

Still, despite these reservations, I recommend this work. If not entirely a framework, certainly a fertile ground on which future Jewish religious naturalism can grow and flourish.

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*Search: A Novel*

by Michelle Huneven

(New York: Penguin Press, 2022), 400 pp.

The departure of a senior clergy leader from their pulpit is sure to rouse ripples of change throughout the community. Many rabbis in our ranks have witnessed this transition or experienced it personally when making a professional change. In this novel, the task of calling a new spiritual leader is presented from the particular point of view of a lay search committee at a midsized Unitarian Universalist Church, but readers with congregational experience will find in it the universal feelings of frustration and humor faced when shouldering the future of a beloved institution. This work of autobiographical fiction is told through the eyes of Dana Potowski, a restaurant food critic, disaffected churchgoer, and onetime seminarian. In hopes of finding her next book, Dana applies to join the search committee for a new minister while secretly taking notes for a memoir (with recipes!) about the experience. Thus, this meta-book provides a description of the yearlong process of discernment, surveys, applications, and interviews in real-time through the lenses of committee meetings, retreats, and congregational votes. The narrator moves from a blasé opinion of religious organizations to a fervent hope that she alone can protect the fate of her community. At its heart, this novel calls into question who is qualified to guide a diverse communal institution and who is responsible for putting said guide at the helm.

The fictional plights of Huneven's UU Church will feel familiar to congregational leaders of all faith backgrounds. Issues faced include sectarian divisions in their ranks, significant questions of theology, the relative emphases on preaching and pastoral care, the use of technology in ritual, the place of innovation versus tradition, and most of all, who will cater the next meeting? As a food writer,

Huneven and her alter ego narrator devote a portion of the text to covering the meals and mixology that sustain the search committee during their crusade. (Look out for a shoutout to matzah!) This combination of passions highlights the committee's dual yearning for spiritual and earthly sustenance.

Rabbinic readers will benefit from a vicarious view from the pews, even in a religious tradition other than Reform Judaism. While many of us have endured a placement process replete with occasional turbulence, this novelization from the other side of the interview table provides fertile grounds for clerical self-reflection. Some of the candidates portrayed here defy belief with their respective egotistical charades, but behind the humor is an earnest hope for integrity and humility among religious leaders. Abuse of power, fiscal irresponsibility, and plagiarism are all showcased among the vices of the clergy applicants.

The committee members are also not without fault—the meetings reveal their individual pettiness and an age-based division over “wokeness.” Even after taking a course on bias awareness, the committee squabbles over the right “vibe” for their congregation. Questions emerge over “How Things Must Be” and whether it is necessary to change for the sake of change. Though ostensibly burdened with holy purpose, the committee's progress is challenged by mundane inanities and underhanded machinations. Each of the search committee members must question whether they individually represent the collective.

It doesn't take much imagination to see that this “Search” is for more than a new clergy leader. Potowski contends with what she calls “midlife spiritual drift” and pins her own hopes for the future of religious life on the pursuit of a new minister. Her ploy seems doomed by the unpredictability of communal shifts despite strenuous planning processes. The outgoing minister warns Potowski that “not everyone survives prolonged exposure to all the behind-the-scenes and inner workings of an institution” (p. 14). Can earnest optimism endure the absurdity and lack of control promised by a congregational search? Readers of Stephen Fried's *The New Rabbi* will recognize a glimpse of a seldom publicly revealed but regularly experienced episode for institutions of American religious life.

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