT

“

No one wanted to come to [a non-coastal] western state.

— STUDY PARTICIPANT

Implication. Where rabbis train impacts where they are willing to serve. For heartland congregations already struggling to attract candidates, a seminary in the region, along with the student pulpits and relationships it creates, is a vital part of the solution to the pipeline challenge.

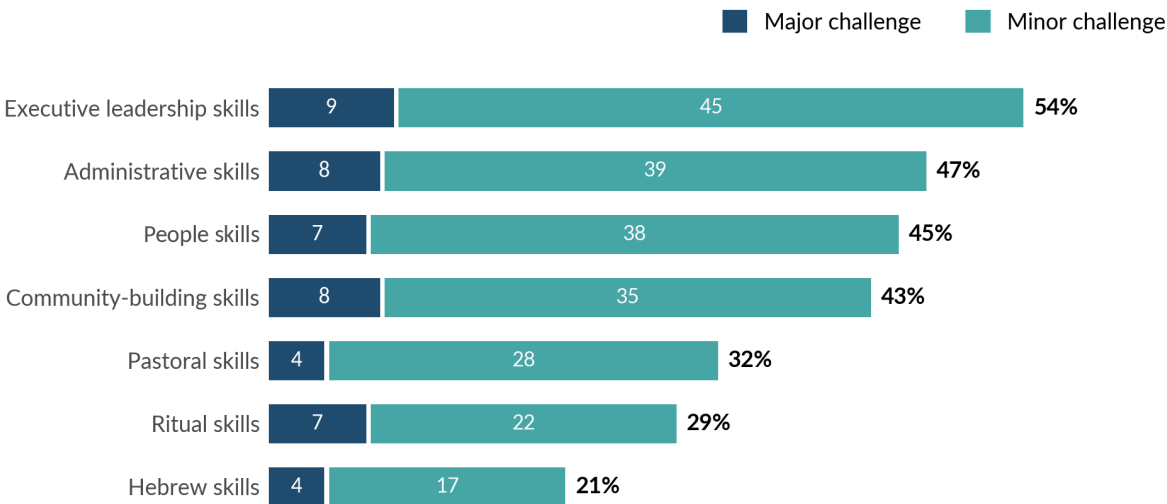
FINDING 4

Congregations want rabbis with a broader set of capabilities

The findings point beyond the number of candidates. Alongside the traditional roles of scholar, teacher, and ritual leader, congregations emphasized their desire to be led by rabbis who can foster personal relationships, build community, lead organizations, and adapt to rapidly changing circumstances. 65% of searches since 2020 reported that applicants lacked at least one important skill or capability.

Skills applicants lacked, searches since 2020

Percent of congregations citing a deficiency (major + minor)



Darker segment: rated a major challenge. Lighter segment: rated a minor challenge. Bar total = major + minor.

“

The modern rabbi needs to be a scholar, spiritual leader, community builder and organizational leader...

— STUDY PARTICIPANT

Implication. The expectations of congregational rabbis have expanded, requiring preparation in organizational leadership, community building, relationship building, and adaptability alongside traditional rabbinic competencies.

FINDING 5

Above all, congregations want rabbis with strong people skills

~80%

of congregations naming the skills essential for a rabbi mentioned **people skills** or similar relational qualities: the ability to connect, build relationships, and bring communities together. Respondents frequently placed these above traditional rabbinic competencies.

“

People skills are the number one quality needed. The candidate should have proficiency in many of the other areas, but a highly qualified candidate without people skills is ineffective.

— STUDY PARTICIPANT

“

Candidates who are genuine, caring, authentic, and curious about the people they will serve are extremely important. They must have strong teaching and interpersonal skills, high EQ [Emotional Quotient], humility, and a capacity for self-reflection and self-awareness.

— STUDY PARTICIPANT

Implication. Relational ability is not a secondary attribute of effective rabbinic leadership; congregations increasingly see it as foundational.

What the findings mean for the future of rabbinic education

Taken together, the findings point to a challenge larger than a shortage of rabbis. **America's heartland needs a stronger rabbinic pipeline, and a model of rabbinic education designed around the realities of contemporary congregational leadership.**

It begins with who is recruited.

If geography is one of the greatest barriers to attracting rabbis, recruiting future rabbis from the Midwest, South, and Mountain West and educating them closer to the communities where they may ultimately serve will likely help build a more sustainable regional pipeline. The closing of HUC-Cincinnati makes rebuilding that pipeline even more urgent.

It requires reconsidering what future rabbis are prepared to do.

Congregations still value the traditional foundations of the rabbinate: Jewish learning, teaching, ritual leadership, and spiritual and pastoral care. But they are also asking rabbis to build relationships, create community, develop leaders, manage organizations, navigate conflict, and adapt to change. Rabbinic education must prepare graduates for this broader role.

And it has implications for how rabbis are formed.

If congregations value relational ability, emotional intelligence, authenticity, and the capacity to bring people together most, those attributes should inform both recruitment and the educational curriculum. Because they are developed through sustained interaction and experience, rabbinic education should provide meaningful opportunities for in-person learning, relationship-building, and hands-on leadership in real communities.

The challenge, then, is not only to educate more rabbis. It is to build a stronger pipeline by **recruiting differently, educating differently, and connecting future rabbis more intentionally to the communities that need them.**

About the College for Contemporary Judaism. The College for Contemporary Judaism (CCJ) is building a new model of rabbinic education to address the critical shortage of congregational rabbis across the American heartland. Based in Cincinnati — the historic cradle of rabbinic education — CCJ will offer full scholarships and living stipends, a rigorous, integrative, and dynamic curriculum, practice-based fellowships, an immersive Israel experience, and direct access to world-class Judaica resources. For more information, visit www.ccjudaism.org. The full findings are available at www.ccjudaism.org.