

## On the Rabbinic Ordination of Women

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### INTRODUCTION

We stand on the threshold of the 1980's, embroiled in a controversy the ramifications of which touch our religious, scholarly, professional and personal lives. We are being asked to make a change, a change which is perceived by some as a radical break with tradition; by others, as a long-overdue extension of the rights and responsibilities of Judaism to its women, the majority of the Jewish people. Individually and collectively, we have all grappled with the question. Now, we are faced with a decision on an issue which cannot be compromised and will not go away. Even delay, the absence of a decision, will be perceived as a decision, a negative one. Positions have been taken, and often hardened and there are few among us whose positions are not known to all. I do not know if there is anyone among us who is still entirely undecided.

The question of the ordination of women which has so exercised us as a faculty for the past year is not a new one. When Henrietta Szold asked to study at The Jewish Theological Seminary of America in 1903 she was admitted to classes "only after she had assured its administration that she would not use the knowledge thus gained to seek ordination."<sup>1</sup>

Clearly, the idea of rabbinic ordination of women was not a complete impossibility in the first decade of the century. In fact, the issue of ordaining women was probably first directly raised in this country in 1922 when the Central Conference of American Rabbis passed a resolution declaring that "women cannot justly be denied the privilege of ordination."<sup>2</sup> In our own movement, the issue was joined much later in the wake of both the appearance of Ezrat Nashim at the Rabbinical Assembly Convention in March, 1972, and a *takkanah* by the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of the Rabbinical Assembly in September, 1973, allowing women to be counted in a *minyan*. In 1973, the United Synagogue, at its biennial convention, adopted a resolution on "The Role of Women," including the following statement on "Admission of Women in The Rabbinical School of The Jewish Theological Seminary of America": "Recognizing the growing role of women in the life of our congregations, the United Synagogue of America, in convention assembled, wishes to note that it looks with favor on the admission of qualified women to The Rabbinical School of The Jewish Theological Seminary of America."<sup>3</sup> It was proposed at various Rabbinical Assembly conventions that women be admitted to the Rabbinical Assembly and/or to The Rabbinical School.<sup>4</sup> Finally, at the 1977 convention, after such a resolution had been proposed, Chancellor Gerson D. Cohen was asked to appoint a Commission for the Study of the Ordination of Women as Rabbis to investigate the matter thoroughly and to make its recommendations to the 1979 Rabbinical Assembly Convention. The recommendation to ordain women was presented first to the Rabbinical Assembly and then to the faculty. The

Rabbinical Assembly, not wanting to force the hand of the Seminary, decided to allow the faculty to consider the Commission report first. That we did, having the date for a vote changed from February, 1979 to May, 1979, to January 1980.

The preceding brief review of the history of the women's ordination issue makes it clear that we have been given ample time to consider the matter. We can no longer claim that the ramifications of a decision to ordain women have yet to be considered, that these things must be done slowly, that we need more time to come to a decision. Not only do we have no excuse for a delay, but a delay would be counter-productive.

Further delay would be seen as an indication of the cumbersome and halting nature of the halakhic process. It would serve to strengthen the hand of those who feel that the halakhah cannot deal with current issues. If, as a result of our delay, the Rabbinical Assembly should take action either to admit women rabbis ordained elsewhere or to ordain rabbis itself we would be abdicating to its position of primacy in the movement. Furthermore, for the women who are hoping to be admitted to The Rabbinical School, delay will serve only to embitter a group of supporters of Halakhic Judaism who will feel that their lives are being left hanging by a faculty which is not sensitive to their commitment and abilities.

To my knowledge the only other time our Faculty was involved in a halakhic issue, was during the forty year attempt to ameliorate the situation of the *agunah*. The repeated delays, the appointment of committee upon committee, served not only to allow time for two more generations of *agunot* to arise while the men involved in the decision deliberated, but also to reduce the respect accorded the Halakhah. As Rabbi Ralph Simon said in 1951, "When I first joined the Rabbinical Assembly, the *agunah* already was present at our conventions. Since that day, the *agunah's* daughter has grown up, and now she is an *agunah*. We still have not done anything about the problem, and I now have fears for the *agunah's* granddaughter."<sup>5</sup> Do we dare allow the women's ordination issue to follow the same path? Like the *agunah* it will not go away.

## **THE HALAKHAH**

To my mind, there would be no way in which we could make this innovation were it halakhically indefensible. The halakhically formulated argument made by our colleague, Professor Joel Roth, in support of the ordination of women is most persuasive. Our concern for Halakhah must be demonstrated not only in the decisions we make but also in the way we make them. The issues should be considered, as Rabbi Roth proposes, in logical, halakhic sequence, with responsibilities preceding rights. Nor would the growing number of female candidates for Rabbinical School with whom I have spoken want it any other way. The respect for halakhah evinced by the women I know, their own concern for halakhic legitimacy, is manifest in the group which regularly participates in the daily services here. This only supports my contention that

ordination is not at all a left-right issue, but cuts across those lines.<sup>6</sup>

At the same time I am concerned that the Committee of the Conference on Halakhic Process seems to have arrogated exclusively to the anti-ordination rabbis the concern for preserving the authority of the Halakhah. Surely there are those on both sides of the ordination issue who are equally deeply concerned. But such concern yields and has always yielded differences of opinion rather than unanimity. Respect for Jewish law, scholarship or the rabbinate is not enhanced when valid differences of opinion on a halakhic issue are turned into attacks on the fidelity of proponents of ordination of women to our sacred tradition.<sup>7</sup> If there is as there often is, more than one halakhic answer, let us admit that this is so and try to explain why one position or another is preferable to us. Since each of us believes that this controversy is "for the sake of heaven", each of us ought to behave in as upright a manner as possible. Only in this way will we be able to enhance the prestige of the Halakhah.

Although the Halakhah may allow for the ordination of women, it does not require it. What does require it is justice, a consideration often outside The Halakhah when narrowly defined. The woman of today is different from the woman of the second, or even the nineteenth, century. Generally speaking, women's religious or intellectual capabilities are no longer called into question. Due to a longer life expectancy, lower birth-rate and lower infant mortality, child-bearing and nursing no longer occupy as large a portion or proportion of a woman's life. "Parenting," involving both parents, is replacing "mothering" as a description of the child-nurturing role. Women hold high positions in virtually all areas of public life.

Their goals, like those of men, include careers of service to God and fellowpersons. If, as has been argued, there is no halakhic barrier, on what grounds can we exclude capable, committed women from the rabbinate?

## **THE SEMINARY**

There has been some talk that the admission of women into Rabbinical School would irrevocably split our faculty. While opinions run strong on this issue, it is important to remember that they run strong in both directions, and that whether or not women are admitted to The Rabbinical School there will be a need for a period of healing for the faculty. The first step in such a process must be taken before the issue is resolved, by refraining from personal attack, and trying to conduct ourselves as befits a community of religiously concerned scholars. It helps no one to have persons on each side impugn the decision-making qualifications of individuals on the other side. We must not lose our respect for each other.

One salutary result of a positive decision on ordaining women is that the issue would then "go away" and we could get on with our major business, producing Jewish scholarship and educating committed Jews. A negative

decision is, even in the opinion of some who are opposed to ordaining women, merely a temporary one, one which will be appealed repeatedly until, in our lifetime or thereafter, it is overturned. Such a prolongation of the process, while it might serve to free from responsibility those of us who will retire in the interim, will not serve the Seminary well. It will only contribute to a further diversion of precious resources of time, energy, talent, and, alas, even money, from our major goals.

I have been asked what questions one might ask a female candidate for admission. I think that the answer to that question is implicit in Rabbi Roth's paper. I think that the questions should be the same for men and women. We must accept only those candidates of either sex who are willing to guide their lives by Halakhah, and to help their congregants or students lead lives so guided. If a woman is to act as a *sheliah tzibbur*, a cantor, we must expect her to have undertaken the obligations of daily prayer, just as we expect the men to do. We should expect that the women, too, have embarked on a religious quest, though theirs has certainly been complicated by the absence of role models. In short, they ought to be potentially worthy of ordination.

### **CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM**

If the concept "justice" seems a bit vague as a basis for instituting change, the history and dynamic of the Conservative movement are not. We have seen within the Conservative movement in the United States, a slow, but steady, extension of rights and responsibilities to women. As Moshe Davis notes, even in the initial phase, the Conservative movement was concerned with enhancing the position of women:

Of all the changes and reforms adopted internally by the members of the Historical School, the most profound was the recognition that women deserved a more significant role in the life of the synagogue. Although that role was not easily or quickly defined, the very acceptance of women as participants in synagogue life wrought a quiet revolution at the time and subsequently changed the character of the traditional synagogue in America.<sup>8</sup>

Improved education for Jewish women was a major concern of Isaac Leeser's. The introduction of the mixed pew or family seating was a dramatic break with religious tradition, in the wake of which all subsequent steps, including the ordination of women, are but a logical consequence. Further innovations of the movement regarding the religious life of women include Jewish education for women; the bat-mitzvah, first on Friday night and now, increasingly on Saturday morning; aliyot for women; and a *takkanah* permitting the counting of women in a minyan.<sup>9</sup> In addition, the agunah problem has been resolved by the new *ketubah*, the antenuptial agreement, and a willingness to perform, when necessary, *hafka'at kiddushin*. Intentionally or unintentionally, the movement toward equalizing the position of women has strengthened Conservative Judaism. In

contrast, "perhaps the single most disruptive force, or strain to American Jewish Orthodoxy has been the subordination of women."<sup>10</sup> The enhanced position of women has proved and continues to prove to be a beacon in our movement to attract persons who are disenchanting with the position of women in Orthodoxy.

The women who want to become Conservative rabbis are, almost exclusively, products of the Conservative movement, of our Ramah camps, of our synagogues, of our Seminary. They have been raised in a movement which offered them equal education. They were encouraged to pursue Jewish learning and, at the same time, not to close themselves off from the world around them. It comes as no surprise that these women, having been raised like their "brothers," want, like their "brothers," to pursue a career in the rabbinate. What is surprising is, rather, the negative reception these women often receive.

It is of little use to admit women to The Rabbinical School if, in so doing, we are to alienate our lay membership. The 1973 United Synagogue resolution previously mentioned indicates that the lay leadership was then in favor of opening the Conservative rabbinate to women. It is reasonable to assume that they are now, with the passage of another six years, even more strongly in favor. The younger membership, which is the future membership, is heavily in favor of ordaining women. Using *Liebman-Shapiro* Table II, one can easily calculate that, while 15.1% of the members under 35 responding think that they would be disappointed or leave the Conservative movement if women were ordained, 38.6% of the respondents think that they would be disappointed or leave the movement if women were NOT ordained.<sup>11</sup> Why risk alienating such a high percentage of the movement's future? Table I of the survey indicates that of the respondents 28.3% would be alienated (leave or be disappointed) if women were NOT ordained, 20.8%, if they were. Thus, despite the preponderance of respondents in the upper age brackets, a significantly larger proportion favors ordination of women, than objects to it. In terms of denominational identity (Table III), the only group significantly opposed to ordaining women is the one which identifies itself as Orthodox. Those people, by their own admission, do not really consider themselves part of the Conservative movement. Although they constitute only 3.4% of the respondents they constitute one tenth (10.1%) of those opposed to ordaining women, and a quarter (24.1%) of those who would leave if women were ordained.<sup>12</sup> Although we are certainly grateful for their participation, we should remember that some of them are doubtless with us by default, because there is no Orthodox synagogue in the area. Were there one they would probably join it. We cannot permit fear of their loss, which may well come about for other reasons to lead us to disregard the bulk of our membership. As this survey confirms, the bulk of the membership is prepared for the ordination of women.

## **SUMMARY**

The ordination of women is a move for which Conservative Judaism is ready. The halakhic analysis has been done, the laity has been polled, our sense

of ethics compels it. The move will benefit Conservative Judaism. In the first instance, the discussion over the past few years has aroused a great deal of interest in the halakhic process. While there is a long road from interest to observance, the interest comes first. A decision to ordain women will prove that, faced with a complex problem, the Halakhah can come up with an answer within a reasonable length of time. We will have opened to us a new source of capable, committed and talented rabbinic leadership. The problem will have been finally resolved, allowing us to turn our attention to other important tasks which lie before us. We must face the need to convert our nominal membership to a meaningful membership. To do this we must show them that the Halakhah has credibility, that it can function in this time and on this continent. The admission of women to the Rabbinical school will give a signal to the young committed products of our movement, many of whom are involved in *havurot* and *minyanim* outside of synagogues, that we are open to change, to diversity, and finally to offering once again a dynamic program for traditional Judaism.

## **Appendix A**

*Proceedings of the Rabbinical Assembly*  
Volume XXXVII, 1975, p. 278

### **XIV. RESOLUTION REGARDING WOMEN AS RABBIS**

The Rabbinical Assembly, in Convention assembled, hereby declares its desire to admit to membership in the Rabbinical Assembly, qualified applicants regardless of sex.

It further calls upon its members to work toward an end to discriminatory treatment in their individual synagogues.

*It was duly moved and seconded that this proposal be adopted as a Convention resolution. During the discussion of this proposal, Rabbi Yaakov Rosenberg made the following amendment: "The Rabbinical Assembly, in Convention assembled, instructs its administration to do everything in its power to bring our influence to bear upon our alma mater, to make sure that The Jewish Theological Seminary of America admits qualified applicants to The Rabbinical School." Rabbi Rosenberg's amendment was duly seconded. After further discussion, during which opinions were expressed both in favor of and in opposition to the proposal and the amendment, Rabbi Herschel Portnoy moved that the discussion of the proposal concerning the acceptance into membership of women rabbis be tabled until a time when the entire membership of the Rabbinical Assembly will first have been notified that the discussion will take place, and that a vote will be taken, so that all of our colleagues may carefully consider the matter and exercise their vote. This motion to table was duly*

*seconded, and passed.*

## **Appendix B**

*Proceedings of the Rabbinical Assembly*  
Volume XXXVIII, 1976, pp. 322-323

### **XII. MEMBERSHIP**

BE IT RESOLVED that the Rabbinical Assembly direct its Committee on Membership to consider applications for membership in the Rabbinical Assembly of otherwise qualified candidates regardless of their sex.

BE IT RESOLVED that the Rabbinical Assembly call upon The Jewish Theological Seminary of America to admit otherwise qualified candidates to The Rabbinical School regardless of sex.

The Rabbinical Assembly calls upon the United Synagogue of America and its affiliated congregations to move with expedition to bring about full equality, regardless of sex, within the Synagogue.

*This resolution was tabled.*

## **Appendix C**

*Proceedings of the Rabbinical Assembly*  
Volume XXXIX, 1977, p. 139

### **I. THE ROLE OF WOMEN**

The Resolutions Committee has revised its resolution as follows:

WHEREAS the Conservative movement initiated educational policies of equal intensive Jewish education for our daughters and our sons, and

WHEREAS the Conservative movement pioneered the ceremony of Bat Mitzvah to accord ritual expression to women, and

WHEREAS the Rabbinical Assembly has supported equal status of women within the synagogue, and

WHEREAS two major rabbinic seminaries now ordain women, and

WHEREAS we recognize the enormous potential for enhancing our

people by utilizing the wisdom and commitment of our people, regardless of sex, and

WHEREAS Article III of the Constitution of the Rabbinical Assembly provides that all "upon whom the title of Rabbi has been duly and properly conferred by a recognized rabbinical seminary or by Semikha; provided, however, that they have the secular training equivalent to the requirement for a college degree" shall be eligible for membership.

BE IT RESOLVED that The Rabbinical Assembly encourages The Jewish Theological Seminary of America to consider and to admit to The Rabbinical School all qualified candidates regardless of their sex.

*After discussion, the following substitute resolution was presented from the floor, was duly seconded and adopted.*

BE IT RESOLVED that the Rabbinical Assembly respectfully petitions the Chancellor of The Jewish Theological Seminary of America to establish an interdisciplinary commission to study all aspects of the role of women as spiritual leaders in the Conservative movement.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that this study commission, whose membership shall reflect the pluralism and diversity of the Conservative movement, shall be responsible for a progress report on its findings to be presented to the Executive Council of the Rabbinical Assembly in the spring of 1978 and for a final report and recommendation at the 1979 convention of the Rabbinical Assembly.

## **Appendix D**

Attitudes toward Ordination of Women among Respondents under Age 35

Based on Liebman-Shapiro Table II  
Respondents under 35 = 963 respondents

588 women + 375 men = 963

273.4 women (46.5% of 588 women) would probably leave or be disappointed if women were NOT ordained

97.9 men (26.1% of 375 men) would probably leave or be disappointed if women were NOT ordained

371.3 = Total disappointed or probably leave if women NOT ordained is 38.6% of 963 respondents

68.2 women (11.6% of 588 women) would probably leave or be disappointed if women were ordained

77.2 men (20.6% of 375 men) would probably leave or be disappointed if women were ordained

145.4 = Total disappointed or probably leave if women were ordained is 15.1% of 963 respondents

## **Appendix E**

The Orthodox-Identified and the Ordination of Women

Based on Liebman-Shapiro Tables III and I

138 women (2.9% of 4765 women) identify as Orthodox

178 men (3.8% of 4618 men) identify as Orthodox

316 respondents (3.4% of 9383) identify as Orthodox

Orthodox identified disappointed or probably leave if women were ordained

87.1 women (63.1% of 138)

110 men (61.8% of 178)

197.1 respondents who are Orthodox-identified disappointed or probably leave if women were ordained

1951.7 respondents (20.8% of 9383 total respondents) disappointed or probably leave if women were ordained

10.1% of respondents (197.1 of 1951.7) who would be disappointed or probably leave if women were ordained are Orthodox-identified

Orthodox-identified who would probably leave if women were ordained

52 women (37.7% of 138)

61 men (34.3% of 178)

113 respondents who are Orthodox-identified and will probably leave if women were ordained.

469.1 respondents (5% of 9383 total respondents) would probably leave if women were ordained

24.1% of respondents (113 of 469.1) who would probably leave if women were ordained are Orthodox-identified.

## NOTES

1. Susan Dworkin, "Henrietta Szold," *Response* #18, p. 43.
2. Sally Priesand, *Judaism and the New Woman* (New York, 1975), p. 62.
3. *Proceedings of the 1973 Biennial Convention of the United Synagogue of America*, November 11-15, 1973, pp. 108-109.
4. See Appendices A, B, C.
5. *Proceedings of the Rabbinical Assembly*, 1951, #15, p. 140.
6. It may be of passing interest that one of the women ordained at another Seminary is reputed to observe *taharat ha-mishpachah*. Stephanie Dickstein, in an unpublished paper on "Feminism, Jewish Observance and Jewish Womanhood: A Study of Joint Program Women," concludes "that when women are committed to a Judaism which they respect, feminism does not lessen their observance. It does, in fact, have the opposite effect on these women who confront the issue of equality in ritual practice and decide they will take on equal responsibilities."
7. See S. Y. Agnon, "Shnei Talmidei Hachamim...."
8. Moshe Davis, *The Emergence of Conservative Judaism* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1963), p. 124.
9. Rabbi Samuel Rosinger recalling his reactions to seeing Henrietta Szold participating in Professor Louis Ginzberg's class in 1904 said: "Yet, even in these ultra-modern days, it was certainly a unique experience to behold a Jewess, and an American product at that, attending one of the most abstruse courses which a theological institution can offer young men preparing themselves for the ministry." *Lives and Voices*, ed. Samuel F. Chyet (Philadelphia: JPS, 1972), p. 126. Seventy-five years later, the participation of knowledgeable women in rabbinical school courses is commonplace. One might hope that seventy-five years is long enough an apprenticeship.
10. Marshall Sklare, *Conservative Judaism: An American Religious Movement* (Schocken, 1972), pp. 86 ff.
11. Appendix D
12. Appendix E