

*The* **BOISI CENTER** *for*  

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**RELIGION *and* AMERICAN PUBLIC LIFE**

**Symposium on Religion and Politics**

**WOMEN IN RELIGIOUS LEADERSHIP**

**“Judaism & Women Rabbis”**

**Reading Packet 3**

**2016**



# BOSTON COLLEGE

BOISI CENTER  
FOR RELIGION AND AMERICAN PUBLIC LIFE

## Symposium on Religion and Politics

### WOMEN IN RELIGIOUS LEADERSHIP

#### “Judaism & Women Rabbis”

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## CHAPTER 2



# WOMEN IN JUDAISM

*Jacoba Kuikman*

## INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

Judaism is one of the oldest civilizations originating in the ancient East. The earliest stages of the history of the Jewish people are recorded in a collection of narratives in the Hebrew Bible from its beginnings up to the time of Ezra, possibly as late as 400 BCE.

The Second Temple period spans a time frame dating from about 515 BCE when the Temple, destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BCE, was rebuilt, until 70 CE when the Romans destroyed it again. This event heralds the beginning of the Rabbinic period during which the Rabbis collected and put into writing the vast amount of interpretation of the Biblical texts circulating orally. For almost 2,000 years normative Judaism would revolve around the study of what came to be known as the Talmud, an exclusively male endeavour.

Without a homeland, Jews suffered extensively at the hands of Christian Europe during this period. Murdered, expelled, and ghettoized Jews survived in part through strict sex-role differentiation with women in the private sphere of the home and men active in the synagogue and study hall. The Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries allowed Jews entrance to the modern world as citizens, and many Jews assimilated into society. However, the liberal German Reform movement sought to restructure religious practice and worship to resemble the dominant Christian milieu. This marks the beginning of what might be called the modern period, which saw the slaughter of some six million Jews at the hands of Nazi Germany between 1938 and 1945 and the birth of the State of Israel in 1948.

## HISTORY AND STATUS OF WOMEN

A brief overview of some of the pivotal biblical events that span some 1,000 years will provide a framework for a discussion of the foundational elements for Judaism and the place of women within that religion.

### The Biblical Period

Genesis tells us that Abraham, who migrated from Ur of the Chaldees to Canaan (Gen. 11:31), made a covenant with God to whom he gave his sole allegiance in the form of observance of laws concerning the individual and the community. In return God promised Abraham and his descendants the Land. Abraham and his wife, Sarah, had a son named Isaac. As a test of Abraham's faith, God commanded him to sacrifice Isaac. This archetypal story in the history of Judaism tells us that God stays Abraham's hand, thus fulfilling the promise that Abraham will have descendants. Isaac's son Jacob, later named Israel, had 12 sons whose descendants would come to be known as the 12 tribes of Israel. Not only is his daughter, Dinah, given short shrift in the Bible, but also the narrative relates that she was raped and infers that this was a consequence of inappropriate, independent behaviour on her part. In addition to the patriarchs of Genesis, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the matriarchs among the women in Genesis, Sarah, Rebekah, Leah, and Rachel, function as role models in Judaism.

A famine brought Jacob and his family to Egypt, where for many years thereafter the Israelites lived in slavery. The textual evidence has it that Moses, with considerable help from his older sister Miriam, led the Israelites out of Egypt, thus liberating them from slavery. This liberation event, the so-called Exodus, occurred around the year 1280 BCE. The gift and reception of the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai was followed by a long period of wandering in the desert.

Living among the Canaanites in the 'promised land', the Israelites found themselves powerfully distracted by Canaanite culture and religion. Military leaders who earned the title of judge, including Deborah, were chosen to fuse together a struggling and often divided people. Around 1020 BCE Saul was chosen as the first king of Israel. David, a poet and author of many of the Psalms, is considered to be Israel's second and greatest king, a messiah and model for the future messiah. Establishing Jerusalem as the capital city, he built a sanctuary to God/El there. David's son, Solomon, built the first temple through heavy taxation and forced labour, resulting in the eventual secession of 10 of the 12 tribes. The 10 tribes in the north came to be known collectively as the Kingdom of Israel, while the tribes of Judah and Benjamin, which remained in Jerusalem, were known as the Kingdom of Judah. Conquest of Israel by the Assyrians in 722 BCE resulted in the dispersal of the 10 tribes, and today they are known as the 10 lost tribes of Israel.

This roughly marks the beginning of the Prophets who inveighed against idolatry and social injustice but who also comforted God's 'suffering servant', especially following the destruction of the Temple in 586 BCE by the Babylonians and the exile into Babylon of most of Judah. The Jews exiled in

Babylon nevertheless flourished, and in the absence of the Temple, initiated other forms of prayer and worship. Permitted to return to Jerusalem in 538 BCE after Cyrus conquered Babylonia, the Jews rebuilt the temple, completing it by 515 BCE. About 100 years later, two leaders of the Babylonian Jewish community, Ezra and Nehemiah, urged the Jews in Jerusalem to adopt an uncompromising loyalty to the one God and to the laws. Conversion to Judaism was now discouraged since converts were likely to bring their foreign gods with them. This despite the fact that much earlier, Ruth the Moabite, a convert to Israel, had served as ancestor to the great King David.

The women of the Hebrew Bible are not uniformly represented. Although not mentioned as frequently as men and although often not named, they are presented variously as subjects of historical events in both the private and public domain. While the Hebrew Bible is an androcentric text it is not difficult to find role models for contemporary Jewish women; Lot's wife, Yael, Dina, Tamar, Ruth and Naomi, and Judith from the apocryphal literature are examples.

### Second Temple Judaism

With the advent of Hellenism, as epitomized by Alexander the Great in the fourth century BCE, the Jews in Jerusalem found themselves once again living under foreign rule. Some Jews embraced elements of Greek culture, and the biblical books were translated into Greek. Under King Antiochus IV Epiphanes, however, Greek religion was forced upon the Jews upon pain of death, a situation that ended with the Maccabean revolt and the reclaiming of the Temple in 164 BCE. Until the Roman conquest in 63 BCE, Israel was an independent kingdom centring on the Temple Cult in Jerusalem under the leadership of the Hasmonean kings.

The next 100 years, up to the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans in 70 CE, saw the rise of various groups of Jews, including the wealthy and elitist Sadducees; the Pharisees, or sages, who sought to apply the Torah to everyday life and created a body of material known as the Oral Torah; and the Essenes, an ascetic and apocalyptic group whom we know through the Dead Sea Scrolls. The synagogue, whose origins may go back as far as Ezra, was promoted by the Pharisees as an institution of worship alongside the Temple. To what extent women were active in the synagogue as leaders is largely unknown from textual material, but some scholars have provided evidence from Greek and Latin inscriptions that tell us of women bearing various titles such 'head', 'leader', 'elder', and 'mother of the synagogue' as well as 'priestess'. This material suggests that some Jewish women did assume leadership positions in the ancient synagogue (Broote 1982). With the destruction of the Temple, the Pharisee tradition became the foundation for rabbinic Judaism,

which in turn has defined Jewish practice in every sphere of life for the past 2,000 years.

### **Rabbinic Judaism**

The Oral Torah, eventually codified in the Mishnah, is the product of pharisaic interpretation of the laws and teachings of the Torah. It also contains meticulous descriptions of the manner in which the laws were to be implemented. The Mishnah and Talmud both name a few women, and they also refer to women generically when they speak of women's legal status in the public and private realm. Largely within this literature, women are seen as 'other', as essentially different from men who constitute the norm. The actual experience and lives of historical women are not evident in these texts.

### **The Middle Ages**

The middle ages in Jewish history span from the time of the completion of the Babylonian Talmud, somewhere between 500 to 600 CE to the sixteenth century when Jews were restricted to ghettos in Western Europe. Jewish communities during this period were diverse. There were large thriving populations of Jews in regions dominated by Muslims, and more insecure, often persecuted, communities in Christian Europe. Despite this diversity, all were governed by the laws of the Talmud, which relegated women primarily to the domestic sphere. The primary sources of information about women in the Middle Ages come from the hands of men seeking solutions to legal problems. This *responsa* literature reveals the discontent and frustration experienced by women in connection with issues such as marriage, divorce, and the inheritance of property. The ban on polygamy by Rabbi Gershon among Ashkenazi Jews in the tenth century was a first but significant change in status for Jewish European women.

Literature from women themselves from this time that might tell us some things about how they negotiated their social and religious status is either non-existent or unrecoverable. One later exception is the autobiography of Glückel of Hameln, Germany (1645–1724), a mother of 12 children. Relatively highly educated for her time, Glückel is upheld in traditional Judaism as a model of piety for her acts of loving kindness. Her memoir offers important information about Jewish women of her time and in her region.

Jewish women in Western Europe enjoyed a higher standard of living and were more active in family economic affairs than Jewish women living in Islamic centres (Baskin 1991: 102). The few religiously educated women of the time, however, remained on the periphery of male-centred Judaism. Jewish women in England seem to have enjoyed greater freedom, particularly in the economic life of Jewish communities. But on the whole, the expectations of

Jewish women in the Middle Ages can be summarized in a prayer from medieval Northern Europe recorded by parents on the occasion of their daughter's birth: 'May she sew, spin, weave and be brought up to a life of good deeds' (cited in Baskin: 94).

The French revolution in 1749 and the Enlightenment generally initiated emancipation for European Jews, especially those in France and Germany, if they were willing to give up their traditional religious practices and beliefs and their sense of being a 'nation'. Efforts to harmonize Jewish tradition and the desire to participate fully in society and to gain civic equality led in nineteenth-century Germany to the formation of a liberal movement known as Reform. Reform Judaism, in its many manifestations, generally regarded modern ethics and historical biblical scholarship as correctives to the religious tradition based on the Bible and the Talmud. It represented an effort to keep modern Jews within Judaism. Fearing too great a compromise with modernity, more traditional rabbis founded the Conservative movement in Germany. Conservative Judaism sought to retain *halacha*, or Jewish law, as well as the traditional texts, although these were regarded as relevant to a modern context and not as static and immutable. What might be called Neo-Orthodoxy was a kind of reactionary form of Judaism in that it retained the *halachic* core of Judaism. It was possible and necessary for Jews within this movement to embrace Western culture only to the extent that it did not impact negatively on religious observance. In Western Europe, Germany formed the heart of the various Reform movements in Judaism. Conservatism flourished here also, since it allowed full assimilation while retaining some measure of Jewish thought and practice. Eastern European Jewry remained largely Orthodox in the traditional rabbinic sense and would be almost completely decimated by German Nazism.

Assimilation into the modern society of highly educated and sophisticated Western German Jews and even baptism did not spare Jews from the horrors of the Holocaust. Zionism, a largely modern and secular movement, emerged in the nineteenth century as a response to persistent anti-Semitism in France, despite the so-called emancipation of Jews at this time. In Europe, the secularization of Judaism did not concretely affect the influence of Jewish laws on women. German Jewish immigrants to North America brought their different denominational movements with them. Some two million Eastern European Jews fled Russia and immigrated mainly to the United States. North American developments both before and after the Holocaust are complex and beyond the scope of this chapter. An important American phenomenon, however, was the emergence of Reconstructionism in the 1930s. This movement began as a kind of philosophy focusing on Judaism as an evolving religious civilization. It was not based on any notion of revelation but, rather, on perceived human needs.

Various forms of Jewish feminism during the 1960s in the United States agitated for full inclusion in the Jewish religious community, specifically equal participation in synagogue services. While some feminists now argue that the basic problem is theological (Plaskow 1983), others call for justice and change in Jewish law to end both segregated worship and discrimination in the area of divorce (Ozick 1983). These demands eventually led the seminary of the Reform movement to ordain the first woman rabbi in 1972. The Conservative movement elected to include women in the *minyan* (the quorum of 10 men required for public prayer in Orthodoxy). The Reconstructionist movement ordained its first female rabbi in 1974 and gave women equality in all of its rituals. The American Havurah movement, which in the past couple of decades has gained in popularity in major centres in Canada, is a traditional and egalitarian movement that has included women in every aspect of ritual and has experimented with inclusive language.

As one leading feminist scholar notes, however, women rabbis have often encountered prejudice and discrimination when searching for rabbinic positions (Heschel 1983: xvii). And much of the liturgy is still riddled with sexism. For orthodox, traditional women, the gains of feminism are even slower. These Jewish women long to practise their Judaism within a classic Jewish framework. One of the major issues here is segregated worship and the nature and height of the *mechitzah*, the separation between men and women in communal prayer. Fortunately there is dialogue among women in disparate Jewish situations. A case in point is Canada, where leading Jewish feminists of various religious persuasions are in dialogue.

## TEXTS AND INTERPRETATIONS

The number of texts compiled throughout Jewish history is nothing less than astounding. Aside from the Hebrew Bible and the Talmud, there exist vast bodies of *Midrashim* (stories that interpret the Torah), classic commentaries on the Torah, various mystical texts (the best known of which is the *Zohar*), responsa literature from the Middle Ages, the *Shulchan Aruch* (a compilation of Jewish law), the *Siddur* (prayer book), and the Passover *Haggadah*. The major texts are the Hebrew Bible, which is commonly referred to as the Torah (although, strictly speaking, the Torah comprises the five books of Moses, or the Pentateuch), and the Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmuds, the latter of which is the better known.

The Torah is the foundation for the whole body of halacha, or Jewish law. According to traditional Judaism, laws codified in the biblical texts are authoritative and, by and large, the basis for the later rabbinic development of law. Because rabbinic decrees are related to biblical laws, these decrees are also

given ultimate authority. Traditional Jews read these texts as atemporal and ahistorical. That is, prohibitions are not considered contextually but are read as valid for all Jews in all times and places. Modern Jewish historians and biblical scholars, however, assert that texts containing certain legal material concerning women, for example, have emerged out of specific cultural contexts. Jewish feminists question the authority of these texts in today's world, notwithstanding the abiding importance of Torah in traditional Jewish religious life. Torah is revelation: God, creator of the universe, is understood to have here made himself known in history. The study of Torah and its adjunct literature has been a central, indeed the holiest, enterprise in religious Judaism.

Yet, as women know, the Hebrew Scriptures are deeply patriarchal. Biblical texts and later interpretations of them, as found in rabbinic literature for example, are products of societies in which women's perspectives and experiences were inconsequential and invisible. Biblical texts and interpretations of them reflect male experiences of war, government, or the Temple Cult. The Bible is a product of a creative, dynamic tension between biblical traditions and the experience of the redactors who interpreted these traditions in order to make them relevant in new and different contexts. That is, the biblical texts and subsequent interpretations are contextual and contingent upon a particular time and place, and a world view that was deeply androcentric and male-dominated. These texts preserve male authority. Critical biblical scholarship, however, has recently drawn upon other tools, such as social scientific analysis, to understand gender in the biblical period. It is possible to regard religion as only one expression of the Israelite experience when one understands ancient Israel as a social entity. When one includes other resources in the study of gender and the biblical world, such as the results of archaeology, our knowledge of the people of the time extends beyond the content of the biblical text (Meyers: 6–23).

The Hebrew Bible presents a diversity of images of women, reflecting the viewpoints of different authors and different socio-cultural contexts. Biblical images of women are found in a plurality of writings, legal, didactic, historical, and prophetic, spanning close to a millennium in their dates of composition (from the twelfth century BCE to the third century BCE). These varied images, however, contain some common themes such as those of wife and mother. Perhaps the epitomic biblical text exemplifying the good wife and mother is *Eishet Chayil*, 'What a rare find is a capable wife' (Proverbs 31:10–31).

Biblical images of women are presented variously, and certain women such as Sarah or Deborah are held up in the tradition as role models for women of today. Sarah is the ideal model of wife and mother. One biblical story that is fundamental for Jewish women is the story of the rape of Dinah, one of Jacob's 13 children. Though the 12 sons come to be known as the founders of the 12

tribes of Israel, Dinah is almost completely forgotten. There are countless other examples that prove the androcentric nature of the biblical texts. Jephtha's daughter, not named, is sacrificed for male ideals, and, unlike Isaac, her life is not saved. When God gives the Torah to Moses at Mount Sinai, one of the central events moulding Jewish identity, Moses warns the people: 'Be ready on the third day; do not go near a woman' (Exodus 19:15). The issue is ritual impurity: according to Leviticus 15:16–18, an emission of semen makes the male and his female partner unfit to approach the sacred. But, as Judith Plaskow points out, Moses does not say, 'Men and women do not go near each other' (Plaskow 1990: 25). At a key moment in Jewish history, the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai, women are invisible in the text even though, as part of the people of Israel, they must have been present at Sinai. Many women experience themselves as excluded and invisible during the annual reading of this text at the festival of Shavuot, or Pentecost. Jewish feminists must reclaim these stories by representing as 'visible the presence, experience, and deeds of women erased in traditional sources' (28). Otherwise the Torah will continue to be a partial record of Jewish experience. 'Modern historiography assumes . . . that the original "revelation" . . . is not sufficient, that there are enormous gaps both in tradition and in the scriptural record' (35).

Feminist historiography, therefore, involves reaching behind the text to recover knowledge about how women actually lived during the biblical period. This process involves retrieving women's experiences in texts, events, and processes that were suppressed, neglected, or erased by both the sources and the redactors and which never became part of Jewish group memory. We are left with the task of adding them to the records. This approach 'challenges and relativizes those memories that have survived' (Plaskow 1990: 35). Feminist historiography incorporates 'women's history as part of the living memory of the Jewish people' (36). The recovery of women's history is not transformative for Judaism, however, 'until it becomes part of the community's collective memory' (36). Accepting the 'Torah behind the Torah' would affirm that Judaism has always been 'richer, more complex, and more diverse than either "normative" sources or most branches of modern Judaism would admit' (51). Many, if not most, of the halachic rulings concerning women are rooted in rabbinic literature comprising five major works: the *Mishnah*; the *Tosefta*, a companion volume to the *Mishnah*; the Talmud of the Land of Israel (the *Yerushalmi*); the Talmud of Babylonia (the *Bavli*); and a body of Midrash. Jewish tradition accords the same status and authority to this literature as it does to Torah. The tradition teaches that God gave this literature to Moses at Mount Sinai and that it was passed on orally until the time it was written down.

The *Mishnah* is a six-volume code of law that makes up the foundation of the Talmud. It includes all legal developments since the time of the Torah

and it was circulated orally for perhaps hundreds of years before it was put into writing around the year 200 CE by the *Tannaim*, or rabbis. In the generations that followed, the rabbis studied and debated these laws, seeking to understand their underlying legal rationales and to apply these laws to new contexts. Debates were recorded in the form of questions and answers and included all opposing positions and opinions. This literature together with the *Mishnah* came to be known as the Talmud, which means, literally, 'the teachings' (Hauptman: 184–5). Academies in Babylonia and Israel appended material unique to their own contexts; hence there is a Babylonian Talmud and a Talmud of the Land of Israel, the former the better known. The Talmuds are the texts most frequently cited with respect to laws pertaining to women.

Historians acknowledge that rabbinic literature was the sages'/rabbis' means of making the Torah more meaningful in their own day, especially after the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE. Originally this was a fluid process by which laws in the written Torah could be expanded or modified to meet differing contexts and circumstances. Some scholars insist that in its time the Talmud was a progressive document in its views of women. For example, a Jewish woman could not be married without her consent. Her marriage document was a legally binding contract and a guarantee that her husband would support her. She was entitled to a monetary settlement in the case of divorce. Thus marriage, as envisioned by the rabbis, was not simply the acquisition of a wife but the guarantee of a woman's emotional, social, and sexual satisfaction. The last 'truly revolutionary' ruling for women was the Edict of Rabbenu Gershom in 1000 CE, forbidding polygamy to the Jews of the Western world (Adler: 16). Since this Edict, the Talmud has ceased to evolve to meet the changing needs of women; it has become a static document, and, according to traditional Judaism, God's word and will for all time. It need not be so. In the classical tradition, a law can be modified depending on the consensus of the Jewish community. Therefore, the many laws and customs in the Talmud that deny women independent legal status and equal participation in ritual, prayer, and study as well as those that discriminate against women in marriage and divorce should, in theory, be open to change. Indeed, for some scholars, changing certain laws is a matter of justice (Ozick: 123). One prominent feminist Jewish scholar, however, questions whether Jewish law, as such, is compatible with Jewish feminism at all (Plaskow 1990: 65).

The purpose of various Jewish observances is to infuse life with religious meaning and to cultivate a sense of ethics. The laws concerning these observances fall into two categories that are both positive and negative, each of which is further divided into time-bound and non-time-bound commandments (Hauptman: 190). None of this is in itself problematical. The difficulty for Jewish women is that many of the commandments in the Talmud concerning

women are rooted in traditional sex-role differentiation that limits women's roles to the home and family life. Therefore Jewish law exempts women from certain positive time-bound commandments because of their family obligations. For example, a woman is not required to pray communally three times a day. She is therefore not counted in a minyan and she is not allowed to say *Kaddish*, the prayer recited daily during the year of mourning in the context of a minyan, even for a deceased parent. However women are bound by all of the negative commandments, such as the prohibitions against theft, adultery, or murder. Because the conditions for most Jewish women have changed dramatically since these laws were first enacted, halachic change concerning the time-bound commandments for women seems both inevitable and just.

In traditional, Orthodox Judaism, women are still denied the privilege of being called up to read a portion from the Torah in the liturgy. Yet, there is no legal argument supporting this practice. Historically what was at stake was the 'dignity of the congregation' (Megillah 23a in Hauptman: 192). Other commandments such as fulfilling dietary laws and lighting the Sabbath candles on Friday night, which were not legally binding on women, eventually fell almost exclusively to women as caretakers of the home. The 'cumulative effect of these exemptions and shifts of responsibility' was to exclude women from public performance in the synagogue and to turn the academies and synagogues over to men. Communal study and prayer, which constitute the heart and soul of religious Judaism, were, and still are in those circles committed to Jewish law, off-limits in terms of woman's religious experiences (Hauptman: 192–3). One solution to this exclusion of women in traditional congregations is segregated study and worship, and separate women's celebrations. But this solution is still based on the principle of Jewish law that women are Other and must thus be kept apart from men.

A passage that has generated female fury and scorn is the blessing recited by traditional male Jews every morning: 'Blessed be God, King of the universe, for not making me a woman.' For many Jewish women these words suggest that women are inferior and that this inferiority is divinely mandated. Other interpretations of this prayer are possible, however. One scholar observes that in the Tosefta, Rabbi Judah remarks that the blessing is an expression of male gratitude that they are in the privileged position of fulfilling more of the divine commandments than women. In this case the blessing is interpreted as merely a reflection of the social world of the time, which relegated women to the home. If understood in this historical context, the words of the blessing, we are told, 'lose most of their sting' (Hauptman: 196).

Some stories in the Talmud describe women's extraordinary religious knowledge. Perhaps the best known of these women is Bruriah, wife of Rabbi Meir, a sage who contributed extensively to the composition of the Mishnah.

Her male contemporaries respected her, and her views are cited throughout the Talmud. Unlike her husband, who is cited hundreds of times, Bruriah is not mentioned once in the Mishnah. It has been suggested that Bruriah is a rabbinic creation, and that she appears for certain literary purposes. Is she a token woman signifying that women are allowed to study Torah or is her function to reinforce the rabbinic injunction that women should *not* study Torah? Whatever the rabbis' original intentions, by the Middle Ages, Bruriah represented 'the folly of permitting women access to sacred learning' (Romney Wegner: 76). The eleventh-century biblical commentator Rashi records that Bruriah's overconfidence led her to be seduced by a student and she subsequently committed suicide. The message here is that women who abandon their assigned roles in traditional religion and culture will experience tragedy. Rachel, the wife of Rabbi Akiba, is an exemplary role model as a woman whose sole purpose in life is to be supportive of her husband's endeavours. According to the Talmud, Rachel lived alone and in poverty for 12 years, enabling the intellectually gifted Akiba to study.

While there are also several Talmudic accounts of individual saintly women and their great compassion for the poor, the Talmud does not hesitate to ascribe less than positive attributes to women in general. A dominant motif here is that women are not only different from men but also inferior to them, especially in terms of their 'physical attributes, their cognitive and affective faculties, and their standards of morality' (Romney Wegner: 77). There are myriad stories that describe women 'as excessively talkative, sharp-tongued, arrogant and outspoken'. Among women's uglier traits are 'cruelty, jealousy, vengefulness and their mean treatment' of each other. 'Women also appear to be superstitious, suspected of being witches, desirous of luxury, and quick to anger' (Hauptman: 205). With respect to these texts, it is necessary to point out that the view of an individual rabbi should not be projected onto the rabbis generally (Hauptman: 197). Nevertheless, it may be argued that these oppressive texts are indicative of general misogynistic rabbinic attitudes of the time. In summary, the Talmud presents a composite image of women with both desirable characteristics as well as negative ones. Positive rabbinic opinions of women, however, are dependent upon women's acceptance of their roles as restricted to the home and family, and this, in turn, reflects the social conditions of the time.

Just as important as the legal sources of the Talmud are the haggadic sources: sections 'that record the rabbi's opinions on a variety of subjects, legends about biblical characters, and stories about contemporary rabbis and their families', some more or less historically true but with 'legendary elements'. These materials are included in the Talmud because of their ethical intent and because they reflect the efforts of the rabbis to educate their readers through

stories about characters with whom they 'could identify' (Hauptman: 197). When Dinah, for example, ventured outside of her home and was raped (Gen. 34:1), her family became embroiled in war and deception. For the rabbis this confirmed that a woman's place was in the home. Haggadah, like the legal material of the Talmud, is not uniform in its opinions on women. But on the whole, the Rabbinic haggadic tradition views the role of woman as wife and mother. Not surprisingly, the theme of barrenness as the worst possible disaster for women runs throughout haggadah as well as the Bible.

## SYMBOLS AND GENDER

Symbols perhaps even more than rituals and beliefs are windows to understanding a religious tradition. Almost any object and even persons can serve as symbols if they are used to represent something else. Eve, for example, is synonymous with 'temptress' and represents fallenness in the Western mind. Symbols are ambiguous depending on who interprets them. Thus Eve can also be interpreted as consciously exercising her free will in the service of change.

### Eve and the Garden of Eden

The traditional Jewish views of men and women, their status, roles, and sexuality, are derived from the Creation narratives in the book of Genesis:

And God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. They shall rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the cattle, the whole earth, and all the creeping things that creep on the earth.' And God created man in His image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. (Gen. 1:26–27)

The Lord God said, 'It is not good for man to be alone; I will make a fitting helper for him . . . So the Lord God cast a deep sleep upon the man; and while he slept, He took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh at that spot. And the Lord God fashioned the rib that He had taken from the man into a woman; and He brought her to the man. Then the man said, 'This one at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. This one shall be called Woman, for from man was she taken. (Gen. 2:18; 21–3)

These two excerpts seem to present us with two contradictory passages concerning the creation of Adam and Eve. The first account tells of the simultaneous creation of male and female, each in God's image. The second contains the well-known rib story in which Adam 'gives birth' to Eve via his rib. Rabbinic commentators, uncomfortable with two contradictory accounts of

creation, fashioned a Midrash that enabled the two stories to be read as one continuous text. Genesis Rabbah, part of a rabbinic Midrash collection, describes the creation of a primordial, bisexual humanoid (Gen. 1), which was subsequently split into two separate male and female beings (Gen. 2).

R. Jeremiah b. Leazar said: When the Holy One, blessed be He, created Adam, He created him a hermaphrodite, for it is said, *Male and female created He them and called their name Adam* (Gen. v, 2). R. Samuel b. Nahman said: When the Lord created Adam He created him double-faced, then He split him and made him of two backs, one back on this side and one back on the other side. To this it is objected: But it is written, *And He took one of his ribs*, etc. (Gen. ii, 21). (Genesis Rabbah VIII: 1)

The text implies that a hermaphrodite is not merely an androgynous being, but two bodies, male and female, joined together. In Genesis 2, the two sides of the androgyne are separated into two separate beings. The fact that the Hebrew word for rib, *tzela*, can also mean side, adds support to this Midrash. But this tradition is immediately countered in the Midrash with the rib account in Genesis 2. This objection led to the normative interpretation of rabbinic literature that woman was created second and subordinate to Adam. Rabbinic literature retained the notion that man and woman were created simultaneously and equally in the image of God as a minority position.

Another attempt to account for the existence of two contradictory creation stories appears in a Midrash of around the eleventh century, the 'Alphabet of Ben Sira'. Here Adam's wife in the first account of creation (his first wife) was Lilith, who, because she was created equal, demanded to be treated equally. When such treatment is denied her, she flies away to the Red Sea where she joins a host of demons and gives birth to hundreds of other demons every day. The tradition of Lilith as demon is as old as the account in Isaiah 34:14 where Lilith resides in a desolate wasteland in the company of owls, ravens, jackals, wildcats, hyenas, and goat-demons. But her demonic roots lie in ancient Sumerian mythology in which she is listed as one of the four vampire demons. A Babylonian terra-cotta relief (c. 2000 BCE) shows a nude and beautiful goddess of the beasts with wings and owl feet. She stands on two reclining lions and is flanked by owls (Patat: 221–2, plate 31). She is identified as Lilith.

Medieval Jewish mystics and the rabbis described Lilith as a seductress who returned to the Garden of Eden disguised as the Serpent who seduces Eve. She continued her career by seducing men who sleep alone, and she caused them to have impure, spontaneous, nocturnal emissions. The rabbinic message to women appears to have been a warning not to behave like Lilith lest they become demons like Lilith. Simultaneously, the rabbis and the mystics

demonized almost any kind of female behaviour that was independent and assertive.

Modern Jewish feminists, attracted precisely to Lilith's rejection of male authority, have begun to reclaim her as a positive symbol and heroine for Jewish women. Rejecting the patriarchal nature of the Midrash, women are rewriting the story to include the powerful idea of sisterhood, and the strong friendship between Lilith and Eve (Plaskow 1979: 206–7; see also Cantor 1983: 40–50). Eve, too, needs reclamation by women. She is, after all, the one who initiated change in the Garden of Eden. Perhaps the prohibition against eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 2:17) existed to be disobeyed. Eve, like Lilith, refused to submit to male authority and became a seeker of knowledge, a tester of limits. She is a conscious actor in the story and chooses knowledge without consulting Adam. Thus, embedded in Jewish tradition are several possible interpretations of the Garden of Eden story. What is absent is a monolithic interpretation of Eve's action as constituting a fall from grace similar to that found in Christianity. The accusation of 'original sin' brought about by Eve/woman is absent from the text. This is a later interpretation from authors with different theologies such as St Augustine. The text reveals that man and woman share responsibility for the alteration of their status and roles (Meyers: 72ff.).

### God and Goddess

Jewish tradition recognizes that equating the symbol of God as male with God is idolatrous. At the same time, the images of God that predominate in the Scriptures and other Jewish texts are those of Father and King. Almost every action of Jewish life is preceded by a blessing of God as Lord and King of the earth. Major litanies on the holiest days of the Jewish calendar repeat the epithet 'Our Father, our King'. Traditional Jews use exclusively masculine pronouns for God even though most would contend that God transcends sexuality. The problem, however, is that the concept of a theistic, personal God in a covenant relationship with the Jewish people is at the 'living heart of the Jewish symbol system' (Gross 1983: 236). It is impossible to engage a personal Ultimate without the use of masculine and/or feminine imagery. A turn to a non-personal Ultimate would require relinquishing the notion of the covenant relationship and the commandments to be adhered to. Therefore, anthropomorphisms, as inaccurate as they are in speaking of God, are inevitable (Gross 1983: 237). To pray to a God-She, then, should be equally possible, though also equally incomplete, to praying to a God-He.

The obstinate refusal to accept this argument is located in the nature of those who have created God language, especially those religious, spiritual Jews who have shaped the contours of normative, traditional religious Judaism.

Because of its androcentric nature, women have felt alienated from the Jewish tradition, excluded as they are from its meaningful elements. The first step for the transformation of this tradition might simply be the experience of addressing God as She. The pronouns, whether masculine or feminine or both, might then develop into richer images of God, whether gleaned from within the Jewish tradition itself or from other religious sources. Some feminist scholars regard movement in this direction as feminizing a male model, and they argue that it is ultimately ineffectual in addressing the theological problem of the deeply imbedded belief in the maleness of God.

Resources for female imagery of God exist within the history of Jewish tradition, although they are preserved by and located in patriarchal contexts. For example, the rabbis usually speak of God and his *Shekhinah*, the feminine indwelling presence of God. In the context of the Exodus story God reveals God's self to Moses as *Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh* ('I am who I am', or, literally, 'I am who I will be'). Even though this name is gender neutral, God is celebrated as the Lord of War in Exodus 15 and his power is regarded as the privilege of maleness. The few images of God as Mother, as, for example, in Isaiah 42:14; 66:13, or elsewhere in the Bible as wet nurse and midwife, are overshadowed by the predominance of male imagery.

Plaskow points out that the making of the one male God was a long process in the course of ancient Israel's dissociation from the polytheistic Near East. Correlated with this process was a concern with gender and the exclusion of women from public religious life (1990: 125). The gradual development and employment of male God language in Israel coincided with the gradual marginalization of women within the religious realm. Symbols here 'are not simply *models* of a community's sense of ultimate reality. They also shape the world in which we live, functioning as *models for* human behavior and the social order' (Plaskow 1990: 126). Male images of God serve both to describe the divine nature and to support a social system that allocates power and authority to men. 'When God is pictured as male in a community that understands "man" to have been created in God's image, it only makes sense that maleness functions as the norm of Jewish humanity. When maleness becomes normative, women are necessarily Other, excluded from Torah and subordinated in the community of Israel. And when women are Other, it seems only fitting and appropriate to speak of God in language drawn from the male norm' (Plaskow 1990: 127). Evident here is a powerful circular argument. Further to this problem with the male image of God is that it has ceased to function as a symbol and has become an idol instead. The result is that what is worshipped is maleness instead of God.

Plaskow's analysis goes farther. Images of divine authority, while diverse, are replete with images of God's power and dominance. God, holy king of his

chosen Israel, is represented as a holy warrior who approves of the slaughter of foreign peoples and the treatment of women as booty and spoils of war (Num. 31:17–18, 32–5). Images such as God as holy king and warrior deny human power and authority and encourage human passivity. They 'fail to acknowledge or evoke from us the energy and empowerment' required to struggle against the very oppression and evil generated by such images (Plaskow 1990: 132–4).

Nature provides a host of images for God that not only resonate with our experience but also nurture responsibility for our wounded environment. In Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, Celie, a poor, black, abused woman, discovers another face of God in conversation with her lover Shug, a face aside from the 'trifling' and 'lowdown' one familiar to her. Shug knows all too well the white, male God found in church. Celie learns from Shug that God is also found within nature, in the colour purple and not over or outside of it. As Shug puts it: God would be 'pissed off' if we did not notice the colour of flowers. Celie writes in her diary:

She [Shug] say, My first step from the old white man was trees. Then air. Then birds. Then other people. But one day when I was sitting quiet and feeling like a motherless child, which I was, it come to me: that feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all. I knew that if I cut a tree my arm would bleed. (cited in Plaskow 1990: 145)

The white male God is displaced first with trees, then air, and only then with other people. Symbols for God from nature cross religious boundaries, nurturing friendships and solidarity with other women in a time when the world is in crisis. Traditional Judaism is ambivalent about nature, however. Anything that looks like the veneration of nature was and continues to be associated with goddess worship in ancient Israel, a phenomenon that was carefully erased by the biblical writers. Early Hebrew popular religion includes the names of three goddesses worshipped by the ancient Israelites: Asherah, Astarte, and the Queen of Heaven (who was probably identical with Anath) (Patai: 34–53). Asherah, the earliest of these and likely the consort of YHWH, was represented as a tree or as a nude woman. For example, Saul Olyan contends that the goddess Asherah was the consort of Yahweh and not of Baal on the grounds that Asherah was El's main consort in Canaanite religion and that the biblical writers identify Yahweh with El (Olyan: xiv). Introduced to the Solomonic Temple by King Rehoboam, the son of Solomon, in or about 928 BCE, Asherah's statue remained there for 236 of the 370 years that the Temple stood in Jerusalem. Worship of Asherah was opposed from time to time only by a few prophetic voices (Patai: 50, 52). It is significant that the Hebrew

people clung to Asherah as the loving, mother-consort of YHWH-El for six centuries. Perhaps the nature-oriented worship of her tree cult was an expression of resistance to the increased vigour of the abstract Yahwist monotheism to which Asherah eventually fell victim.

Proverbs 8:30 tells us that Wisdom (that is, Torah) was active in creation together with God. In Proverbs 3:18, Wisdom is depicted as *etz chaim*, the Tree of Life to those who hold fast to her. Asherah may be the model for portraying Wisdom as a tree in this passage. The tree metaphor found with reference to the majesty of Wisdom in Sirach 24:12–21 would support this possibility. Here Wisdom is patterned in luscious, rich images of fertility and fecundity. She is the all-nourishing Tree-Mother who invites us to: 'Come to me, you who desire me, and eat your fill of my fruits' (see Kuikman 2000; Wolfson 1: 123 n.1) Female images of Torah or Wisdom in rabbinic literature are more metaphorical in nature and include the images of Torah as daughter of God or the King, as bride of Israel, God, or Moses and as the mother where the father is God (Wolfson 3: 125, n. 12).

The strong prophetic condemnation of goddess worship in ancient Israel attests to its tenacity in the tradition. This condemnation, however, is not to say that Israel was responsible for the death of the goddess, as some Christian feminists have claimed. The accusation that Jews killed the goddess is an echo of the earlier charge of deicide, that Jews are Christ killers. Feminist Jewish scholars and others have condemned assertions that Judaism introduced patriarchy and violence into the world (Heschel 1990; von Kellenbach 1994). Overlooked has been the evidence of the introduction of patriarchy in other parts of the world. Moreover, the notion that early matriarchal, goddess cultures represented an ideal, peaceful, and harmonious time is wishful thinking, given the fact that this is unverifiable and also that goddess-oriented societies today, such as India, do not necessarily promote equality and justice for women. Also overlooked or neglected is the history of the ancient nascent nation of Israel as a small struggling nation in the context of much larger Canaanite patriarchal cultures. What is disturbing here is the (perhaps unwitting) resurfacing in some Christian feminist writings of the old assertion of the superiority of Christianity. Jewish feminist rejection of the patriarchal nature of traditional Judaism is an internal critique, and Jewish feminists resent being placed in a position of defending what they believe needs to be challenged in traditional Judaism.

Feminist Jews who are not comfortable with goddess imagery have a host of non-gendered names for God upon which to draw from biblical and other sources: God as lover or friend; companion or co-creator; fountain, source, wellspring, or ground of all being (Plaskow 1990: 161–5). Metaphors from the Psalms furnish us with rock and refuge. The Jewish mystical tradition has

provided the image of God as *Makom*, literally 'place', a sacred place. To imagine God solely as male is simply not necessary, even in traditional Judaism.

## SEXUALITY

The traditional, Orthodox view of sexuality is rooted in rabbinic concerns for family unity, including the production of children and future generations. Sexuality is regarded positively as the God-given means by which to propagate the human race. Sexuality must be controlled and mastered, however, in order to render it holy. Within the context of marriage, sexuality is 'an expression of the noblest human creative impulse' (Kaufman: 124). Unlike many other religious traditions, the Orthodox view asserts that Jewish texts are sensitive to female sexuality. The Talmud (Baba Metzi'a: 84a) teaches that women have a greater sex drive than men (Biale: 122). But the rabbis' perceptions of women's sexuality also included the idea, based on her internal anatomy as opposed to the male's external erection, that women were passive. They tell us that despite her strong sexual drives, a woman is 'temperamentally inhibited in initiating sex' (Biale: 125). Therefore it is the man's responsibility to initiate sex when he knows his wife desires it (Biale: 126). Male sexuality, on the other hand, is regarded by the rabbis as active, in danger of 'running wild', and in need of restraint through the restrictions of marriage such as the obligation to procreate (Biale: 122).

The tension women experience between sexual desire on the one hand and passivity on the other was interpreted by the rabbis as part of the curse of Eve which all women have inherited. While the first part of the curse according to Genesis 3:16 is the pain of childbirth, the second reads: 'Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you'. What this passage means, precisely, is not at all clear. Medieval biblical commentators present varied interpretations of Eve's desire and Adam's rule. Generally, though, women are seen as caught in a bind between sexual desire and servility. 'Whether because she cannot initiate sex, or because she "pays" for her sexual desire with total obedience, the woman's curse is bound up with her sexuality' (Biale: 125).

Traditional scholars sometimes posit positive views of sexuality within Judaism, comparing them with the more negative attitudes of classical Christianity in which sexuality and original sin are regarded as products of Eve's sin (see, for example, Kaufman: 123). The Talmudic literature is ambiguous, however, regarding the positive nature of sexuality. The rabbis state: 'Let us be thankful to our forefathers, for if they had not sinned we would not have come into this world' (Avodah Zarah: 5a cited in Biale: 121). It appears that some of the sages' views on sexuality do not differ all that much from those in other Western religious traditions. The rabbis saw sexuality as potentially

dangerous and therefore in need of regulation (Biale: 121). As well as restricting sexual expression to marriage, confinement of sexuality is achieved through the laws of *niddah*, a Hebrew term referring to a woman who is ostracized, excluded, or separated. The laws of *niddah* are directed to women regarding sexual contact during and after menstruation. These prescriptions are based on Leviticus 15:19, 'When a woman has a flow of blood where blood flows from her body, she shall be a *niddah* for seven days; whoever touches her shall be unclean until evening'. Two additional texts, Lev. 18:19 and Lev. 20:18, explicitly forbid sexual relations during menstruation. During the biblical period, a woman would be separated from engaging in sexual relations with her husband for seven days and she would be *niddah* until she immersed herself in a *mikvah*, or ritual bath. When the task of examining the bloodstains shifted from a rabbi to women themselves, the rabbis imposed an extra seven days of seclusion to ensure the woman was free of bleeding.

The laws of *tumah*, or ritual impurity, and *taharah*, or ritual purity, are complex and include cases of contamination in addition to those in the *niddah*, such as contact with leprosy and seminal discharge. The ultimate source of *tumah* is the corpse. The purpose of these laws was to prevent impure persons from entering the Temple where the divine Presence resided (see Lev.: 11–15). Since the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE these laws no longer serve a purpose and, except for the laws of *niddah*, are today inoperative. Since the laws of *niddah* are included in the biblical sexual prohibitions, they were retained, especially after the Second Temple was destroyed and religious observance shifted from the public, cultic sphere to that of family life (Biale: 147–8).

Contemporary justification for the laws of family purity includes the idea that mutual love and devotion can be expressed in ways other than physical. The separation, we are told, can be a time of 'intimacy of the spirit', a break from mechanical, monotonous sex. Monthly separation, further, is said to increase desire for sexual expression. There is a kind of revival in the practice of family purity laws among some Jewish women in that it affirms their independence and rejects the treatment of women as sex objects (Kaufman: 145–51). Some Jewish feminists adhere to family purity laws because of their symbolic value. *Tumah* signifies an end of a cycle, a dying when the rich, potentially life-giving menstrual blood leaves the body. *Taharah* is the return to potential life in the womb. Menstruation is a nexus point. It is both an end of life and a beginning of something new (Adler 1976: 66).

Other feminist scholars have raised several issues regarding the laws of *niddah*. A recurring question is why menstruation was the only form of impurity that remained after the destruction of the Second Temple. *Tumah* practised only in the context of menstruation suggests a sense of stigma or taboo based

on male fear of women's sexuality and menstrual blood (Cantor 1995: 138; Koltun 1976: 69). That the rabbis extended the period of women's impurity from seven days to fourteen would seem to raise certain suspicions in this regard despite all protestations that *tumah* is not regarded as pollution, as it was in other ancient religious societies.

Scholars generally agree that the rabbis are disgusted by female functions in the Talmudic tractate, *Niddah*. There is also fear of female sexual power, especially the fear of being overwhelmed by it. Thus the creation of a system in which men did not have to deal with women's sexuality for half of each month was in their own interest (Cantor 1995: 138). However, as one scholar observes, the *tuman/taharah* symbolic system is, at least, inclusive of women. Adler asks why one should reject it just because the later generations of rabbis 'projected their repugnance for women upon it' (1976: 71).

### Homosexuality

The only permissible sexual relationship within traditional Judaism is a married, heterosexual one. Homosexual relations between men are explicitly forbidden in Lev. 18:22 as an abomination. Since procreation is one of the major purposes of sexual relations in Jewish law, it is prohibited on these grounds. (While there is no prohibition against lesbianism in the biblical texts, the tradition includes it under the practices of Egypt and Canaan prohibited to the Israelites in verse three of Lev. 18.) The Talmud contains only two minor references to lesbianism, and both describe it as a form of licentiousness. Lesbianism here is not legally punishable, perhaps because no semen is spilled. One might conclude from this evidence that lesbianism scarcely existed during rabbinic times. Alternatively, one might just as easily observe that rabbinic material reflects, almost solely, men's experience and that the experiences of women were simply excluded.

Jewish lesbians encounter marginalization and homophobia both within and outside of the Jewish community. Most Jewish communities and congregations, feeling challenged and threatened, have tended to respond with silence and denial to lesbians who are brave enough to make themselves known. The 1982 publication of *Nice Jewish Girls: A Lesbian Anthology* forced Jewish communities at least to acknowledge the existence of same-sex relationships within Judaism. There are signs of hope in that more progressive congregations, out of a sense of justice, understand the gifts lesbians and community can offer each other. The Havurah movement in North America is, to a great extent, understanding and appreciative of lesbian involvement in the Jewish community. While it is important that individuals deal with and overcome homophobia within the Jewish community, Jewish texts and tradition are the ultimate source of discrimination against Jewish lesbians.

These texts and the tradition have never been monolithic. There has always, throughout the history of Judaism, been a kind of unity within diversity. I believe that a feminist transformation of Judaism, and specifically a 'lesbian transformation of Judaism' (Alpert 1997: 13), rests on changing definitions of Judaism and recognition of the richness of diversity.

### SOCIAL CHANGE

Judaism has embedded within it the seeds for social action in a world laden with all forms of injustice: sexism, classism, capitalism, and racism. Yet the transformation of unjust structures has generally been left to the 'dirty work of politics', which has been unhelpfully severed from the realm of spirituality (Plaskow 1990: 213). Unlike traditional Christianity, Judaism has always been infused with the notion that fidelity to halacha and rootedness in the world go hand in hand, although the latter has not usually been translated into political terms (Plaskow: 214). It is here that Jewish tradition and concrete feminist concerns for social justice converge most strongly.

The foundation for building a climate of peace and justice is rooted in the writings of the prophets, who criticized worship without the practice of social justice for those most in need, the orphan and the widow, and the poor.

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? (Isaiah 58:6-7)

The prophetic critique of empty religion devoid of social justice undermines observance of Jewish law for its own sake. Yet it is the intention of the law to infuse the world with justice. For example, even earlier than the prophets, there is the command to 'love the stranger, for you were once strangers in the land of Egypt' (Exodus 22:21). The Jewish tradition of *t'shuvah*, repentance (literally, turning around in a different direction) contains the possibility of change at an individual level and social and communal level.

The rabbinic and mystical concept of *Tikkun Olam* (literally, 'mending the world') has many layers of meaning and has not always been applied politically. But it has its roots in the mystical experiences and visions of the prophets. Though never fully endorsed by the rabbis because of its intense speculation on the nature of God, mysticism has nevertheless persisted in Judaism; the idea of *Tikkun Olam* has ensured that Jewish mysticism has remained profoundly connected to the world and its problems. Isaac Luria (1534-72) sought to

explain the demise of the great Jewish community in Spain in 1492 through the concept of Tikkun as well as two others: *Tzimtzum* and *Shevirat Ha Kelim*. The mystical concept of creation, as Luria envisioned it, required *tzimtzum*, or the withdrawal of God from the universe, leaving room for the act of creation. Miscalculation of God's own power resulted in *shevirat ha kelim*, or breaking of the vessels intended to hold the divine light. As a result evil was released in the world and the *Shekhinah*, God's feminine indwelling presence in the world, was now in exile. The sparks of God were scattered and God's internal unity was disrupted. Tikkun Olam in Lurianic understanding meant 'gathering the sparks' and returning them to the Shekhinah, the channel to God, and thus restoring God as well as the world. Originally the means of restoration involved intense devotion to God and adherence to the commandments. Later transformations of Jewish mysticism through Hasidism and the activism of the nineteenth century added a more political dimension to the notion of Tikkun, as is evident today in the liberal and progressive magazine *Tikkun*.

Jewish women have implemented the various justice traditions within Judaism in some unique ways. Tikkun Olam for Jewish women begins as a corrective to the hierarchical nature of leadership in most synagogues and Jewish social institutions, as well as to the various religious structures that exclude women. But the repair and transformation of Judaism is extended to the larger process of transforming political and economic structures of domination. Concerns for halachic change and fuller inclusivity for women in the religious realm have been extended to include justice concerns for all women, everywhere, thus linking the spiritual and the political.

Women in Black, for example, is a network of women committed to peace and justice around the world. Women usually dress in black and demonstrate in non-violent vigils wherever a certain context of injustice demands opposition. The movement began in Israel in 1988 with Israeli and Palestinian women and their supporters protesting the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. Another such group is *Bat Shalom*, a feminist organization of Israeli women working together with Palestinian women's groups toward peaceful cooperation between Israelis and Palestinians.

Jewish *kashrut*, or dietary laws, have traditionally reflected a concern for the welfare of animals and a sense of the sanctity of the basic necessity of eating. Feminist Jews and others concerned about the growing poverty in the world are suggesting that eating 'low on the food chain' to preserve more grain might lead to vegetarianism. The inhumane raising of animals for food and the diseases linked with beef production would support this. Kashrut might be extended to prohibiting foods produced with pesticides and herbicides as well as foods containing hormones (Plaskow 1990: 236). Many foods are the product of exploitative labour practices exported for Western consumption.

Placing these products on the forbidden foods list might result in a boycott and create a greater awareness of the economic and social conditions of peoples from developing countries and how the West is implicated in these conditions.

The minor holiday of *Tu Bishvat*, the new year of trees, might be made into a 'major environmental holy day emphasizing the interconnectedness and relational character of all life in the world' (see Ellen Bernstein in Plaskow 1990: 237). Observance of such a day would help to undercut the dualism that pits inferior matter and nature against the superior realm of spirit and the divine. Recognition of the divine within, rather than outside of, nature might nurture respect for the trees to which we, as physical beings dependent on oxygen, owe our existence. Besides providing us with that oxygen, trees remove carbon dioxide from the environment. The continued buildup of carbon dioxide in the ecosphere over the past few decades through increasing carbon emissions and the rapidly diminishing forests around the globe have led to growing concerns about global warming. Recognizing the tree as sacred would not rule out an 'I-Thou relationship'—to quote Martin Buber—with trees. The 1995 Israeli film *Under the Domim Tree*, which tells the story of teenage Holocaust survivors who attend a youth-camp/boarding school in Israel in the early 1950s, illustrates a poignant example of a human relationship with a tree. The most sought-after place for solitude and healing is under the domim tree, which is almost always 'occupied'. These survivors' experience of sacred place is consistent with mystical Judaism, in which a non-gendered name for God is the Hebrew word *Makom*, literally, Place.

Celebration of *Tu Bishvat* as a sacred day for trees within the Jewish calendar could connect with a larger esoteric philosophy common to many cultures and mythologies, that of the 'Tree of Life', or Cosmic Tree. Often regarded as an all-nourishing Mother, the Cosmic Tree occurs in many myths active in the creation of the world. She is axis mundi: she stands in the centre of the world, continuing to nourish it. She embodies the Divine in the cycles of rebirth, continual creation, and never-ending life. Not surprisingly, the ancient Hebrew goddess Asherah was often lovingly imaged as a tree. We find ourselves also returning to that image of Torah as Tree of Life in Proverbs 3:18.

Ritualizing concerns for the environment is another way of bringing together the spiritual and the political. In the case of *Tu Bishvat*, the spiritual realm might well be a means to sustain us in the long haul of messy political struggles concerning clear-cutting and of efforts to create sustainable lifestyles.

## WOMEN'S OFFICIAL AND UNOFFICIAL ROLES

The complementary positions that women and men were assigned in the private and public spheres of traditional Jewish life are rooted in the ancient

texts, particularly the Hebrew Bible. The survival of the ancient Israelites depended on childbearing. The four Matriarchs of the Bible—Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah—are regarded as models to be emulated especially in the realm of motherhood. To be fertile was a blessing, while barrenness was a misfortune at best and a disaster at worst. When Ruth, the convert to Israel, was betrothed to Boaz, she was blessed with the wish that she be 'like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel' (Ruth 4:11). Ruth proves fertile and gives birth to a son, Obed, grandfather of King David, forerunner of the future Messiah. Sarah is exemplary in traditional Judaism in that she embodies the Jewish ideal of modesty. Sarah's spirituality is evidenced by her fervent completion of all of her household tasks including hospitality (Kaufman: 48–9). Sarah is one of the first women in the Bible to work quietly and subtly behind the scenes to help bring about redemption of the world, to bring the world to a state intended by God. One traditional interpretation of Sarah's banishment of Hagar's son Ishmael (Gen. 21) is that she was more spiritually astute than her husband, Abraham, and therefore was able to see Ishmael's 'corruption' (Aiken: 47). Here, Isaac, not Ishmael, was Israel's hope for the future. The traditional ideal of modesty and the notion that women live on a higher spiritual plain than men are recurrent themes that justify placing restrictions on them and limiting their roles to the private sphere. Indeed, Sarah is to be protected as one would an 'invaluable pearl' (Ghatan: 65).

Some traditional Jewish women regard motherhood as the essence of womanhood, an opening to the world of the spirit. Motherhood is also deeply connected to the future, as was the case with Sarah's treatment of Hagar and Ishmael (for example, Frankiel: 6). The fact that the tradition attributes prophecy, the ability to see the future, to six other biblical women, attests to the importance of these women as role models. Their exercise of power in the realm of the household (Frankiel: 6) reinforces the notion in the Jewish tradition that men and women have different but complementary roles. Notable exceptions to this general rule include Deborah, prophetess and judge in the public domain (Judges 3–16) and Huldah the prophetess (2 Chronicles 35:22–8).

Aside from a few female heroes who are exceptions to the male-centred textual tradition, there are female figures that might be referred to as negative role models in the rabbinical tradition. Yael, for example, who is mentioned in connection with Deborah, kills Sisera, a general of the Canaanite army at war with Israel. The fleeing Sisera seeks 'refuge' in the tent of Yael only to be killed by her when she hammered a tent peg through his skull. The assassination is described elsewhere as 'aggressively phallic' (Levine in Niditch 1989: 46).

Other female figures such as Judith function as a kind of 'feminine unconventional' in subversive literature that aroused a cry of protest around the fifth century BCE, when Ezra and Nehemiah, having returned to Jerusalem from

Babylonian exile, sought to restrict the liberties of Israelite women and impose hardships on them by denouncing intermarriages with the Canaanite foreigners (LaCocque 1990: 1–6). These figures 'use the most controversial resources of their femininity' to become God's instruments (LaCocque 1990: 2). The story of Judith is found in the Septuagint, the Greek versions of the Hebrew Bible. In a later retelling of the Assyrian conquest of Israel, Holofernes commander of the Assyrian army and enemy of Israel, is seduced and then beheaded by Judith while he is 'dead drunk' (Judith 13, New Revised Standard Version). Not surprisingly, rabbis did not canonize (recognize as authoritative scripture) the book of Judith.

In the Middle Ages the greatest Jewish women were considered those who exercised their special status in the context of family life, in the bearing and raising of children. It is in the private sphere that women have 'left an indelible mark on Jewish history'. The few women who exercised influence in the public domain did so 'in response to the needs of the nation' and largely against their own will (Kaufman: 73). One such woman is the German Glückel of Hameln (1645–1724), who wrote her memoirs giving us valuable glimpses of the lives of women during this time. Like other medieval Jewish women whose lives have been recorded, Glückel was of a higher social class than the majority of women of the time. Highly educated for this period she also was a 'warm, good mother' who had 12 children. Her moral directives centred on acts of loving kindness and living out traditional Judaism (Kaufman: 96).

The roles of women in Judaism vary depending on culture and location. Sephardi Jewish women's lives,<sup>1</sup> for example, were determined first by Muslim control of Spain and, after 1492, by Christendom. Jewish women, like Muslim women, were largely limited to the home. Under Christian pressure to either convert to Christianity or be expelled from the country in the late fifteenth century, many Jews lived as underground Jews at great risk to their lives, always under threat from the Inquisition. Jewish women played an important role in keeping certain observances alive, especially those related to the Sabbath and the dietary laws.

Peculiar to Central and Eastern European Jewish women was the recitation of *tkhines*, prayers written in the colloquial Yiddish<sup>2</sup> rather than in Hebrew, the language of public ritual and scholarship from which women were excluded. Tkhines constituted a form of popular devotional religious literature largely written by men. An examination of these prayers reveals that ordinary unlearned Jewish women did have rich religious lives around biological events such as menstruation, pregnancy, and childbirth as well as various domestic duties. Although excluded from communal worship, women had recourse to developing individual spirituality within the context of the home (Weissler 1991: 159–81).

A study of the contemporary experience of elderly, pious Kurdish and other Middle-Eastern Jewish women living in Jerusalem reveals modern expression of sacralizing the female domestic domain. This is a shift away from the study of female symbols and the official roles of women as described by men, in which women are treated as objects, to the study of the lives of women as actually lived (Starr Sered 1992: 7). Functioning within the male-oriented, normative and religious system, they have used this very system to develop 'an alternative scale of measuring value and worth'. In the female domains of family and kitchen, caring for neighbours, giving to charity, and tending to tombs of family and saints, these women have 'a great deal of power and autonomy' (Starr Sered: 4, 139). By creating a tradition within the normative tradition of study of religious texts and participation in public worship, these women have established their own rich religious world of meaning and control.

The twentieth-century experience of North American Jewish women (and men) confirms the reality that scholarly study and communal worship is not, and need not be regarded as the 'essence' of Judaism (Umansky 1991: 285). (Both Umansky and Sered, above, appeal to Carol Gilligan's study on gender and moral development, *In a Different Voice*.) Many immigrant women to the United States and to Canada had been strongly influenced by the German Reform movement, where ethics was considered more important than study and prayer (Umansky: 284). Early in the twentieth century these women began to form volunteer, altruistic social, educational, and philanthropic organizations within both non-sectarian and Jewish contexts.

As society opened up to women in most spheres of life, some women sought rabbinic ordination. In 1972 the Reform movement ordained for the first time a woman, Sally Preisand. One of the first Canadian congregations to hire a female rabbi, Elyse Goldstein, was Holy Blossom Temple in Toronto. The Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in Philadelphia began to accept openly gay and lesbian candidates for ordination in 1984. Today, Rebecca Alpert, one of the first women to be ordained there, works openly as a lesbian rabbi to those Jews who have been relegated to or who have chosen to live on the margins of the Jewish religious establishment. She finds being on the margins a particular vantage point from which to view reality in general and the Jewish and Reconstructionist world in particular, as well as the larger world, joining others at the margins: women of colour, other lesbians, Muslim women, and the working classes (Alpert 2001: 174–7). The freedom of the margins allows her, she maintains, to promote, as a rabbi, abortion rights and opposition to the death penalty, and work with interfaith groups for peace and justice around the world (178–9). Furthermore, she has been welcomed by the 'unaffiliated', approximately one-half of the American Jewish community that does not officially belong to the community through membership in

a synagogue. Many of these unaffiliated Jews are themselves marginalized—as singles, gays or lesbians, or poor—by, more often than not, strongly family-oriented and middle-class Jewish communities (179).

Those on the margins have created many new rituals, for example, ceremonies for 'coming out' and gay marriage. Most Jewish rituals such as birth, puberty, and mourning rituals are male-created and many of them are reserved for males. There are new rituals celebrating female persons, including baby-naming ceremonies for girls, rituals connected with menstruation, and *Bat Mitzvah* (puberty, coming of age) ceremonies (Adelman 1990). Jewish women have reclaimed ritual immersion (*mikveh*), a ritual traditionally prescribed for ritual impurity after menstruation or childbirth. Mikveh ceremonies are now performed as healing ceremonies, especially for victims of rape or other traumas (Broner 1999: 133–48). The *Rosh Chodesh* celebration that marks each month's new moon has evolved into a woman's holiday (Broner: 170–80). The *Haggadah*, or 'the Telling', at the annual Passover Seder meal has been retold over and over again as seen through Jewish feminist lenses (Broner 1993; 1999: 76–104). The Exodus, the Festival of Freedom, is a time of 'crossing borders' by naming women such as Miriam and rewriting them back into the *Haggadah* (Broner 1982: 234–44). Perhaps and hopefully, the frequent crossing of borders in Jewish women's rituals will entice the centre to find ways to accommodate and incorporate into the mainstream of organized Jewish religious life those on the margins and their new and innovative texts.

## BACKLASH

Efforts to bring about change almost always meets with resistance from those determined to maintain the religious status quo. Pushing the boundaries of traditional Judaism to allow for greater inclusivity for women often raises suspicions that feminists have sold out their Jewishness or opted for something that can no longer be called Judaism. There is also the fear that Jewish feminists are a threat to the traditional nuclear family, the mainstay of Judaism. Jewish feminism in the 1960s began to explore ways to transform the Jewish religious community so that women might become full members. Some women sought to change Jewish laws concerning divorce and segregated seating in synagogues as well as to include women in the minyan, or the quorum of 10 required for communal worship. Liberal sectors of the Jewish community made institutional changes that allowed for the ordination of women. In 1972 the Reform movement in the United States ordained its first woman. Opposition to the gains made in these areas and to the ordination of women has come not just from Jewish men but from some Jewish women as well. A leading feminist scholar notes that the Jewish feminist movement is experiencing a 'retrenchment' as

it tries to take stock of past successes and attempts to respond to its opponents (Heschel 1983: xvii).

The main objection to Jewish feminisms and Jewish spiritualities is an alleged connection to goddess worship, and the charge that these movements represent a return to paganism. For some feminists, experimentation with God language using female metaphors is necessary to broaden the range of images of God. Even though female imagery rings of goddess worship for some, others who engage in such experimentation may have no inclination toward goddess veneration. Substituting 'Queen of the Universe' for 'King of the Universe' in a *berakha*, or blessing, for example, may not be a successful image for everyone. One well-known traditional scholar who would call herself a feminist writes:

The answer stuns with its crudity. It is preposterous. What? Millennia after the cleansing purity of Abraham's vision of the One Creator, a return to Astarte, Hera, Juno, Venus, and all their proliferating sisterhood? Sex goddesses, fertility goddesses, mother goddesses? The sacrifices brought to these were often enough human. This is the new vision intended to 'restore dignity' to Jewish women? A resurrection of every ancient idolatry the Jewish idea came into the world to drive out, so as to begin again with a purifying clarity? The answer slanders and sullies monotheism . . . Without an uncompromising monotheism, there can be no Jewish way . . . Not for nothing does a Jew fervently recite, morning and evening, 'Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is One', in order to reaffirm daily the monotheistic principle'. (Ozick 1983: 121)

The underlying angst and false assumptions (such as human sacrifice to goddesses) are clear. One of the issues raised in the above reaction to female God imagery is the nature of monotheism. If monotheism is understood as the worship of only one image of God, a male one, then it is not monotheism but monolatry. Any one image for God is only a partial picture of the divine totality (Plaskow 1990: 151).

Even though female imagery of the divine need not imply goddess worship, there are precedents in the history of Judaism for such worship. The history of ancient Israel is one of separation from their surrounding cultures, the most well known of which are the Canaanites and their many deities. Biblical editors portray Canaanite religion as idolatrous, and in tension with the exclusive worship of Yahweh, who, in the biblical tradition, unlike the Canaanite deities, had no sexual partner. But in the long journey towards monotheism, the high Canaanite father god, El, whose consort was Asherah, was conflated with Yahweh. It was not easy for the majority of Israelites to relinquish other deities such as Asherah. Therefore the tension between

Israelite monotheism and Canaanite polytheism is a dialectic within Israel itself. The prophetic invective against ancient worship is similar to the New Testament contempt for the Pharisees; each condemns the older religion in the process of defining itself. It is prudent to remember the ancient roots of Judaism without demonizing and caricaturing it, just as Christians would do well to remember their origins. Christian treatment of Judaism should function as a warning to Jews of the 'danger of unthinking contempt for another tradition' (Plaskow 1990: 149).

## UNIQUE FEATURES OF JUDAISM AS THEY IMPACT ON WOMEN

Women within Judaism are able to function as Jews in many ways, inside or outside of the religious tradition, or on the margins. A Jewish woman may find her Jewish vocation as an Orthodox Jew, as a liberal in Conservative or Reform Judaism, or in the Renewal Movement which combines elements of orthodoxy with New Age insights. She may be a committed, passionate Jew and also an atheist. There is no body of theology in Judaism to which one must adhere to be a Jew. Judaism is not only a religion, but also a civilization and a nation. A Jew is one born from a Jewish mother. Thus there is an ethnic, but not a racial dimension to Jewish identity. Conversion to Judaism is possible but difficult. A Jew by choice is considered to be fully Jewish in the State of Israel if he or she converts through orthodox channels.

Women who live within the *halachic* framework of Judaism and who accept the presuppositions of Jewish life and law do not see themselves as oppressed but as living within a world structured and ordered by God's will. They may regard themselves as liberated from the obligation to pray three times a day, and they are satisfied and nurtured by their three positive *mitzvot*, or commandments: lighting the Sabbath candles, ritual immersion, and separation of the *challah* (Sabbath bread) dough.

Women committed to the Jewish religious tradition but dissatisfied with the exclusive language of the liturgy and ways of addressing God in exclusively male terms have created new blessings that reflect their experience. The 'heart and soul and bones of Hebrew prayer' (Falk: xv) is the *berakha*, or blessing, which encompasses every aspect of Jewish life. Substituting inclusive images of divinity for the traditional, patriarchal formula—Blessed are You, Lord, King of the Universe—Falk has reached a whole range of Jews from the liberal denominations such as Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionism to *chavurah* communities and unaffiliated Jews. Her *Book of Blessings* 'is for those immersed in Judaism, and for those standing at its gates, looking for ways in' (xxi). Recognizing that every alternative image for divinity is partial, she sought

to create 'a process of ongoing naming' that would embrace diversity of experience (Falk: xvii). Her rewriting of the Blessing Before the Meal, for example, reads as follows: 'Let us bless the source of life that brings forth bread from the earth' (18). It is a communal formula that acknowledges unity in diversity.

Women's rituals such as *Rosh Chodesh*, honouring the New Moon and ushering in the beginning of the Jewish month, are proliferating. Other rituals, however, have been lost to women, as, for example, the ancient period of mourning by women of Jephthah's daughter's plight (Judges 11). This ritual occurred in the story of Jephthah, Israel's mighty warrior, who, in battle against the Ammonites, made a vow to God that should the Ammonites be delivered into his hand, he would offer up as a burnt sacrifice the first person to emerge from his house. This person is his daughter, who asks to be given two months to lament her virginity with her women friends. Thereafter 'there arose an Israelite custom that for four days every year the daughters of Israel would go out to lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite' (verses 39b–40). Norma Baumel Joseph in the Canadian Film *Half the Kingdom* states '[H]ere's our biblical authority . . . here's our legitimacy. It was lost to us; let's bring it back . . . There's a time once a year . . . this is women's day . . . women celebrating women, mourning women'.

Judith Plaskow would concur on the basis of the principle of rabbinic openness, 'on the rabbinic insistence that the Bible can be made to speak to the present day (1990: 54). *Midrash* was the vehicle for this type of interpretation in the past and continues to be today. These *midrashim* are based on women's experience today. Therefore women's experience is authoritative: the experience of marginalization, exclusion, Otherness.

The 1994 documentary *Half the Kingdom* was produced by the National Film Board of Canada and Studio D, the now-defunct studio that focused on women's issues. Directed by Francine Zuckerman with Roushell Goldstein, the film captures the diversity of Jewish women's lived experience. It begins with an old legend about a man, retold about a woman: 'an old, arthritic [woman] gnarled and planting a tree'.

People walk by her and ask, 'Why are you planting this tree, old woman? You'll never eat from its fruit'" She answers: 'There were trees planted by others when I came into this world. My job is to plant this tree for those who come after me. Our lot in life is not to finish everything but merely to begin'.

In dialogue with her young daughter and her husband regarding the infamous prayer said by males in the synagogue every morning 'Thank God for not making me a woman,' Norma Joseph's partner concludes that it was no longer appropriate for him to say this prayer. An Orthodox female and a professor at

Concordia University in Montreal, Norma Joseph herself concludes: 'If there were things I couldn't accomplish, the next generation might' (*Half the Kingdom*).

Naomi Goldenberg, professor of Religious Studies at the University of Ottawa, states in this film:

I am a Jew, I'm an atheist, I'm a feminist: I would love to find a group of people with whom I could be all those things. . . . For me, Judaism is about freedom and dignity and human independence of thought in the face of lots of hardships and lots of sadness. I want my daughter to have a sense of that Jewish rebelliousness of spirit, a sense of that connection with vitality that Judaism has. I want her to have Judaism as a chisel to work on this monolithic Christian identity that's being handed out so much in western culture and I'd like Judaism to be something or to have a place where my daughter could be comfortable.

On the other hand, Norma Baumel Joseph argued passionately in Jerusalem at the first International Jewish Feminist Conference in 1988 as follows:

I am a Jew. I'm a believing and practising Jew and I choose to be an Orthodox Jew. I find challenge and conflict in my existence as a female Jew. Frequently I feel divided as though parts of myself are in opposition, antithetical, antagonistic, clashing, hostile. I wish to live as part of a community. I am often alone. The road has been difficult in ways I never expected. I knew the *yeshiva* world would not like me. I even knew I would be too feminist for the Jewish world. But when the feminist world finds me too Jewish and when this Jewish feminist world finds me too religious . . . I find it too difficult. Always an outsider, women have tried to redirect me or disempower me as frequently as men and I reject it and reject their patronizing concept of me as an Orthodox Jew. You don't know me because you can label me. You don't know my politics nor my radical feminism and you cannot tell me I am not there yet.

In the State of Israel, Alice Shalvi, women's rights activist, professor, and principal of Pelach, a school for girls and one of the first in the last century, seeks to fuse a love of Judaism with general, secular studies. She seeks to integrate drama and theatre (in some Jewish traditions regarded as forms of lying and deception) into everyday Jewish life. In North America, Michele Landsberg, political activist and columnist for the *Toronto Star*, says: 'Politics is my halacha: it's my law of being . . . how to live. Our political beliefs in Democratic Socialism and a fairer, more just world . . . guides us in our daily

life in the way that Jewish law guides the Orthodox' (*Half the Kingdom*). In the same film, Reform Rabbi Elyse Goldstein, currently director of Kolel, a centre for Jewish studies, states:

I think what has been happening in the Jewish feminist community is very exciting in that women are having more of a voice—in everything. What makes me worried is a feeling that we might need permission to use that voice . . . We have permission—permission is given to us not by men, not by any human being but just by being who we are—by being alive and being God's creatures.

As for the future, Michele Landsberg maintains: 'If Judaism is too rigid and too formalized to accept this new stream of thought and experience that is coming from the women, then, I think, it will be simply amputating its living parts—and it will become a relic, a relic that can't go on being a creative and living force'. The film ends with a story by the biblical commentator Sporno, narrated by Elyse Goldstein:

There are two kinds of trees: there is a tree that stands up straight against the wind and when a big gust of wind comes it refuses to bend—it's going to be straight. What is going to happen to that tree: eventually a gust of wind strong enough is going to knock it over. But then there is a reed in the water and the reed bends with the wind. When the wind comes the reed doesn't fight the wind—it goes with the wind. . . .

'That is what Jewish feminists really are . . . Many people would wish we were just a little breeze—oh, it's just a few crazy fringe Jewish women out there who want to change everything. No, we are that gust of wind and Judaism is either going to be that tree that's going to stand against us until it falls or it's going to be a reed in the water and bend with the changes and ultimately grow a great deal and become more beautiful and more blossoming as a result' (*Half the Kingdom*).

The last word on this documentary goes to Norma Joseph who articulates this sentiment at the very beginning:

I love being a Jew: I want the community to survive; I want the tradition of Judaism to continue into the future and I want to have a part in being that future and I won't be silent.

## NOTES

1. Sepharad is the ancient name for Spain. Those Jews born there and their descendants are called Sephardim or Sephardi Jews.

2. The Yiddish language is a combination of Hebrew and German written in Hebrew characters and spoken by Ashkenazi Jews. The Yiddish word *tkhines* is based on the Hebrew term *tkhinna*, which means 'supplication'.

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# Religious Leadership: A Reference Handbook

## Women Leaders in Judaism

Contributors: Susan Grossman  
Editors: Sharon Henderson Callahan  
Book Title: Religious Leadership: A Reference Handbook  
Chapter Title: " Women Leaders in Judaism"  
Pub. Date: 2013  
Access Date: November 30, 2015  
Publishing Company: SAGE Publications, Inc.  
City: Thousand Oaks  
Print ISBN: 9781412999083  
Online ISBN: 9781452276137  
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781452276137.n46>  
Print pages: 322-327

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781452276137.n46>

[p. 322 ↓ ]

## Chapter 40: Women Leaders in Judaism

SusanGrossman

“Do not appoint a woman to reign ... And so, too, [for] all positions in Israel. Do not appoint anyone but a man.” Thus writes Moses Maimonides (12th century) in his comprehensive code of Jewish law, the *Mishneh Torah* (Laws of Kings 1:5 ). Citing a much earlier rabbinic commentary, “ ... *set a king over yourself*, [meaning appoint] a king and not a queen” ( Sifre Deut. 157 on Deut. 17:15), Maimonides prohibits women not only from the throne but from all leadership roles.

Despite such proscriptive statements, literary and archaeological evidence indicates that women indeed served in leadership roles throughout Jewish history, as prophets; judges; communal, political, and prayer leaders; scholars; and even queens. Reconstructing their stories is complicated by the tendency of historic materials to suppress women’s names and roles. These women were unique in overcoming traditional gender role restrictions. Without formal leadership authority, other women led as agents of change through their influence with husbands and sons. By the 19th century, the stage of such influence broadened as women leading other women founded organizations that functioned as agents of change in both Jewish and wider society.

The second wave of the women’s movement led modern Jewish feminists to confront traditional restrictions on women’s role and status within the Jewish community. As women in general society gained improved educational access, economic independence, and social mobility, Jewish women, as a class, began to take on the public mantles of religious and political authority previously closed to them as rabbinic, political, and communal leaders.

## Biblical Models

Hebrew scripture excludes women from the priesthood, perhaps as part of removing sexuality from the monotheistic cult. Nevertheless, women appear as agents of change. In the Genesis narratives, Sarah and Rebecca both influence the birthright ( Gen. 21:9–12, 27:5–13 ). In the Exodus narratives, Miriam initiates the liberation story by making arrangements for her brother. Identified as a prophet, she leads the Israelite women in thanksgiving (Exod. 2:4–9, 15:20–21).

Deborah (c. 12th century BCE), identified as both a prophet and a judge, renders decisions and appears to have led the army, appointing the general Barak and directing the battle ( Judg. 4:4–10 ). Except for Moses, Deborah is the only character in Hebrew scripture to fulfill all three aspects of religious, military, and political leadership.

During the reign of King Josiah (7th century BCE), the prophetess Huldah, rather than her contemporary, Jeremiah, is approached about a scroll discovered during Temple renovations ( 2 Kings 24:14, 2 Chron. 34:22 ). Her decision to accept it as a scroll of the Law (Torah) may be credited with the Josianic Reform, centralizing worship in the Jerusalem Temple, and possibly giving us the fifth book of the Torah, Deuteronomy.

Most Biblical queens wielded considerable power not through their own authority but through their influence over their king. From the time of Solomon's reign (c. 10th century BCE), the Bible presents such influence as a threat to Israelite monotheism. Solomon's wives are credited with influencing Solomon to import and worship their foreign gods ( 1 Kings 11:1–8 ). Queen Jezebel (c. 9th century BCE), wife of King Ahab and daughter of [p. 323 ↓ ] the king of the Phoenician city of Tyre, is credited with inspiring Ahab to spread the worship of Baal in the Northern Kingdom of Israel ( 1 Kings 16:31–3 ) and killing God's prophets ( 1 Kings 18:4 ).

A generation later, Athaliah (identified as the daughter of Ahab's father Omri according to 2 Kings 8:26 ) becomes the only woman to reign as an Israelite monarch. She reigns over the Southern Kingdom of Judea for six years following the death of her husband, King Jehoram and assassination of their son, Ahaziah ( 2 Kings 11:3–20 ).

Her patronage of the Baal cult in Judea is inferred from Joash's destruction of Baal's temple after he overthrows her.

## Hasmonean Period

According to Josephus (1st century CE), the Hasmonean king John Hyrcanus left his kingdom to his wife (c. 104 BCE), whose name remains unknown. Josephus recounts that she was immediately arrested by her son Aristobolus and starved to death so he could seize the throne (Josephus, *Antiquities* 13:11:1). When Aristobolus died a year later, his widow, Salome Alexandra, freed his imprisoned brother Alexander Yannai and appointed him king. Most scholars assume this is the same Salome Alexandra who married Alexander Yannai and was appointed his heir when he died. During her nine year reign (76–67 BCE), Queen Salome Alexandra kept the kingdom independent and free of invasion. She ended civil war between the two most powerful ancient Jewish sects, the Sadducees and the Pharisees. (The Sadducees, who largely represented the hereditary priestly class whose power was vested in the Temple, followed only in written Scriptural law, while the Pharisees, possible precursors of the rabbinic class, largely represented a meritocracy based on knowledge of both written Scripture and oral law, which they believed was transmitted with written Scripture by Moses at Mount Sinai.) Upon her death, her two sons began a civil war over her succession. Josephus thus blames her for the Hasmonean dynasty's fall since she acted "out of a desire for what does not belong to a woman" ( *Antiquities* 13:16:6).

## Rabbinic Period

## Ancient Synagogue Women Leaders

Inscriptional evidence identifies a number of named women as ancient synagogue officials (c. 1st–6th century CE). Early modern historians initially interpreted such inscriptions as honorary appellations for wives of (male) synagogue officials. That these named women actually filled the roles of president, treasurer, and so on, is now

widely accepted. For example, an inscription from the Greek settlement of Phocaea, in Asia Minor on the Aegean coast, explains that a woman named Tation sat in the synagogue's seat of honor, an honor reserved for the synagogue president.

## Women Scholars

A new model of leadership appeared during the Hasmonean period: the sage. By the 1st century CE, sages were often titled rabbis. Women could not be rabbis in the rabbinic period (1st–6th century CE). However, the Talmud identifies a number of women as respected scholars who influenced the decisions of their rabbinic fathers and husbands. In Palestine, Beruriah (2nd century CE), often identified as the daughter of Rabbi Hanina Ben Teradyon and wife of Rabbi Meir, is credited for a rabbinic rule on ritual purity (Tosefta Kelim 1:6). In Babylonia, Yalta (c. 3rd–4th century CE), often identified as daughter of the Exilarch (head of the Jewish community) and wife of Rav Nahman, is credited in at least one source with clarifying a dietary law (Hullin, 109b). Even though her proper personal name is lost, Rav Hisda's daughter, a younger contemporary, is so highly regarded that her husband, Rava, switches the application of an oath in court based solely upon her word (Ket., 85a).

## Medieval to Early Modern Period

The rabbinic model of learned daughters and wives continued through the pre-modern period. Chana bat Yoheved, daughter of Rabbi Shlomo Yitzaki, known as Rashi (11th century), taught Jewish law to her father's students. She may be the same daughter who served as her father's assistant, recording and signing his decisions, a position traditionally reserved for a rabbinic heir apparent. Another of Rashi's descendents, Miriam bat Shlomo, sat in a tent and taught rabbinic law to the best students. A decision by Baila Edels (16th–17th century), on the proper way to light festival candles, is codified as Jewish law by her husband, Rabbi Joshua Falk. Half a world away in Amadiya, Kurdistan, a contemporary, Asenath Barazani Mizrahi, daughter of Shmuel haLevi Barazani and wife of Rabbi Yaakov ben Yehudah Mizrahi, taught in her father's school of advanced Jewish studies (*yeshiva*). She ultimately took over her husband's

*yeshiva* in Mosul, Afghanistan, after his death. The Jews of Afghanistan called her *Tannit*, the feminine of the title *Tanna* applied to her father until his death.

## Women Prayer Leaders

The separation of men and women during synagogue prayer can be dated to 10th-century Cairo and 12th-century Germany. Whether because many European women were uneducated in Hebrew, the language [p. 324 ↓] of Jewish prayer, or could not follow the main service from the woman's gallery or separate prayer room, female prayer leaders became so common that Yiddish titles developed for them: *fierzogerin* and *forelainer* (fore-sayer). Often these women's prayer leaders were rabbinic wives and daughters. The earliest may have been Dolce, wife of Rabbi Eleazer, who taught and led women in prayer in 12th century Worms. A funerary inscription from 13th century Worms notes that Urania, daughter of Rabbi Abraham, also led the prayers before the female worshippers.

Many *fierzogerin* composed prayers called *techinot* (petitions) calling upon the biblical matriarchs, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah, and incorporating women's experiences. While not all *techinot* were written by women, notable female authors include Taube (17th century), daughter of Rabbi Moses Lob Pizker and wife of Rabbi Jacob Pan of Prague; Sarah bat Tovim (18th century); and Serel (19th century), daughter of Rabbi Jacob haLevi Segal of Dubnow and wife of Rabbi Mordecai Katz Rapaport. Some prayer leaders, such as Rebecca Tiktiner (17th century), daughter of Meir of Prague, may also have served as preachers. Female prayer leaders also appear in the Jewish communities of Rome—for example, Deborah Ascarelli and Anna D'Arpino (16th century)—and of Safed, Israel—for example, Sarah Francesa (16th century). However, women do not fill a similar role in the Jewish communities of the Arab world. The tradition of *fierzogerin* largely ended with the destruction of European Jewry in World War II.

# Wealth as Entre to Communal Leadership

A number of women rose to positions of communal leadership through their wealth. In mid-14th century Germany, the widow Kandlein inherited her husband's wealth. She sat on the council that set taxes and determined settlement rights for the Jews of Regensburg and served a two year term as one of the leaders of the community.

Perhaps the most powerful Jewish woman of the pre-modern period was Dona Gracia Nasi (1515–c. 1569). Her family was one of those who remained in Spain following the 1492 expulsion of the Jews from Spain. Outwardly Catholic, they remained secret Jews ( *conversos*). As a widow, she inherited one of the world's largest fortunes at the time. Centuries ahead of her time, she organized a secret route to help other *conversos* escape Spain for Protestant Europe or the Ottoman Empire, coordinated an international boycott to protect Jews from the Inquisition, and purchased land in Tiberius, Israel, to settle Jewish refugees. Once she reached the Ottoman Empire, she reaffirmed her Judaism, sponsored building a synagogue (the Synagogue of Our Lady), and successfully had overturned the rule prohibiting individuals from changing synagogue affiliation.

A probable contemporary, Esther Handali the Kiera (economic agent), became independently wealthy, serving as agent to Safiyah Baffa, favorite wife of Sultan Murad III. Esther used her influence to avert the Sultan's destruction of the Jewish community. A major Jewish philanthropist, she assisted Jewish merchants ruined in an anti-Jewish riot, helped rebuild the Jewish area of Constantinople destroyed in a fire, and supported scholars and the printing of Jewish books.

## Early to Late Modern Period

### Charismatic Women Leaders

The charismatic and anti-establishment nature of the Hasidic movement, beginning in the late 18th century in Eastern Europe, allowed a number of women to rise to positions

of prominence as Hasidic religious leaders. Malka (1780–1852), wife of Belzer Rebbe Sholem Rokeah, sat next to her husband as he held court for his disciples and was consulted by him before he made a decision, unusual in the Hasidic community even at that time. Their daughter, Eidele, gave sermons on the Sabbath and participated in the community's leadership. A younger contemporary, Malkah, daughter of Rabbi Abraham Twersky of Trisk (1806–1889), filled some of the roles of a Hasidic rebbe in sponsoring public meals, distributing food, and receiving petitions from the Hasidim twice daily.

Perhaps best known is Hannah Rachel Webermacher, called the Maid of Ludomir (1815–c.1892–1895) for having broken off her engagement after undergoing a mystical experience in which she claimed to have visited heaven and received a new soul. She wore the traditional male ritual objects of prayer shawl ( *tallit* ) and phylacteries ( *tefillin* ) and built a synagogue with funds she inherited from her father, attracting many followers. Under threat of excommunication, she agreed to marry. With the failure of her first and then second marriage, her influence began to wane. She ultimately immigrated to Israel, continuing her mystical studies in Jerusalem until she died in relative obscurity.

By contrast, Sarah Frankel (1836–1937) was so well accepted as a charismatic leader that thousands attended her funeral. Daughter of the Hasidic leader Joshua Heschel Teumim Frankel and wife of Hayyim Samuel, the Hasidic leader of Chenciny, she succeeded her husband as religious leader following his death. Famous for her parables, prestigious rabbis sought her advice. Her daughter, Hannah Brakhah, remained active in her mother's Hasidic court even after her own marriage.

## Women Leading Women

Beginning in the 19th century, women begin to organize for social reform in Western Europe and America. They led other women, and sometimes men, founding organizations that served as agents of social change. One of the earliest such women was Rebecca Gratz [p. 325 ↓ ] (1781–1869). In Philadelphia, Gratz organized the first Jewish charitable organization to function independently of a synagogue, the Female Hebrew Benevolent Society, and the first Hebrew Sunday School, providing the first opportunity for boys and girls to study Judaism together as equals. Some scholars consider her the model for the character Rebecca in Sir Walter Scott's novel *Ivanhoe*.

Gratz is one of a number of women who served as social activists in the early and mid-19th century. The writings of women such as Penina Moise (1791–1880) in the United States and Grace Aguilar (1816–1847) in England, in both the Jewish and general press, inspired and encouraged this broadening of the social involvement and Jewish education of women.

Jewish education of women was also a concern of Sarah Schenirer (1883–1935). Arguing that Jewish education was the only antidote to assimilation, she won the support of leading Hasidic and Orthodox scholars. She founded a teacher's seminary and schools across Europe. The Bais Yaakov Movement she founded continues today throughout the world, educating thousands of Jewish girls in Bible and traditional Jewish texts.

By the turn of the century, Jewish women in the United States continued to expand the network of women's organizations focused upon social services, particularly for women and immigrants. Chicago born Hannah Greenebaum Solomon (1858–1942), active with Jane Addams in founding one of the first settlement houses, Hull House, helped establish the National Council of Jewish Women in 1893, dedicated to social welfare and educational efforts. As its first president, Solomon was invited to preach from many synagogue pulpits. Lillian Wald, whose lectures on public health nursing had inspired Columbia University's Teachers' College to begin its College of Nursing, organized the Henry Street Settlement house in New York City in 1912 as a way of supplementing nursing services with other needed social services. Baltimore born Henrietta Szold (1860–1945) founded Hadassah in 1912, to provide medical care and infrastructure to treat both Jews and Arabs in British Mandate Palestine. She later directed the Youth Aliyah program that rescued children from Nazi Europe. Though denied ordination, she was also one of the first women to study rabbinics at Jewish Theological Seminary and served as a respected writer and editor on Jewish subjects.

Such women leaders not only served as agents of social change, but the organizations they founded expanded leadership opportunities available to women and laid the foundation for broadening such opportunities beyond women's-only organizations.

## Rabbinic and Cantorial Predecessors

Although women, as a class, were not permitted rabbinic ordination until the 1970s, individual women throughout history had filled a variety of rabbinic roles as scholars, deciders of rabbinic law, prayer leaders, preachers, and charismatic spiritual leaders. Until the mid-19th century, such women were seen as extraordinary exceptions to the rule excluding women from the rabbinate. Such an attitude began to change in the mid-19th century, concurrently with the rise of the first wave of the woman's movement and the ordination of women in various Christian denominations.

Dubbed "a latter day Deborah" and "the Girl Rabbi of the Golden West," Rachel (Ray) Frank Litman (c.1861–1948) was held in such high esteem as a popular preacher and writer that Reform leader R. Isaac Wise invited her, and any other eligible women, to enter the theological program of Hebrew Union College (HUC)-Cincinnati. Although Frank enrolled in classes at HUC in 1893, she never pursued ordination. Across the ocean in England, Lily Montagu (1873–1963) led services for women and girls for the West Central Girls Club she founded, as well as for her Orthodox synagogue before she left Orthodoxy to help organize the institutional structure of the Liberal (Reform) Movement in England, start a number of synagogues, and finally establish the Liberal (Reform) Movement as a viable part of England's Jewish community.

The first officially ordained woman was Regina Jonas (1902–1944). Her private ordination in Berlin was affirmed when she was officially hired as a rabbi in 1937 by the Berlin Jewish community. Jonas counseled, preached, lectured, and led services in Berlin and around Germany. Deported to Theresienstadt in 1942, Jonas continued to serve as a rabbinic leader until her death at Auschwitz in 1944. Betty Robbins became the first official woman cantor when she was hired by a Long Island Reform synagogue in 1955. She trained in a boys' choir in Poland where she wore her hair short to fit in and had served as cantorial soloist in the German synagogue of Danzig for six years before escaping the Nazis in 1939.

## Contemporary Realities

By the beginning of the 21st century, despite traditional prohibitions on women filling roles of public authority, even the most traditional elements of the Jewish community had accepted the authority of women leaders in business, politics, and communal organizations.

## Philanthropic Leadership

In 1984, Shoshana Cardin became the first woman elected to lead the Council of Jewish Federations (the national umbrella for local Federations). Since then, many women have held top staff and lay positions in Jewish organizational life. As in wider society, the number of women serving on the boards and as top staff of many Jewish communal agencies increased even as salaries and representation continued to lag behind those of men.

[p. 326 ↓ ]

## Israeli Leaders

Even before the establishment of the State of Israel, women filled important leadership roles. One such leader was Golda Meir (1898–1978), who served in the provisional government and as a secret envoy to Arab leaders and a major fundraiser for Israel among the American Jewish community. With the founding of Israel, Meir served as Labor Minister, Foreign Minister, as the only woman in the administration. She served as head of the Labor Party and Israel's fourth Prime Minister from 1969– 1974. Israel's first Prime Minister, David Ben Gurion, used to call her "the best man in the government."

Women have filled 7–15% of every Knesset seat since Israel's founding. In the first Knesset race of 1949, women's rights activist Rachel Kagan won a one term seat as candidate for her woman's only party sponsored by WIZO (Women's International

Zionist Organization). Barred from running for Knesset in the Orthodox coalition in the same election, Tova Sanhadray-Goldreich (1906–1993) organized an Orthodox woman's political party (The Religious Woman Worker Party) and finally won a Knesset seat in 1959. She served as Knesset Deputy Speaker for almost a decade. Other Israeli women Knesset members include Shulamit Aloni, former head of the liberal Meretz Party and Minister of Education, who served in Knesset from 1965–1996. Right-wing activist Geula Cohen served in the Knesset from 1972–1992. Since 2008, the centrist Kadima Party has been headed by a woman, Tzipi Livni, who previously served as Foreign Affairs Minister. In 2011, the Labor party chose another woman as head, Shelly Yachimovich.

Numerous women have served on Israel's bench. Dorit Beinisch (1942–) became the first woman appointed to Israel's Supreme Court in 1995. She has served as its president (equivalent to a Chief Justice) since 2006.

## Women Rabbis and Cantors

Women's ordination was part of a larger agenda of ritual equality pursued by the Jewish woman's movement that rose on the heels of the larger feminist movement, many of whose leaders were also Jewish. Reform Rabbi Sally Priesand became the first woman ordained in America in 1972. The Reconstructionist movement ordained women with its first graduating class in 1974. Another decade would pass before the Conservative movement accepted women into its rabbinical school in 1984, ordaining Rabbi Amy Eilberg in 1985. The investment of women cantors followed the ordination of women rabbis by several years in the Reform Movement, with Cantor Barbara Ostfeld-Horowitz in 1975, and, in the Conservative movement, with Cantors Erica Lippitz and Marla Rosenfeld Barugel in 1987.

Several Orthodox women, notably R. Sara Hurvitz, received private ordination and currently serve congregations in pastoral and educational roles amidst much controversy, due to traditional proscriptions on women's ritual role and authority. Rebbetzin Esther Jungreis, the wife of Rabbi Theodore Jungreis, though embracing traditional gender role distinctions, founded the religious outreach movement Henini and serves as a popular religious speaker and writer. (The honorific rebbetzin refers to the

wife of a rabbi.) Other Orthodox women, including Blu Greenberg and Rivka Haut, write, speak and advocate for increasing women's rights within Orthodox Judaism. While the more liberal arms of the Jewish community have embraced egalitarianism (the equality of men and women), Jewish women leaders across the religious spectrum continue to face discrimination equivalent to that faced by women leaders in larger American society, despite the advances of the last few decades.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781452276137.n46>

## Rabbinical Council of America Bans Ordination of Female Rabbis

'Orthodox institutions may not ordain women into the Orthodox rabbinate, regardless of the title used,' says main U.S. rabbinical group.

Haaretz and JTA Nov 02, 2015 7:15 PM

The Rabbinical Council of America, the main modern Orthodox rabbinical group, formally adopted a policy prohibiting the ordination or hiring of women rabbis. The policy announced Friday by the RCA came after a direct vote of its membership, according to the organization.

The resolution states: "RCA members with positions in Orthodox institutions may not ordain women into the Orthodox rabbinate, regardless of the title used; or hire or ratify the hiring of a woman into a rabbinic position at an Orthodox institution; or allow a title implying rabbinic ordination to be used by a teacher of Limudei Kodesh in an Orthodox institution."

Limudei Kodesh refers to religious studies.

"This resolution does not concern or address non-rabbinic positions such as Yoatzot Halacha (advisers on Jewish law), community scholars, Yeshiva University's Graduate Program for Women in Advanced Talmudic Study, and non-rabbinic school teachers," the resolution concludes. "So long as no rabbinic or ordained title such as 'Maharat' is used in these positions, and so long as there is no implication of ordination or a rabbinic status, this resolution is inapplicable."

Maharat is an acronym meaning female spiritual, legal and Torah leader. It is a designation granted by Yeshivat Maharat, an institution for women in Riverdale, New York, founded by Rabbi Avi Weiss.

In 2010, following the establishment of Yeshivat Maharat, the RCA issued a resolution on women's communal roles, stating that the RCA "reaffirms its commitment to women's Torah education and scholarship at the highest levels, and to the assumption of appropriate leadership roles within the Jewish community. We strongly maintain that any innovations that impact the community as a whole should be done only with the broad support of the Orthodox rabbinate and a firm grounding in the eternal mesorah (tradition) of the Jewish people."

A follow-up 2013 resolution on Yeshivat Maharat, as it ordained its first cohort of maharats, said: "Due to our aforesaid commitment to sacred continuity, however, we cannot accept either the ordination of women or the recognition of women as members of the Orthodox rabbinate, regardless of the title. The RCA views this event as a violation of our mesorah (tradition) and regrets that the leadership of the school has chosen a path that contradicts the norms of our community."

JOFA, the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance, issued a statement in response to the RCA announcement, expressing their "disappointment," and maintaining that the Jewish community can only benefit from having women in positions of communal authority.

The RCA's "insistence that only men may assume positions of 'rabbinic status,' which, as far as we can tell, amounts to nothing more than an obsession with titles," the statement reads.

They sharply blast the male cohort of religious leaders for "developing redundant statements absent of halakhic grounding, rather than addressing Orthodoxy's real challenges -- and particularly, the development of a systemic halakhic solution to resolve the agunah crisis."



Join

## **The Sisterhood**

# **The New Critical Mass of Orthodox Women Rabbis**

June 18, 2015 | By Elana Sztokman | Maharat

*Image: Yeshivat Maharat*

The past two weeks have been historic for Jewish women. Orthodox women in both Israel and New York were ordained as clergy – although with a variety of titles from Maharat to Rabba to Rabbi, but effectively all as rabbis. While Yeshivat Maharat is now the veteran institution with five years of experience at this, Yeshivat Har’el appears more liberal in calling women “rabbi” or “rabba.” Israeli Orthodoxy thus effectively caught up with and then surpassed American Orthodoxy, creating a bizarre and beautiful historic twist in which organizations seem to racing against one another to demonstrate the greatest commitment to women’s advancement in religious Judaism.

The advancement of Orthodox women is part of a historical narrative around women's leadership in the Jewish world. All the denominations have roots in the conception of Jewish leadership as exclusive men's clubs. The fight for women's inclusion in the rabbinate began in earnest with the feminist movement of the 1960s – although in reality it began much earlier. The first Reform woman rabbi, Sally Preisand, was ordained in 1972. The first woman Reconstructionist rabbi, Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, was ordained in 1974. The first Conservative woman rabbi, Amy Ellberg, was ordained in 1985. The first woman rabbi in Israel, Naamah Kelman, was ordained in 1992. Three women received private ordination from Orthodox rabbis before Yeshivat Maharat opened: Mimi Feigelson in 1994, Evelyn Goodman-Tau in 2000 and Haviva Ner-David in 2004.

The ascent of women has been slow but gradual – and nevertheless invigorating. There are few areas of the Jewish feminist movement that can show such clear markers of impact as the struggle for women's rabbinic leadership. Even if the struggle is far from over – with high-status positions still male-dominated, and issues of equal pay, work-life balance, LGBT inclusion, and others still painfully unresolved – the fact that women have gained titles is extremely significant. Titles are a vital step to being seen, heard and respected, which are vital for women to be included as leaders.

Actually, though, the story of women's rabbinic leadership begins earlier than third wave feminism. The very first woman rabbi, Regina Jonas, was ordained in Germany in 1935. And the truth is, Jewish history is replete with women who served as rabbis – informally and without being ordained – before denominational divides had fully taken over Jewish life. Chana Rochel Wernermacher became “rebbe” of Ludmir (1805-1888). Pearl Shapiro, the daughter of the Maggid of Koznitz, prayed with tallit and tefillin, and held court like any other rebbe (1768-1848). Merish daughter of Eliezer of Lizhensk, served as a rebbe in her community, as did Freida and Devora Leah, the daughters of Rabbi Shneur Zalman Liadi, the founder of the Chabad movement. Gershon

Winkler's beautiful book, "They Called her Rebbe: The Maiden of Ludomir," has an extensive compilation of women in the shtetls of Europe who served as rabbis. Women have often served as leaders, just without recognition and without systematic impact on women's lives.

Remembering the history of women's struggles for inclusion is really important at times like this. The current achievements are only possible thanks to the hard work of the women who fought beforehand. Everyone wants to be able to be the "first" and be mentioned in the history books. And certainly these events warrant remembrance. But the women on whose shoulders they stand today also deserve to be acknowledged.

As Rabbi Haviva Ner-David said to me, "It is about time people stop acting out of fear and stand up for what they believe in and stop worrying what others might say or whether or not they will be accepted. Orthodox women rabbis are only one step along the way."

From a historical perspective, then, Modern Orthodoxy has become the latest group to join the party, the most recent denomination to adapt to the notion that women can and should be rabbinical leaders. Clearly this issue has nothing to do with halakha and everything to do with entrenched ideas about gender, power and assumed social hierarchies. One day, years from now, Orthodox leaders are going to have to answer to their descendants and offspring about why they were so resistant to that radical notion that women are people. It would be nice to see more men in positions of power take that kind of long view of history.

It is worth pointing out that Orthodox male rabbis are not alone in attaching themselves to persistent notions of Jewish leadership as a male domain. All around the Jewish world, organizations continue to create all-male panels, as if men are the only ones with interesting things to say, and the only ones worth paying. Similarly, Jewish federation leadership remains aggravatingly male-dominated, and salaries in Jewish communal life reflect this tenacious bias. The Jewish community has many generations of socialization to undo in order to fully be rid of the deeply entrenched notion that “leader” means “man.”

Meanwhile, ironically, women’s inclusion sometimes breeds new forms of sexism. There is a new trope that men have been retreating from synagogue because it has become “feminized”. Let us recognize this refusal to be led by women for what it is: misogyny. The refusal of men to be led by women has existed for thousands of years, from the time of Deborah the Judge, who, according to Judges chapter 4, was implored by her second in command, General Barak to lead the war against the army of Sisera. She responded by saying, “But then, people will say that Sisera fell to a woman.” Barak, perhaps the first recorded feminist man, was unmoved. He had no problem being led by a woman – and in fact, under Deborah’s leadership, the Israelites won and had peace for forty years.

We need to fill the community with men like Barak, who fully understand the power of being led by spectacular women.

**Tagged as:** Maharat, Rabba

Remembering Bonna  
Haberman

Six Jewish Women We'd Like  
To See On The \$10 Bill

## Why Orthodox Jews in Israel Can Ordain Women as Rabbis, but Those in the Diaspora Won't

There is a crucial difference between Orthodoxy in Israel and abroad; the former is experiencing an evolution, whereas the latter is stifled by the threat of other denominations.

Rabbi Yehoshua Looks Jun 18, 2015 10:52 PM

A friend of mine recently completed the rabbinical program at the Jerusalem Orthodox center Har'el, and invited my wife and me to attend his ordination ceremony. It was a moving ceremony and quite an exceptional one, for two women joined the two men receiving Orthodox semicha (ordination).

In the Modern Orthodox world, it is common for women's education to be equal to men's. What's uncommon is for professional opportunities to be based on educational credentials. Until now, Modern Orthodox women's institutions that grant professional degrees have struggled with what title to give their graduates: yoetzet halakhah (advisor of Jewish law), rabbanit (a term commonly reserved for the wives of rabbis), maharat (an acronym for female leader of Jewish law, spirituality and Torah), rabba (the feminine form of the Hebrew word "rabbi") and others. On this evening, this coeducational institution ordained all four graduates as rabbis, with intentional gender neutrality.

It is no coincidence that the Har'el Beit Midrash, situated in the Talpotei neighborhood of Jerusalem, became the first Orthodox institution in Israel to ordain women as rabbis. Rabbi Herzl Hefter, the head of the beit midrash, half joked to me that it's as though Katamon-Baka-Talpitei, our Bermuda Triangle of neighborhoods in Jerusalem, is under a "kipat barzel," Iron Dome, free from the divisive scrutiny of religious authorities and thus open to exploring creative halakhic alternatives, particularly with regard to the role of women in Orthodoxy.

In this context, I view his decision to ordain these Orthodox women as female rabbis as an Israeli phenomenon; one that is part of an evolutionary, grassroots process that is emerging from a religious, socially liberal moral center, and growing in resonance. This is crucially different from the Diaspora experience, where there is an ongoing tension between Orthodoxy and the other denominations of Judaism, based on substantial differences in interpretations of halakhah (Jewish law). Confronted by the Conservative, Reconstructionist and Reform movements having female pulpit rabbis, the Orthodox camp has always responded by condemning the ordination of women as rabbas.

### **Practical implications in Israel and the U.S.**

The practical implications of ordaining women as female Orthodox rabbis vary between Israel and the Diaspora. In Israel, the Chief Rabbinate exercises absolute

control over most religious functions (marriages, divorces, conversions, etc.). In the Diaspora, on the other hand, these functions are traditionally performed by a pulpit rabbi or beit din (rabbinical court). The Chief Rabbinate of Israel excludes all Conservative, Reform and even some Modern Orthodox rabbis from participating in the system – and it is doubtful that they will welcome female Orthodox rabbis into their ranks. As such, the Rabbinate is unlikely to make a big deal about the newly-minted rabbas: with their limited power, they do not threaten the system.

Another difference is that in Israel, semicha is recognized as a professional educational degree, and, like a Master's degree, can afford those who hold it employment benefits, like a pay rise. (As an aside, last year, seven prominent rabbis were reportedly convicted of falsifying records and taking bribes for awarding unearned semicha to police officers and others who lacked the necessary qualifications to hold the title.)

Also, there are relatively few pulpit rabbis per congregation in Israel compared to in the Diaspora. This is because many Israelis who attend synagogue have extensive Jewish ritual education. At the Jerusalem synagogue I pray at on Shabbat, there are more rabbis than non-rabbis; all of us have professional backgrounds and share the responsibility of running the synagogue. With the pulpit position currently an anachronism in Israel, the point of contention with female rabbis is basically a non-issue here. Rabbis in Israel, whether male or female, are integrated throughout our society – via their work as teachers, lawyers, doctors, soldiers and even politicians.

In last week's Torah portion, G-d tells Moses, "Shlach lecha anashim," send out for yourself people (anashim, unless specified, is usually gender neutral). Moses chose 12 princes of Israel to be spies. Ten of them returned with an evil report on the land of Israel, and, as a result, a generation died in the desert. The Kli Yakar, the famous 16th century Torah commentator, Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim of Luntchitz, writes that the problem originated with Moses understanding anashim as men. According to the Kli Yakar, Moses should have sent out nashim (women) because they love Eretz Yisrael more than the men.

In the accompanying Haftorah reading this past week, Joshua sent out two unidentified anashim as spies. It is through their successful mission that we were merited with entering Eretz Yisrael. Perhaps these anashim were nashim?

Shortly before the ordination ceremony at Har'el, someone remarked to Rabbi Hefter: "So, I hear you're giving semicha to women." Hefter replied, "No, I am giving semicha to people."

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political legacy their older counterparts want to share with them. Perhaps the lesson of feminism, the lesson of my early experience in Havurat Shalom, is that the first liberation can come only from within.

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*Since 1972, when Sally Priesand became the first woman rabbi to be officially ordained, increasing numbers of women have entered the rabbinate and the cantorate. Despite the official endorsement by their movements, women who seek to enter these professions still experience difficulties. As Rabbi Emily Korzenick and Cantor Nancy Hausman show, congregants are often slow to accept women in roles traditionally reserved for men.*

*Hausman discusses the process by which women achieve professional equality: by dispelling male fears that the feminization of their profession would lower its status and by persisting in their efforts at communal acceptance. Hausman illustrates that discrimination often dissipates as congregants grow accustomed to women as leaders in the synagogue.*

*Korzenick details how women bring to the rabbinate special nurturing skills often acquired in their roles as mothers and wives. She is one of a growing number of rabbis who seek to re-establish the home as a focus of religious life. While in the Orthodox community religion was always centered both in the home and the synagogue, during the past century, non-Orthodox synagogues have supplanted the home as the loci for Jewish observance. The inclusion of women in the rabbinate has facilitated the process of integrating home and synagogue.*

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*Emily Faust Korzenik*

## **ON BEING A RABBI**

I am one of the oldest women to become a rabbi in the United States, a fact that has significant implications for the way I have perceived my role in this profession. I took my own four children through *Bar* and *Bat*

*Mitzvah* ceremonies, and then had my own *Bat Mitzvah*, before I began to guide other families through that meaningful rite of passage. Most often, I guide mothers who, whether they work or not, usually bear the major responsibility for supervising their child's *Bar* or *Bat Mitzvah* preparation and for arranging the festive celebration.

Being older than most new rabbis also means that I had confronted the death of a loved one, a parent, before I began trying to assist others in the most painful hours of their lives. It also means that I graduated college and began my life as a wife and mother at a time when most middle-class women saw their primary function as serving their families.

Nurturing is good preparation for the rabbinate. For example, I enjoy inviting members of my congregation to my home for Shabbat dinner. I cook the meal as well as prepare a talk on a Jewish theme. This spring I invited my college bound youngsters for a Shabbat dinner and asked them to bring their college catalogues so that together we could look over the Jewish Studies courses available to them. Every Sukkot my very helpful and encouraging husband and some grown children build a *sukkah* in our yard, to which I invite some of the young couples I have married. They are beginning to come with their little ones. Passover is madness for me. I prepare and cook for my own big *seder* at home, and on the second evening I conduct my congregation's community *seder*. It is exhausting but I love it.

Coming to a rabbinical career as an older person and as a woman also means that I am not lonesome. Rabbinical colleagues, notably men, speak about the difficulty of making close friends, of being set apart, of having a religious and public role that complicates intimacy. Long before I became a rabbi, I had formed my cadre of close friends. Now I marry their children and can bring some special comfort, I believe, at sad times. I am first of all their friend, and, as a result, I intuitively approach my congregants as a friend who has a particular role. My way of being a rabbi has been shaped as much by my life as a wife and mother, a high school history teacher, and a social and political activist, as by rabbinical study and preparation itself.

People often ask me if I experience discrimination as a rabbi because I am a woman. From its inception, the Reconstructionist Movement accepted women as peers. Mordecai Kaplan performed the first *Bat Mitzvah* ceremony for his daughter in 1922. There was never any question about the role of women in the Reconstructionist congregation in White Plains, N.Y. to which my husband and I have belonged for thirty years. I read

from the Torah, chanted the *haftarah* portion, was president of the synagogue, and even chairperson of the ritual committee. I was just one of many studious, participating women. That was the milieu within which I began to form my desire to become a rabbi. It was a milieu that made discrimination against women elsewhere in the Jewish religious world seem incomprehensible and, therefore, something to be overcome.

There have been disquieting moments, of course. A young woman doctor asked me to officiate at her wedding, and then she discovered her Israeli fiancé and his family would not be comfortable with a woman rabbi. She asked if I would co-officiate with a man. I replied that if I was not rabbi enough to perform the ceremony, I preferred not to participate. She wanted to satisfy her fiancé but she meant to be kind. Didn't I understand that the "social customs" were different in Israel? I did not remind her that "social customs" had kept women from becoming doctors until not long before her own entry into that profession.

The most egregious example of discourtesy toward women in the synagogue that I experienced took place in Poland. In September of 1985, I participated in a Shabbat morning service in Cracow with a *Bar Mitzvah* boy and his family who are members of my congregation in Stamford, Connecticut. A gentleman, whose daughter I had married the year before, returned from a United Jewish Appeal-Federation mission to Poland and Israel with a request from a leader of the remnant of elderly Jews in Cracow. When the American visitors had asked what they could do to help, Maria Jakabowicz said, "Bring us some life. Bring us some youth. Bring us a *Bar Mitzvah*." One of my *Bar Mitzvah* students, his family, and I immediately responded to the request. I also invited a wonderful, traditional Jewish man, a survivor of Auschwitz, to come with us to daven *Shaharit*, as I was sensitive from the first to the probable preferences of the elderly Jews in Cracow; however, I did plan to participate in the service.

In Cracow, I stood upon the *bimah*, *tallit* in hand, to be with the *Bar Mitzvah* boy when he chanted his beautiful *haftarah* portion from Isaiah. I offered a brief commentary, despite the actions of an American rabbi, who pulled my *tallit* from me and attempted to prevent me from speaking.

The experience in the synagogue was not painful because the congregation's sympathy was with us. We had succeeded in bringing some joy to these old people who had suffered so much. We had fulfilled their re-

quest. We had handled ourselves with dignity and restraint. It was a triumphant day, the rabbi who had challenged me notwithstanding.

However, it was sad, so very sad, to know that leaders of the Orthodox community at home in the States had, in fact, asked the Jews of Cracow to rescind their invitation to us because, as non-Orthodox Jews, our use of the fifteenth-century Remu Synagogue would have been a desecration in their eyes. The Jews of Cracow responded by arranging to have the *Bar Mitzvah* held in the Templum, a nineteenth-century non-Orthodox synagogue. The day following the Sabbath ceremony, Ed Blonder, the survivor who had led the morning *Shaharit* service and chanted the Torah portion, took us through Auschwitz. The torturers and murderers of over three million Polish Jews had not differentiated between the Orthodox and the non-Orthodox. I remembered stinging words from a Sholem Aleichem story, "You know how we Jews are, if the world does not pinch us, we pinch each other."

I cannot, however, end on so sorrowful a note. It is wonderful to be a woman and a Jew in America at the close of the twentieth century. Without question, the new opportunities for women in the religious world had their impetus in America's open, democratic, secular society. I am blessed to be a rabbi when most Jews are proud to be themselves. And I am so eager to serve.

*Nancy S. Hausman*

## **ON BECOMING A CANTOR**

My parents raised me to believe that I could do anything I wanted to do. Partway through my junior year in college I realized that the prelaw program I was taking was not for me. It was then that I considered going to cantorial school. My parents were very active Reform Jews. They were one of the founding families of our temple in Upper Nyack, New York, and I had sung in the temple choir from its inception, eventually becoming the soprano soloist. Cantorial school seemed just the right career for me, a person who loves Judaism and who also loves to sing.

I entered Hebrew Union College—Jewish Institute of Religion's School