

WHAT WE HEARD — Focus Groups

Executive Summary

The Rabbi Search Committee held 14 individual meetings with a broad range of congregants. The Rabbi's most important role is to serve as the congregation's moral, spiritual, and communal anchor—providing clear religious leadership, deep pastoral care, and unifying vision in a complex and changing world.

First and foremost, the Rabbi is expected to be the *mara d'atra*: a trusted religious and spiritual authority grounded in *halachah* and Conservative Jewish practice. Congregants look to the Rabbi for meaningful *tefillah*, compelling *Divrei Torah*, and the ability to connect Torah to modern life, current events, antisemitism, and Israel in ways that inspire relevance and pride in Jewish identity.

Equally central is the Rabbi's role as a pastoral presence—accessible, compassionate, and genuinely attentive to people at all stages of life. The Rabbi is expected to walk with congregants through illness, grief, aging, joy, conversion, and transition, offering personal connection and emotional support that builds trust and belonging.

The Rabbi is also seen by congregants as a primary community builder. This includes repairing trust after recent challenges, strengthening the sense of “shul family,” cultivating volunteers, and reconnecting people to synagogue life across generations. Inclusion is not theoretical but lived: setting the tone for what it truly means to belong, welcoming interfaith families, LGBTQ+ members, converts, newcomers, and those on the margins, as well as demonstrating openness through actions and language.

Beyond the synagogue walls, the Rabbi serves as a bridge-builder and public voice, representing KBI within Ottawa's Jewish, interfaith, and civic communities, and helping prepare the community for rising antisemitism and security concerns while maintaining strong Zionist values and ties to Israel.

Finally, our Rabbi is expected to be a visible leader of congregational vitality and continuity—someone whose presence, integrity, and example attract and retain members, articulate a compelling shared vision, and help to ensure the long-term sustainability of the congregation. Whether operating as a visionary partner with lay leadership or within a more collaborative governance model, congregants agree that wisdom, adaptability, influence, and lived Jewish values are essential.

In short, the Rabbi is expected to lead with Torah, heal with humanity, unify with trust, and inspire a vibrant Jewish future for the congregation.

What do you see as the most important role of a rabbi in our congregation today and in the years ahead?

Congregants consistently emphasized that the rabbi's most important role is strong, values-based leadership, grounded first and foremost in being the religious and spiritual authority (*mara d'atra*) of the congregation. The rabbi is expected to bring deep *halachic* knowledge, offer clear guidance, and make Jewish practice and prayer meaningful through engaging worship, strong sermons/*Divrei Torah*, and the ability to connect Torah to modern life, current events, antisemitism, and Israel.

A major theme was the rabbi as a spiritual and pastoral presence—accessible, compassionate, and an active listener—supporting congregants of all ages through illness, aging, death, life-cycle events, and conversion. A central expectation is that the rabbi lead by example in creating a genuinely inclusive congregation. This includes actively involving non-Jewish family members in all ways permitted by the congregation, using equitable and respectful language, and demonstrating inclusion through actions rather than words. The rabbi should clearly set the tone for “what it means to be included.” Openness, acceptance, and inclusivity, including being welcoming to LGBTQ+ individuals, were repeatedly emphasized.

Many stressed the rabbi as a community builder and connector: repairing trust after recent experiences, prioritizing the existing “shul family,” cultivating volunteers, drawing people back into synagogue life, and connecting individuals across generations. Effective connection and presence were seen as key indicators of success, reflected in attendance and engagement.

Leadership beyond the synagogue was also important. The rabbi should serve as a bridge-builder and public voice, representing KBI within the wider Jewish and interfaith community, understanding Ottawa's unique context, and preparing the congregation for increased antisemitism and security concerns. Strong Zionist values and ties to Israel were repeatedly noted.

There were differing views on organizational structure: some saw the rabbi as effectively the CEO and visionary leader working with and reporting to the Board, while others cautioned against a CEO model, emphasizing collaborative leadership within established governance and leaving operational management to professional staff. Despite this nuance, there was broad agreement that leadership, vision, adaptability, and influence are essential.

Finally, many identified congregational vitality and growth as a top priority. The rabbi is seen as the most visible figure in attracting and retaining members, ensuring the synagogue's long-term sustainability, and leading by personal example as someone who lives Jewish values and inspires others to do the same.

What are the most important qualities and skills you hope a new rabbi will bring?

The congregation is seeking a Conservative rabbi who lives an authentic Jewish life and leads by example, grounded in *halachah*, modern observance, and pride in Judaism, with a strong connection to Israel and respect for synagogue governance. Strong rabbinic competence is expected, including leading services, leyning, daily minyan, shiva, and lifecycle events, along with the ability to teach Jewish tradition, spirituality, and practice in ways that are meaningful, inspiring, and relevant today.

A dominant theme was *menschlichkeit*. The rabbi should be compassionate, empathetic, approachable, and a strong listener who makes people feel at ease. Congregants emphasized the importance of visiting the sick, attending shiva, supporting people through life transitions, and being perceived as genuinely available to the broad needs of the membership. The ability to relate warmly to people of all ages, from older members to young families, is essential.

Equally important is humble, collaborative leadership. The ideal rabbi listens first, builds trust through a listening tour, and works in partnership with the cantor, board, staff, and volunteers. Congregants want a leader who respects shared roles, avoids ego, accepts feedback and performance reviews, and can grow alongside the congregation. Team-building, volunteer management, and conflict-resolution skills are seen as critical.

The community also values a bridge builder who can engage across generations, ideologies, and levels of observance. The rabbi should foster inclusion for interfaith families, converts, LGBTQ+ members, newcomers, and the less-involved, while maintaining strong relationships with highly engaged members. Comfort with the diversity and tensions within Conservative Judaism, and the ability to navigate disagreement without alienation, is key.

Looking ahead, congregants want a rabbi who is future-focused, adaptable, and creative, able to manage change and innovate within the spectrum of Conservative Judaism. The rabbi should articulate a clear, compelling vision that is community-driven rather than imposed, inspiring people to act, volunteer, and deepen their Jewish lives.

Finally, the rabbi should be grounded in the Canadian and Ottawa context, knowledgeable about current events, Israel–Diaspora relations, antisemitism, security, and public advocacy. Strong communication skills, charisma, and the ability to connect across multiple demographics were repeatedly emphasized, along with recognition that while no single rabbi can do everything, the right rabbi will grow with the congregation and help lead it with wisdom, warmth, and integrity.

What are the two or three most important challenges or opportunities a new rabbi should focus on in their first two years at KBI?

Congregants emphasized that the first two years should prioritize listening, healing, and relationship-building while laying a foundation for long-term stability and growth. A central challenge is rebuilding trust and unity following the amalgamation and recent leadership instability. The rabbi is expected to invest significant time in learning KBI's history, culture, strengths, and challenges, engaging broadly with members, and becoming a visible, unifying presence. Clear religious leadership, well-defined roles, thoughtful time management, and strong collaboration with the board, staff, and the cantor were seen as essential to organizational stability and confidence.

Another key opportunity is deepening connection and inclusion across the full diversity of the congregation. Congregants want the rabbi to reach out personally, provide strong pastoral care, and be accessible to people of all ages and levels of engagement. Emphasis was placed on helping individuals find their own meaningful connections to Judaism, including by affirming interfaith families as an integral part of KBI's present and future. Strengthening multigenerational engagement, rebuilding pride in the congregation, mobilizing volunteers, mentoring leaders, supporting the supplementary school, and attracting and retaining young families while valuing seniors were repeatedly highlighted.

Finally, once trust is established, congregants want the rabbi to articulate a clear and inspiring vision for a vibrant, growing KBI. This includes strengthening Jewish education, explaining the meaning behind rituals within Conservative Judaism, maintaining strong ritual life, and bringing positive energy that pulls people together. Over time, the rabbi should also grow into an outward-facing role in the wider Jewish and civic community, helping lead on issues such as antisemitism, Israel, and security. Overall, the first two years were seen as a careful balance of listening and learning alongside thoughtful, visible action that sets KBI on a path toward healing, engagement, and future growth.

What are the most meaningful ways for a new rabbi to connect with you, your family, your peers, and the broader community?

Congregants identified personal, consistent, and relationship-based contact as the most meaningful way for a new rabbi to connect with individuals, families, peers, and the broader community. Direct outreach, such as phone calls, emails, and regular check-ins, was repeatedly emphasized, particularly during times of illness, hospitalization, grief, and other lifecycle moments. Being visibly present at services, offering pastoral care, and demonstrating reliability as a "family rabbi" were seen as essential to building trust and belonging.

Many highlighted the importance of informal, face-to-face interactions. These include walking around during kiddush, engaging people at tables, holding Shabbat and congregational dinners (at KBI and in homes), small-group gatherings, coffees, and social events. Congregants want to feel genuinely known, listened to, and valued, not just the most vocal members. Intentional outreach to diverse groups, including converts, interfaith families, seniors, young families, and newcomers, was viewed as critical.

Learning and education were also seen as powerful connectors. Accessible classes, discussions, and informal conversations offered in multiple formats and tailored to different knowledge levels help people explore what Judaism means in their own lives and support the development of Jewish identity for both adults and children.

Finally, congregants stressed the importance of the rabbi showing an obvious, authentic interest in people, being available, socially engaged, and present both inside and outside the synagogue. Outreach within the wider Jewish and civic community, support for participation in synagogue and communal life, and recognition of the full diversity of Jewish families were all seen as key ways a rabbi can foster strong, lasting connections.

What advice would you give the Rabbi Search Committee as we consider who to hire? Or, if you could suggest one question for us to ask rabbinic applicants, what would it be?

Congregants emphasized the importance of thorough, thoughtful vetting when considering rabbinic candidates. They want the Search Committee to go beyond references by reviewing candidates' online presence, past work, sermons, and reputation within the wider Jewish community ("Jewish geography") to ensure alignment with KBI's values and needs. Observing candidates in their home congregations, attending a Shabbat service, and checking public records were suggested as key due diligence steps.

There was strong agreement that the candidate's track record and experience are the best predictors of future performance. Congregants stressed understanding the rabbi's guiding principles, motivations, leadership style, and practical approach to life in Ottawa, pastoral care, education, outreach, and inclusivity. Alignment with Conservative Judaism, Israel, antisemitism, and Jewish peoplehood were highlighted as important considerations.

Suggested questions for applicants included:

- What does Shabbat mean to you?

- How do you lead consistently across multiple demographics, personalities, and perspectives?
- What is your involvement in the Conservative movement?
- Why Ottawa and why KBI?
- What are your priorities and markers of success in the first two years?
- How would you work with volunteers, the board, and staff to foster inclusion and engagement?

Congregants also recommended assessing emotional intelligence, ability to manage diverse needs, and readiness for the realities of the role, including pastoral care, community outreach, education, and collaboration with the cantor. They cautioned against rushing to hire without a strong fit, suggesting that using an interim option is preferable to selecting a candidate who may not meet the congregation's long-term needs. The overall message was to combine careful homework, broad consultation, and rigorous due diligence to find a rabbi who will thrive at KBI and in Ottawa.