



*Reprinted from Moment Magazine, Nov/Dec 2012, "Ask the Rabbis" column*

**"What, in your opinion, makes someone a rabbi?  
Was there a moment when you realized you were a 'real' rabbi?"**

***Response by Rabbi Peter Schweitzer***

As new rabbinic candidates, we eagerly assume the title rabbi in our student congregations even though we really don't claim to be something we aren't. The members, in turn, are glad for us to fill the role even while they know we are a work in progress. But when it comes time for ordination there is something uniquely transformative that takes place. We don't suddenly become smarter or wiser or more compassionate. But now we are distinguished in a way that transcends our own individuality. We are authenticated and admitted into a line of leadership and responsibility that is bigger than ourselves. We somehow become real rabbis.

A member of my congregation told me the story about how his in-laws were shocked when he referred to me casually by my first name only. They could not imagine such informality. In fact, I am happy to go by my first name alone or, just as simply, as Rabbi Peter. But, as is frequent, when simply someone calls me "Rabbi" – with no name attached – then I wonder how much I am occupying a role in the eyes of the beholder. It is a valued position, to be sure, but also potentially a depersonalized one. I am a "real" rabbi for that person – and I trust that the salutation is offered with respect – but sometimes it makes me feel like an "unreal" person in my own skin.