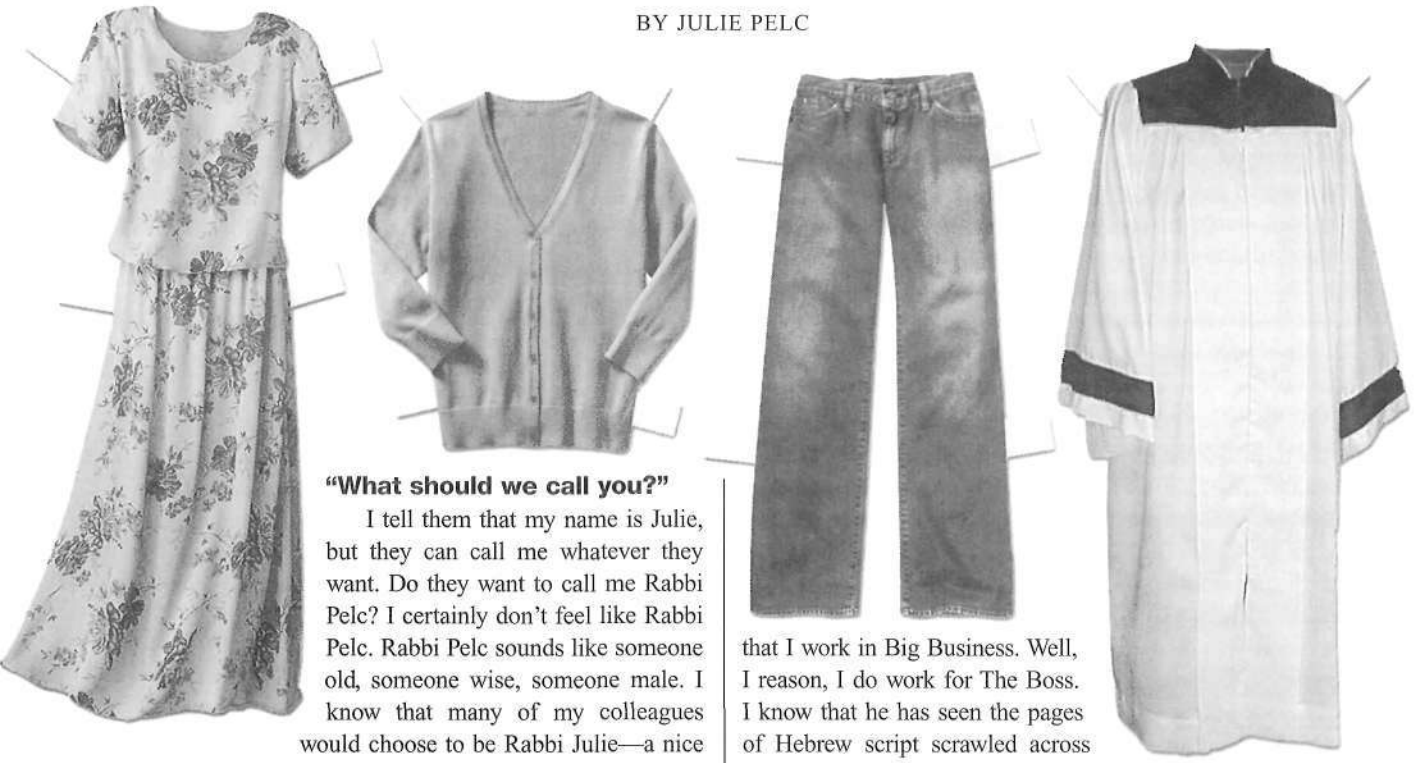
Rabbi Julie, Take One

BY JULIE PELC



"What should we call you?"

I tell them that my name is Julie, but they can call me whatever they want. Do they want to call me Rabbi Pelc? I certainly don't feel like Rabbi Pelc. Rabbi Pelc sounds like someone old, someone wise, someone male. I know that many of my colleagues would choose to be Rabbi Julie—a nice compromise. But this begs the question; if I were a man, even a male student, would I still be flinching when they called me Rabbi? Or would I smile, shyly, knowing that this title would be mine soon enough?

I tell myself that I am being reverential to the training of my chosen profession, since I will not rightfully deserve the distinction of being called Rabbi for three more years, when I am finished with my graduate studies. But I know that hidden inside this reverence and humility lurks a deep-seated fear of owning the power of the rabbinate, owning the power of my own authority.

On the airplane, high above Las Vegas, headed toward Lubbock, Texas, I try on my profession for size for the first time, just to see how it fits. I am practicing my Torah reading, matching the ancient words with their musical cantillation: reading, then singing quietly under my breath until I can chant the Hebrew without looking at the page. This week, the portion of the Torah we read includes the story of Noah. I glance over my sermon, describing God's plan to eradicate all of humanity because of the corruption and immortality that has permeated the land.

Seated in the aisle beside me, three attractive young men loudly discuss their weekend plans. The one seated closest to me is especially good looking, and I pause every few verses to listen to their animated debate. It seems that they are arguing about whether or not the guy in the window seat is, in fact, single—and whether it would be cheating on the girlfriend in question if he were to elicit the affections of another lady while on vacation. Perhaps noticing my interest in the conversation, the dark-eyed man sitting directly across from me asks me what I do for a living. I pause. I imagine the simplicity of telling him that I work in Big Business. Well, I reason, I do work for The Boss. I know that he has seen the pages of Hebrew script scrawled across the tray-table on the seat in front of me and has heard me muttering strange chanting sounds under my breath. I tell him that I am studying to be a rabbi. The other two men stop arguing long enough to hear my admission.

"That's it. It's a sign from God," exclaimed the semi-single bachelor in question. I shrug. Which one of us is God? "It's not a sign from God," argues one of his pals.

"God sent her," he insisted again. "I can't do it."

That's it, I think. I am now officially a symbol. I decide to pipe in on behalf of womankind.

"Maybe it's your *girlfriend* who sent me." And I smile, trying to make light of the whole situation. For a moment, I allow myself the luxury of imagining myself to be superwoman, traveling near and far, intervening on behalf of women everywhere just before the men in their lives do stupid things to hurt them. I can tell that the two friends are less than thrilled at their buddy's newfound fidelity.

The flight attendant announces that the plane is in its final descent. We are heading directly toward Lubbock, our final destination. There, I will serve as the community's rabbi for the weekend, and eight more weekends throughout the coming year. As the plane heads for the runway, I shift in my seat, fold up the pages of Hebrew and stuff them into my red backpack.

The former president of the Temple picks me up from the airport. He'd asked how he might recognize me. I told him I wear glasses, I look Jewish. Dark, curly, shoulder-length hair. And a red backpack. Yep, that's how you find your rabbi. Your spiritual leader. You look for the red backpack coming off the airplane. I walk past the former president without his noticing me. He follows me outside, explaining that he saw the

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backpack, but didn't know that it was me. Their rabbi. I wonder whether I would know to look for a 26-year-old girl in a maroon sweater-set, either.

"What should I call you? Ms. Pelc?"

I think this is the worst of the options I have heard so far. He does not want to offend me, but the fact remains that he does not know what to call me, either. I try to pretend that I am just like any other guest rabbi who has visited Lubbock, Texas.

"Do I look more like a rabbi if I wear a robe?" I ask the choir director.

At the hotel, I unpack my bags and review the clothes that I have brought along for the weekend. I know that I will need something dressy for Friday night services, and that Saturday and Sunday will be a bit less formal. What does a young woman rabbi wear? A suit? A dress? I had decided against suits, since they felt too formal and too male. I brought a flowered dress falling between knee and ankle for Friday night. Conservative, sophisticated, simple. Perfect for Lubbock, Texas. I have not worn it since I purchased it three years ago. I look at myself in the mirror. I feel like a little girl. I change clothes three times before I am content to leave the room. I sit in the lobby, lean over, and realize that it is possible to see more leg than I had anticipated in that flowered dress. I long for jeans and comfortable shoes, for my seat in the back of the congregation where I can whisper with my friends and critique the rabbi from below.

I am picked up from my hotel by the synagogue's ex-president and his wife. I reach for the handle of the rear door, but I see that his wife is seated in the back seat. I am reminded that I am here for work. A guest rabbi would sit in the front seat of the car, even when a husband and wife are both present in the vehicle. I tell myself that I am a hired professional, not someone's daughter or niece or out-of-town cousin.

When we arrive at the temple, people want to shake hands and say howdy to the new rabbi. Everyone asks me what I would like them to call me. What is it preventing me from making eye contact and, smiling with confidence, saying "Call me Rabbi"? I am unsure whether I want to be their adorable granddaughter or their professional, competent spiritual leader.

I am told that all of the members of the temple's entirely non-Jewish choir wear long white robes. I see the robes hanging one after the other on a coat rack in the office, and wonder aloud whether I, too, should wear one.

"Naw, you're dressed up so pretty," the choir director, Christina, tells me, as I try one on over my flowered dress.

"But do I look more like a rabbi in the robe?" I ask her, as I push the long sleeves up so I can use my hands.

"You do what you want, but I think you don't need it" she tells me. I imagine wrapping a big white prayer shawl over the robe and drowning in white fabric. I decide to leave the robe on its hanger.

As the choir and I ascend the steps to the raised platform of the bimah, I see rows of blank faces looking up at me, the curiosity. Standing before them, my nervousness and my self-consciousness fade. I have waited my whole life for this moment. To stand before a congregation and sing my soul, to connect with the ancient words of our tradition and to reach out to the people who have come to share this sacred moment with me.

I hold the kiddush cup and bless the sweet Sabbath wine. I carry the heavy Torah around the sanctuary as the choir sings and I proclaim *"Shema Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad."* Listen, Israel. The Lord is Our God, the Lord is One. I chant from the Torah and teach the congregation about Noah. As I call out the names of our ancestors in the central prayer, the *Tefilah*, I add the names of Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah—the matriarchs—and I smile.

At the end of the service, we gather in the social hall to share homemade desserts and coffee.

"Thank you for coming, Rabbi, Sir" one elderly man tells me, before changing the epithet to "Ma'am, er, Miss."

Some people tell me that they loved the sermon. One congregant tells me that it was "very accessible for the children."

The children ask me if I am married, if I am a vegetarian, and which is my favorite portion of the Torah. They call me "The Rabbi"—talking about me in the third person to their parents, even though I am in the room. I wonder if they sense that this is what I really do want.

"The Rabbi taught us the Bathroom Prayer," one of them announces, after I explain that tradition provides an opportunity to praise God even after using the facilities.

"The Rabbi said that it's okay to give her a hug," another exclaims.

"The Rabbi is coming into our Sunday School classes!" I nod, letting them know that I will be here, for them, as The Rabbi, all weekend.

For the children, I tell myself, it is important for me to be The Rabbi. Not student rabbi. Not Ms. Pelc. But Rabbi.

A woman slowly approaches me after most of the others have left the temple. Her eyes are swollen, she asks whether I do spiritual counseling. She is crying.

"My dad died two weeks ago. I can't work, I can't sleep. There was no formal mourning. He was cremated." I notice that she is the same age as my mother. She calls me Rabbi. I tell her yes. I would be glad to meet with her, to listen, to allow space for her tears. We agree to meet after Sunday school. I look at her looking at me. I am a 26-year-old child—and I am her rabbi.

For the first time all weekend, I know who I am. ■

JULIE PELC is studying to be a rabbi at Hebrew Union College in Los Angeles. She is co-editor, with Tobin Belzer, of the forthcoming anthology *Joining the Sisterhood: Young Jewish Women Write Their Lives* (SUNY Press).