



Is Now the Time for

ORTHODOX WO

**BLU
GREENBERG**

The growing reality of women rabbis in liberal denominations will transform the expectations of Orthodox women into a powerful agent for change.



I am at a memorial service in Jerusalem for a woman who died of cancer at age 44. More than 300 people have gathered to mourn the passing of this extraordinary teacher of Torah. Though I had never met Chanah Beilinson, over the years I had heard of her great intellect, her radiant holiness, her ability to impart to her students not only deep knowledge but also a sense of wonderment. She so loved teaching that even during these latter months she continued, with but one concession to her weakened state: classes were held in her home.

Four of her colleagues will speak, "two rabbis and two women." Oshra Enker, tall and willowy, in her late twenties, white beret tilted distractingly way over to the side, begins to weave her way with ease through the rabbinic sources. I forget the beret as she magically unfolds before us the *halachah* and theology of *kiddush levanah*,

the ritual sanctification of the sliver of a new moon. Delicately, she compares its meaning to the life and spirit of her beloved Chanah. For a brief instant, I find myself thinking Oshra would make a splendid rabbi. And then I think: well, that's exactly what she is, what Chanah was. And then: I wonder if Oshra ever thinks of herself that way.

Another scene: The rabbi begins his Yom Kippur *drasha*. My eye wanders. Through a slight opening in the *mehitzah*, I see a young boy, 14 or 15. His eyes fix on the rabbi. His lips are parted and every few seconds he faintly shapes them to complete a familiar Hebrew phrase the rabbi has begun. As I observe him, I realize that something more than listening is taking place here: the boy relates to the rabbi, not only as scholar and leader but as role model and future mentor.

Over the years, I've asked many a young rabbi how he chose his calling. "Growing up,

MEN RABBIS?

I had a very special rabbi” or “I was close to my rabbi” is often the response. These answers do not preclude more weighty ones, such as “I wanted to teach Torah,” “spend my life in *yiddishkeit*,” “build Jewish lives and community.” Rather, a role model is the first line of introduction to all the rest.

Today there are no Orthodox women rabbis to serve as role models. No equivalent status of leadership is conferred upon Orthodox women. No one asks a woman’s opinion on halachic matters. Nor are there community expectations. In fact, the lines have hardened. Once not an issue within Orthodoxy—so remote was it from communal consciousness—the matter has now comes closer to home with the ordination of traditional Conservative women. And the response from centers of Orthodox authority tends to be: Not Permissible!

Moreover, Orthodox women themselves are largely inhospitable to the idea. This, despite the growth of a curious new form of discrimination against them: Because the title “rabbi” is required for certain non-congregational positions, such as hospital chaplaincy (in which Reform, Conservative and Reconstructionist women rabbis figure prominently), Orthodox women who might otherwise qualify are simply out of the loop. Another example: the Women’s Cabinet of the UJA ought to—and probably soon will—have a woman rabbi in its service. I can think of several Orthodox women who would be excellent religious mentors for the cabinet, but lacking the title “rabbi,” their names would never be considered.

Similarly, Orthodox women are left out of the networking that goes on between religious women leaders. Orthodox women are not nourished by intergroup dialogue, nor do they contribute to others the unique insights of Orthodoxy.

On the other hand, we do have role models. There has been an explosion of women’s learning within Orthodoxy, intensive learning of sacred texts and—particularly new—study of Talmud. Whereas a generation ago, only a handful of women were taught Talmud—among them the two daughters of the great Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, of blessed memory—today thousands of Orthodox women study Talmud, some making it their life’s work.

Institutions of higher learning of religious texts have been created for women, among them Drisha, the first and most established (Manhattan); Machon N’shei Torah (Brooklyn); Shalhevet (Queens); Ma’ayan (Boston); and many in Israel (see directory, page 53). Add to this list long-standing institutions that have reshaped their curricula to accommodate women’s new learning, such as the *yeshivah* day- and high-school system and the Stern College Kollel program. Add again the university doctoral programs in Talmud in which substantial numbers of Orthodox women are enrolled,* and you have a virtual transformation of the intellectual potential of the community. Shortly we shall have a critical mass of learned women who have mastered the qualifying texts for rabbinic ordination.

Moreover, the numbers of noteworthy female teachers of religious texts has risen. A generation ago, there was but one—the incomparable Nechama Leibowitz. Her vast knowledge of rabbinic commentary on the Torah inspired many thousands of students. Today, there are Orthodox women who

*According to Dr. Reuven Kimelman, women significantly outnumber men in these programs. He conjectures that the tipping of the balance results from the presence of Orthodox women who might otherwise be in rabbinic seminaries.

Two women study the talmudic tractate of *Ketubot* in *chevruta* (partnership) at the Drisha Institute in Manhattan, where over 3,000 women have studied traditional texts since 1979.



teach Scriptures, commentary, *halachah*, *midrash*, codes, and even Talmud. And contrary to the stereotypes some hold of Orthodoxy, there has been communal appreciation of women in these roles not in every instance, but in enough to make it apparent that the love of Torah prevails, no matter the gender source. Thus, Nechama Leibowitz, Naomi Cohen, Chanah Beilinson, Oshra Enker, Aviva Zornberg, Menucha Chwat, Tamar Ross, Chanah Henkin, Devora Steinmetz, Dena Weiner, Malka Bina, Esther Krauss, Rivka Haut, Beruriah David, Maily Katz and several dozen others may not carry the title "rabbi," but they serve in similar ways. These women have different areas of specialization and different depths of knowledge, but all are totally dedicated to Torah learning within the tradition.

In an open society, role models can come from outside one's community. The existence of women rabbis and the honorable ways they serve speaks more powerfully than a thousand debates on the subject. In Riverdale not long ago, a Reform rabbi, Shira Milgrom, taught a class in *Mishnayot* to a group of Orthodox women. That she was friend and neighbor was her *entree*. But in the encounter itself, in the

acceptance of her as teacher, new ideas about women rabbis were surely replacing old diffidences.

I believe the ordination of Orthodox women is close at hand. The cumulative impact—of a critical mass of students of Talmud and *halachah*, a plethora of rising-star teachers, the support of educational institutions and the presence of respected women rabbis in the liberal denominations—will be to transform the expectations of Orthodox women. This will be a powerful agent for change.

But all of this is sociological conjecture. What does Jewish law say regarding ordination of women? Oddly, it is not discussed anywhere in rabbinic sources and no formal ban exists. Why was this role not proscribed when roles seemingly less intrusive in a male society, such as women counted in a prayer quorum or women as witnesses in a religious court of law, were? Probably the matter was so far fetched no one thought to raise the issue.

A close look at the convention of ordination (*smicha*) reveals that it is not a conferral of holy status nor a magical laying on of hands to transmit authority. Nor does the process uniquely empower a rabbi to perform special sacramental functions that a knowledgeable layperson cannot.

Ordination is the confirmation of an individual's mastery of texts (largely from the Talmud and codes); familiarity with precedents; and ability to reason analogically and apply precedents to contemporary questions. Conferring the title "rabbi" is a guarantee to the community that this person has been judged fit by a collective of rabbis or by a single great scholar to give guidance on matters of *issur v'heter*, the forbidden and the permitted, primarily as it concerns the laws of *kashrul*, Shabbat and family purity. The *smicha* process assumes but does not even test for personal piety, good character or a spiritual bent. The formal criteria are almost wholly intellectual.

Why, then, have some Orthodox rabbis asserted that *smicha* for women is not permitted? Halachic decision making, particularly when a new issue is at hand, is a creative process, part the word of God at Sinai, part rabbinic tradition, part human inter-

pretation. Selective choice of precedents is a powerful shaper of the outcome. Today, some *poskim* (rabbinic decisors) pin their judgments on rabbinic interpretation of the verse, "And you shall surely place upon yourselves a King" (Deuteronomy 17:15). In *Sifre*, the Rabbis* comment, "a king but not a queen," thereby legitimating for the ages men, but not women, in positions of authority. Other contemporary Torah scholars raise the standard of "honor of the community," which can broadly be interpreted as that which offends the faithful.

*When the word "Rabbis" is capitalized, it refers to the Rabbis of talmudic times; lower case "rabbis" generally refers to rabbis of modern times

Other rabbis say that while there may be no halachic objections to ordination, its linkage to other issues creates obstacles. Rabbis function as witnesses in the *beit din*, a Jewish court of law where women's testimony is inadmissible. Other complex linkages are to *mechitzah*, the separation of men and women and to *minyan*, the quorum of 10 men required for communal prayer that excludes women because they have a lesser halachic obligation. As the discussion proceeds, some rabbis will surely raise the issue of *kol isha*, the prohibition against men hearing the voice of a woman under certain circumstances.

continued on page 74

Many Orthodox women are on the way to mastering rabbinic texts that would qualify them for ordination.

Where Women Can Study Torah in Israel

Below is a partial list of institutions in Israel where women can spend a year, six months or a summer in Torah study. In addition to regularly scheduled classes, some of these institutions will tailor a program of study to an individual's needs. Some have special summer programs. Some are geared primarily to college-age students; others, to women of all ages. With the exception of Pardes and Hartman, all are women-only institutions; all are places of serious study. Half of them teach Talmud in a manner similar to the men's *yeshivot*, that is, directly from the tractate text. Half of these institutions would dissociate themselves from the content of my article; the fact that the other half would not reflects new thinking within the Orthodox community.

—B.G.

Bnot Chayil College
POB 16406
Bayit Vegan, Jerusalem
tel: 02-422062

Matan
17 Ben Yefuneh St.
Jerusalem
tel: 02-731128

Midreshet Rachel (Shappells)
222 Rehov Yaffo
POB 13209
Jerusalem

Bnot Torah Institute
27 Rehov Yam Suf
Jerusalem
tel: 02-814382

Michlalah—Jerusalem College
for Women
POB 16078
Bayit Vegan, Jerusalem
tel: 02-422481/2

Neve Yerushalayim
POB 16020
Har Nof, Jerusalem
tel: 02-529276

Hartman Institute for Advanced
Jewish Studies
20 Rachel Imenu
Jerusalem
tel: 02-619418
fax: 02-619706

Midreshet Lindenbaum
39 Herzog St.
Jerusalem
tel: 02-785087
fax: 02-784-701

Nishmat
27 Michelin St.
Bayit Vegan, Jerusalem
tel: 02-421051

Machon Gold—Gold College
for Women
36 Haturim St.
Jerusalem
tel: 02-381742
fax: 02-380-443

Midreshet Moriah
Shaare Zedek Educational
Wing
POB 3235
Jerusalem
tel: 02-527449
fax: 02-511-524

Orot Israel College
Elkana
D.N. Harei Efram
tel: 03-936-2174/5

Pardes Institute
10 Gad St.
Jerusalem
tel: 02-717975

Machon Ora
5 Rehov Gat
Kiryat Gat, Jerusalem
tel: 02-521982

Orthodox Women Rabbis

continued from page 53

Witness, *minyán*, *mechitzah*, *kol-isha*—these objections cannot be lightly dismissed. Given the weight of authority vested in contemporary rabbinic decisions, it seems almost pointless to press the issue forward. And yet, Orthodox views are not monolithic. *Halachah* is not static. It contains internal mechanisms of repair; it holds sparks of dynamism and creativity; it is and always has been responsive to special-interest groups (if women can be called such) and cases of special pleading; all of which explains why *halachah* has served the Jewish people so well, for so long.

Some highly respected Yeshiva University-ordained, modern Orthodox rabbis see no halachic barriers to women's ordination. These minority views carry great significance, as this is a community where religious authority is decentralized.

A look at women's issues in this last decade confirms the dynamism of *halachah*:

- The scriptural peg in Deuteronomy 17:15 was also used to rule out leadership of women as officers of Orthodox synagogues, a question that arose in the 1920s with the growth of American-style synagogues. Yet in 1993 there are women who hold high office, up to and including presidency of Orthodox synagogues.

- During the past several years, pressure has mounted on rabbis to alleviate the plight of *agunot*, women caught in the vise of recalcitrant husbands who refuse to grant a *get*, a writ of divorce. One response of the Israeli rabbinate has been to train *toanot*, women who are permitted to function in quasi-judicial capacity in the rabbinic courts of law to help *agunot* through adversarial *get* proceedings.

- One hundred years ago, and for 1,500 years prior to that, it was considered forbidden to teach women

Talmud. Today....

Thus, sociology and *halachah* are interdependent. If they so will it, contemporary rabbinic authorities can find halachic means to open the system more widely to learned women. To a large extent, the process will be driven by Orthodox women wanting it to happen. Having opened to them the learning enterprise—interpretive keys to the tradition—ordination will come as a natural halachic consequence of this powerful revolution.

Orthodox women should be ordained because it would constitute a recognition of their new intellectual accomplishments and spiritual attainments; because it would encourage greater Torah study; because it offers wider female models of religious life; because women's input into *p'sak* (interpretation of Jewish texts), absent for 2,000 years, is sorely needed; because it will speed the process of reevaluating traditional definitions that support hierarchy; because some Jews might find it easier to bring halachic questions concerning family and sexuality to a woman rabbi. And because of the justice of it all.

Nevertheless, many problems remain, not only connected to *halachah* but to communal unity and mainstream attitudes. That is why I do not foresee that Orthodox women will serve initially—or perhaps not for a long while—as pulpit rabbis of traditional congregations. Nor do I believe it must necessarily be part of the agenda, though I know that some feminists would fault me for taking that stance. But a respect for community sensibilities, an appreciation of incremental steps, a desire for internal unity and a realism about *shul* politics propel me along this path.

To be sure, halachic issues of *mechitzah*, of *minyán* and *aliyot*, of female witnesses in Jewish courts of law, of *kol-isha*—will have to be looked at again. But meanwhile, an ordained Orthodox woman need not serve as witness in family status matters and need not breach the *mechitzah*. All of this should not be joined to the issue at hand. The first step is the ordination of women. From there, we shall see where to go next. ☺

arad
ARTS
p r o j e c t

Visual arts, performing arts, and literature
subsidized program for artists,
6 months of creativity in Israel
accommodations and studios, exhibition
space and performing opportunities
**creations of excellence will be
recognized and publicized**

for further information contact:
WUJS Institute International Graduate Centre,
Arad 80700, Israel. Tel. 057-955370 Fax. 057-955472
or contact in U.S.: WUJS Institute Office, 110 E. 59th St.
New York, NY 10022. Phone 212-339-6051 Fax 212-832-2597

supported by the C.R.B. Foundation