

Moving Beyond Maimonides and

Mechitzah:

A Look at Women Rabbis'

Transcendence of a Societal

Metaphor

An ethnographic approach by Megan Grady and

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Introduction: Jewish Women Moving through the Barriers of Time

June 3, 1972, was a day that would alter the face of American Judaism forever. On that day, the Reform movement fell away from history and made Sally Jane Priesand, a twenty-six-year old woman from Cleveland, Ohio, the first female rabbi in the United States (Umansky, 1996: p. 36). Just like many firsts throughout history, Priesand's ordination served to mark both an end and a beginning. It served not only to subdue the exclusively male character of the American rabbinate, but also to compel the renegotiation of interpersonal relationships in a public Jewish life that allowed women to hold positions of authority.

Yet, contrary to beliefs held by many, Priesand's ordination did not serve to break down a reified barrier that separated the jurisdictions of men and women in terms of public domain versus private domain, respectively. Long before Priesand was ordained, Jewish women in America had carved out a place for themselves in public religious life beginning in the nineteenth century.

The nineteenth century marked the beginning of what many religious scholars refer to as "The Second Great Awakening". During this subsidiary enlightenment, the religious character of American society received a makeover. As Jonathan D. Sarna contends, the nineteenth century was a period in which "there was a diminished belief in predestination and innate human depravity and a greater emphasis was placed on the ability of human beings, through their own efforts, to change the world" (Sarna, 1996: p.43). This shift in religious ideology was particularly beneficial to women. Seemingly, religious institutions in America began to realize that if their communities were to take part in the transformation of the world, both religious men and religious women would have to take an active role in the public sphere. Jewish women seized the opportunity to take public action during this time. Many such women concentrated

their efforts on creating communal organizations comprised of women geared toward the betterment of society at large. In the 1830's, Hebrew ladies benevolent societies comprised of Jewish German immigrants began popping up across the country. The ladies of the benevolent societies put upon themselves public duties such as aiding the sick, helping the unemployed, sewing clothes for the poor, raising money to build synagogues, and insuring proper burials for the deceased—and all of this they did in the name of Judaism (Nadell, 1995: p. 64). Thus by the middle of the nineteenth century, Jewish women had developed public caretaker roles that corresponded to the natural roles of woman as envisaged by many votaries of Judaism (Nadell, 1995: p. 65).

By the twentieth century, American Jewish women, especially women of the Reform movement, had created an associational life at the national level. Most of the associations created by the women held self-education and the welfare of society as central concerns. The most notable organizations created by Jewish women in America during the twentieth century include The National Council of Jewish Women for Zionism and Hadassah (1912), The National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods (Reform Judaism—1913), and The National Women's League of the United Synagogue in America (Conservative Judaism—1918). Pamela S. Nadell contends that by creating organizations like the ones mentioned above, “women created a culture that enabled them to change the expectations of their proper behavior within the portals of the synagogue and expand Jewish women's public religious roles” (Nadell, 1995: p.43).

Thus, the twentieth century was a time in which many Jewish women became free to exercise their expanded public religious roles at local and national levels. At the local level, Jewish women became more and more visible within the synagogue. Encouraging this increased visibility, wives of Reform rabbis organized sisterhoods of women geared toward creating a

“social congregational spirit” (Nadell, 1995: p. 65). Sisterhood women became highly involved in educating Jewish children, sustaining synagogues, and organizing religious services. Many women of the Reform sisterhoods willfully accepted the responsibility of organizing and leading prayer services when rabbis went on vacation. Thus, as early as 1920, women of Reform Judaism were already speaking from the pulpit (Nadell, 1995: p. 68). Somewhat taken aback by the ever-evolving roles of women in Reform Judaism, Carrie Simon wrote in 1938, “In the past, we have considered the Jewish woman as a follower. Within recent years, she has become a participant. Does the next step lie in her becoming a leader, religiously speaking?”(Nadell, 1995: p. 69).

Yet, “the next step” for Jewish women as imagined by Simon in 1938 was not to be taken until Priesand’s ordination thirty-four years later. And in the minds of many Jewish people, particularly Orthodox Jews, Priesand’s step into the rabbinate was one that represented a devastating break from *halakhah*, or Jewish law.

One of the main and most relevant reasons that women were historically kept out of the rabbinate can be traced back to the writings of Maimonides (1135-1204), a twelfth century Jewish sage who was the first person to write a systematic code of all Jewish law, the *Mishneh Torah*. The *halakhah* written by Maimonides includes a prohibition against women taking a role of public authority (Novak, 1984: p. 41). Thus, many votaries of this Maimonidean prohibition have taken pains to keep women from being ordained as rabbis, as the position of rabbi has historically been associated with great public authority. Yet, as mentioned above, Jewish women have been exercising influence in the public religious life since the nineteenth century in America, which leads one to question why their increasing influence was not perceived as a break from this Maimonidean prohibition. David Novak provides the answer to this question,

writing, “Any Jew can do such things as preaching, teaching, counseling, and pasturing, none of these things is essentially rabbinical” (p. 42).

Yet, Novak’s definition of “rabbinical things” is essentially a negative one. He only provides a list of duties that are not “essentially rabbinical”, while failing to address the types of things that are. This leads one to question what it means to be a rabbi. Does it mean serving as “an authority in a religious court (Bet Din) dealing with matters of personal and familial status?”(Novak, 1984: p. 41). If that is what it means to be a rabbi, then *halakhists* could certainly use this rabbinical function as a reason to prevent women’s ordination, as the Jerusalem Talmud states that women can neither serve as witnesses or judges. For many *halakhists*, the prohibition against women becoming judges would serve as the “most insurmountable barrier to female rabbinic ordination”. Many rabbis argue that to ignore this prohibition is “to destroy what makes a rabbi a rabbi as opposed to a Jewish minister” (Cohen, 1988: p. 2).

Although there may be further and more marginal *halakhic* reasons for excluding women from the rabbinate, the reasons mentioned above held women back for millennia. Today, however, American women have been enjoying positions in the rabbinate for over thirty years, notwithstanding opposition from their *halakhist* critics. Furthermore, many women rabbis enjoy their positions while serving as wives and mothers. For many years, people doubted that women rabbis could handle both rabbinical and familial responsibilities. In fact, such doubts served as another reason why women were held back from the rabbinate. At the Central Conference of American Rabbis in 1922, the question arose as to how women would be able to handle life both as a rabbi and as a mother:

If there is any calling which requires a whole-hearted devotion to the exclusion of all other things and the determination to make it one’s whole life work, it is the rabbinate. It is not to be considered merely as a profession by which one earns a livelihood...One must choose it for his lifework and be prepared to give it all his energies...[A married woman] cannot give to the rabbinate that whole-hearted devotion which comes from the determination to make it one’s lifework. (Lauterbach, 1970: pp. 245-246).

However, whether or not wifedom and motherhood serve to take the “whole-heartedness” out of a woman’s devotion to the rabbinate is not something that can be divulged from theory. In order to better understand women rabbis and their devotion to their positions, one must consult the women themselves. As anthropology students, this is what we have set out to do.

Yet, as we embark on our ethnographic study of women rabbis, we find ourselves in a rather precarious position. Most of the texts we encounter are either written by *halakhists* who oppose women in the rabbinate or written by anthropologists and theologians who are rather neutral on the subject. Texts written by women rabbis about their own experiences, however, are not to be found anywhere. Thus, we have found ourselves trapped in a world of extralocal mastery, forced to read through phallogocentric texts as a means of understanding women. What we are doing, however, is not that much different from what anthropologists seeking information about Jewish women and Jewish women seeking information about, well, themselves have been doing for years. Getting beyond the texts has become one of our biggest obstacles.

We have directed our research efforts to the town of Bloomington, Indiana. Home to 65,000 people, Bloomington is a college town nestled in the forested hills of the southern portion of the state. For many, Bloomington is a haven of diversity and culture. Moreover, it is a rather liberal town whose university has long attracted progressive thinkers. In Bloomington, there are two women rabbis: Rabbi Mira Wasserman and Rabbi Sue Shiffon. Rabbi Wasserman serves as a congregational rabbi at Beth Shalom, a Jewish Center located away from the college, and Rabbi Sue Shiffon serves as the Executive Director of Indiana University’s Hillel Center. We will provide more information about both ladies throughout our paper. Right now, however, it is enough to reveal that it is the perspectives of these women that dominate our ethnographic report. Essentially we turned to these women to determine whether or not wifedom and

motherhood serve to take the “whole-heartedness” out of a woman’s devotion to the rabbinate and to learn what types of activities are deemed “essentially rabbinical” by women rabbis in the twenty-first century. It is hoped that our ethnography will compel further research focused on the actual lives of women rabbis.

Methodology

Our first priority in conducting our fieldwork project was, of course, to find our informants. Being students at Indiana University, we sought the help of two female rabbis in Bloomington, Indiana: Rabbi Sue Shiffon and Rabbi Mira Wasserman. Rabbi Sue received her bachelor’s degree from Indiana University, a master’s in social work from Temple University, and rabbinical ordination from the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in Philadelphia. She is the mother of two children and a wife in addition to serving as the Executive Director at Indiana University’s Helene G. Simon Hillel Center. Rabbi Mira received her bachelor’s degree from Barnard College and her rabbinical ordination from Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati. She has two children, a husband, and serves as a congregational rabbi at the local temple in town, Beth Shalom.

After setting down some ideas, we set out reading a bit about the subject of women rabbis on our own. I read various articles and sources regarding the subject, which focused on the *halakhic* issues concerning women’s ordination, while my colleague, Megan, read two books that extolled the presence of women in the rabbinate.

We scheduled an interview with Rabbi Sue, which came to pass on 7 March 2003. The next week, Rabbi Sue and Rabbi Mira came to anthropologist Joëlle Bahloul’s class on the

Indiana University campus, and as Bahloul's students, we were present in her class on that day.

Megan set up an appointment with, met, and interviewed Rabbi Mira on Friday 4 April 2003.

Unfortunately, I was unable to attend this interview, as I was out of town. In all three instances, Megan tape recorded the interactions and later transcribed the discussions.

On three separate occasions, Megan and I got together to discuss our projects in terms of strategy. I then prepared a few pages with facts regarding the ordination of women, which was adapted by Megan for our introduction.

As far as analysis is concerned, we decided that it would be best to come up with interpretations independently before meeting to discuss them. We did this because we were rather interested in how our analyses would compare. Megan and I essentially inhabit two different worlds. She is a female Catholic, and I am a male Jew. She is a feminist; I, a traditionalist. As we predicted, our cultural differences were manifested in our writings and interpretations. Thus, we have decided to leave our summaries and analyses separate within the body of the report. In doing so, we hope to show how cultural differences can serve to influence perspectives on women rabbis.

Drew's Ethnographic Experience
Date: Friday, March 7, 2003-04-29
Location: Hillel Center at Indiana University
Interview with Rabbi Sue Shiffron

Interviewing Rabbi Sue was not unusual or out of place for me because I go to the Hillel and see her regularly. The only thing specifically unique to interviewing her was that I generally only saw her in passing and had not engaged in any particularly lengthy conversation with her up until the interview. Having Megan there asking her prepared questions made me feel comfortable because I felt she was certainly taking up a good measure of responsibility on our behalf towards Rabbi Sue. At later points in the interview, I made a couple of inquiries which I thought ought to have been made and probably aided Megan to not feel as if she was being an interview-hog. The interview with Rabbi Sue Shiffron began with Megan introducing the setting and establishing the structure of the interview and then beginning the question-and-answer style to the conversation which consisted of either Megan or me asking questions and Rabbi Sue responding:

According to Rabbi Sue, women have always had critical roles in Judaism in its continuation. Now, women's role may be enhanced or new. Female rabbis have made Judaism accessible to a lot of people who might not have otherwise had access to it. Women can bring multitasking, caring, compassion and being caregivers to the profession.

Rabbi Sue has two kids and the hardest thing for her to do is to juggle family and professional life as well as for any professional woman. Her kids have grown up with Hillel students and have gained from it by developing their security and comfortability. It is in that community that they have become committed to community. She knows that they sometimes feel they do not have her 100% because she may be working and may have to miss attending some of their activities. She has had to give up a lot of activities being so busy with just her job and mothering. She could not give as much attention to her students because of her children, especially when they were younger. She is a mother figure at Hillel and there is a family feeling to it.

Rabbi Sue's father has always been supportive and encouraging. Her mother pushed her with Jewish activities and passed to her the importance of community, giving to the community, and being Jewishly involved.

In her job, she is frustrated with the amount of fundraising and administrative tasks because she would rather be doing more teaching or rabbinic things, like pastoral counseling. She likes bringing Jewish life to people who would not have understood how important

leadership is to Jewish life and to build Judaism and she wishes she could focus all of her time on it. A big challenge to her has been the lack of a business background.

When she was pregnant, it was awkward, though before, it was less common for women rabbis. Being pregnant may have made her female students more uncomfortable than the male students because they might have to confront issues of their future. Women have looked at her and thought they could not do what she does and some say if she can, so can they.

The foundation of everything she does in her job is Judaism, though she does not get to study it as much as she would like to study it and she also does not necessarily get to put it into her work daily. The foundation of Hillel is family, which is linked with Judaism, community, and leadership. Jewish leadership is about building and that is about *zedakah*. She does teach a little and tries to incorporate Judaism in programs and in meetings.

She has received respect from the school administration and they are happy to see that she wants to make positive changes for the students for the better. She has served on committees and has accomplished things on behalf of the students.

Megan's Ethnographic Experience

Date: Friday, March 17, 2003

Time: 12:45-1:30 p.m.

Location: Hillel Center at Indiana University

Interview with Rabbi Sue Shiffon

On the day that Drew and I were to interview Rabbi Sue, I was feeling rather confident. I had had a good morning and was rather eager to get the fieldwork aspect of our project underway. During my walk across campus to the Hillel Center, I checked the batteries in my audiocassette recorder and went over the questions I planned to ask Rabbi Sue in my head. As I made my way up the narrow steps to the Helene G. Simon Hillel Center entrance, I took off my hat to show respect and made efforts to straighten my hair. Upon entering the center, I was overwhelmed by the wonderful smell of freshly baked food coming from the center's kosher kitchen. I must have been rather conspicuous in my sniffing efforts, as I soon realized that I had a small audience to my left comprised of rather confused looking women sitting in what appeared to be a living room. One of the older women in the group asked me if I needed help with something. When I told her that I was looking for Drew Kaplan, she directed me to the kitchen. Drew was sitting in the kitchen, flirting with some Jewish girls, and looking at a flyer

he had designed for one of the events that the Hillel center was putting on when I found him. I interrupted his activities and suggested that we go over our interview plan. He told me that Rabbi Sue was running a little late and would be arriving soon. About five minutes later, Rabbi Sue arrived. She looked different than I had imagined. For some reason, I had envisioned her as a rather unapproachable woman clad in a dark purple robe at all times. After all, she was not simply the first woman rabbi I met; she was the first rabbi I had ever seen or talked to. And having grown up in a Catholic household, I guess I must have developed the idea that all religious leaders are intimidating individuals who wear equally intimidating attire. Yet, Rabbi Sue seemed very approachable. On that particular day, she was wearing a loose fitting mauve ensemble complete with pants, a jacket, and a camisole, which served to bring out the auburn highlights in her wavy brown hair. I noticed that she peered out at the world through very concerned looking eyes that were flanked by the tortoise shell rims of her glasses. And although she appeared rather small in stature, I soon realized that she had a very big presence. After formal introductions, Rabbi Sue suggested that we move to her office for the interview. Her office was rather large and divided equally into two parts: one part was reserved for a rather large desk, a computer, and a huge bookcase, while the other part was reserved for a comfy armchair, a couch, and a table with flowers on it. Rabbi Sue suggested that Drew and I settle in on the couch while she took a seat in the armchair. Suddenly I began to feel nervous, and my nervousness showed as I began my first question, saying, "So, Drew and I are doing are project on Jewish women rabbis...". Having realized the redundancy of my phrasing, Drew, Rabbi Sue, and I all began to laugh together. From this experience, I learned that a good laugh is perhaps the best way to begin an interview.

Summary of interview held with Rabbi Sue on March 7, 2003:

Our interview with Rabbi Sue lasted for approximately forty-five minutes. During that time, we discussed how she negotiates her familial responsibilities in relationship to her rabbinical responsibilities, how her mother influenced her decision to become a rabbi, and how she feels about the administrative aspects of her position as the director of a Hillel serving approximately thirty-five hundred students.

To begin, Rabbi Sue contends that the hardest part of her job has been learning how to juggle the familial and rabbinical duties that she is confronted with on a daily basis. Although she admits that there have been times when her children have resented her occupation, Rabbi Sue firmly believes that both her son and her daughter have benefited significantly from growing up around the close-knit community that has developed within the Hillel over the years. She claims that being surrounded by Jewish communities comprised of surrogate “older brothers and sisters” has enabled her children to develop strong sense of filial devotion not only to their own family but also to the Jewish community at large.

When Rabbi Sue was a child, her own mother stressed the importance of developing a relationship with and giving back to one’s community. Rabbi Sue’s mother grew up in Gary, Indiana, the murder capital of the world, and was confronted with the toils of poverty from a very early age. Although Gary was home to a rather large steel mill industry, that industry did nothing to contribute to the community’s welfare. When Rabbi Sue’s mother moved to Indianapolis at the age of ten, however, she was confronted with a thriving community much different from the one that she had become accustomed to as a young girl in Gary. At that time, Indianapolis was growing at a rapid rate because Eli Lilly, the biggest employer in the state, had always invested back into the community. Thus, Rabbi Sue’s mother learned from her transition from Gary to Indianapolis a lesson that she would later teach to all of her children, a lesson that stressed the importance of giving back to one’s community in order to insure its survival. Rabbi Sue and her two brothers have always been active participants in the Jewish community. From the time that Rabbi Sue was a young girl, her mother always pushed her to enroll in Hebrew school, get involved in Jewish youths groups, and volunteer her time to help the Jewish community whenever possible. Today, Rabbi Sue’s brothers are successful businessmen, and they give back to the Jewish community financially. Rabbi Sue, on the other hand, gives back to the Jewish community personally through her vocation.

As the Hillel director at Indiana University, Rabbi Sue’s goal is to create a home away from home for students, as she states, “I am really committed to family, and I want this Hillel to feel like a family”. Yet, Rabbi Sue’s position as a Hillel director, as opposed to a congregational rabbi, has left her feeling very frustrated at times. Because her job is rather administrative, she has to spend a lot of her time reading budgets, raising funds, and meeting with potential contributors. If it were up to her, she would be able to spend 100% of her time at the center with the students because that is why she wanted the job in the first place. Yet at the same time, she realizes that the administrative aspects of her job are a necessary evil. She must raise funds to put on quality programming for the Jewish students at IU, and she must make sure that the Hillel is running smoothly not simply as a home away from home but as a business. Yet as a woman, she believes that administrative roles are better suited to men with an affinity for business. She, on the other hand, has never been interested in business. When she was a student at IU, she

studied social work. Thus, she is more interested in spending a considerable amount of time with students, developing activities infused with Judaism at IU, and teaching classes about the history of Judaism. Unfortunately, her administrative role has prevented her from doing these things as much as she would have liked to over the last thirteen years¹.

¹ Rabbi Sue received her ordination from the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in Philadelphia, in 1988. She has been the executive director of Indiana University's Hillel center since 1989.

Drew's Ethnographic Experience
Date: Thursday, March 13, 2003-04-29
Rabbi Mira and Rabbi Sue speak to the class
Time: 9:30-10:45 a.m.

On Thursday 13 March, both Rabbis Sue Shiffon and Mira Wasserman spoke to our Anthropology class on being women rabbis. Our classroom at 9:30 AM was set up with desks and chairs in rows and about a dozen, mostly female, students in the room while our professor and we students sat and one rabbi at a time spoke standing up in front of the class. The procedure was that each of the two women spoke at length on their own, unaided by questions or prompts:

Rabbi Sue spoke first about what Hillel does on campus, as she is the director of that organization on campus. She spoke about how there have been significant changes about women as rabbis and that people have accepted them more.

She then moved on to telling how she became a rabbi. She was very active in her congregation in high school and, at first, wanted to take a step back from Judaism in college, though she received many questions about Judaism, forcing her to acknowledge it. Towards the end of her first year, she was confronted by a Christian who tried to get her to accept Jesus as the Messiah. The effect of this incident was that it solidified her Judaism permanently and made her think and caused her to start doing some more studying. To her, Judaism is being part of the Jewish community, being raised in a Jewish family, and being involved in the Jewish world. She then got more involved in college and the more she got involved, the more she wanted to be a rabbi. Having been aware of women being able to become rabbis, and receiving support from people, especially her family, she decided to attend rabbinical school. While she was in rabbinical school, she figured out that she would not be a congregational rabbi and would rather be involved with Hillel and took up a position at the University of Delaware Hillel while still in rabbinical school.

Aside from there being *halakhic* issues about women being rabbis, some people have emotional issues with it but she thinks that exposure to them helps people accustom themselves. There are more normative ways now for people to have met women rabbis, so it is not so unusual. She loves Judaism, cares about Judaism, and wants to make the Jewish world stronger. About having a job, she said women who have a career will always have a struggle. Although her first commitment and priority is family, she does not want to have to choose.

At this point, Rabbi Sue sat down and Rabbi Mira took the floor. She questioned "Is there a distinctive role of a woman rabbi? Are rabbis who are women functioning significantly differently than men who are rabbis? Or is it something a bit more complicated?" She believes that it is more complicated.

She began speaking about how her upbringing influenced her in becoming a rabbi. Her mother's feminism came after Mira's birth during the first generation of Jewish feminism. In her

household growing up, the boys and girls were treated the same- she even wore a yarmulke. When she was in eighth grade, she wanted more equality in the services at the Conservative Jewish day school she attended, though it was later that she learned the issues involved. Having been aware of women rabbis growing up, she went to rabbinical school to continue her Jewish studies and to maybe work with public policy, maybe in the Jewish world. She was really drawn to the academics, working with Jewish people, making connections between the Jewish texts, Jewish traditions, and the Jewish people who had not discovered meaning in their life.

Growing up, she “had no sense that there had been any content to a Jewish woman’s experience.” She “had a sense that Jewish women sort of did nothing and that Jewish men did everything. Yet, equality demanded [her] as a girl to do everything as the boys do. It was only much later that [she] began to have a sense that Jewish women throughout the ages had had meaningful Jewish experiences that were different than those of Jewish men.”

Jewish women and women rabbis, especially, have encouraged Jews to start looking back at the traditions which are especially meaningful to women, such as family purity. They also are helping to create new rituals for females.

Rabbis were more desired for their pastoral role than their legal authority, especially in the reform movement. Women have changed the rabbinate, making it more like a healing profession, like social work and teaching. She thinks “being a mother makes such terrific demands upon one’s time and energy that it demands sometimes a negotiation of the rabbinic role. Traditionally, rabbis, whether functioning in the new way or old, were expected to be working in the public realm as rabbis around the clock, whenever they were needed.” Women rabbis have been instrumental in “various rabbinic organizations of protecting rabbis’ time and suggesting that we need to be more realistic about the limits on a rabbi’s time.” Women have been changing the rabbinate, especially in the reform movement. She says her work is indistinguishable from her male colleagues’.

Megan’s Ethnographic Experience

Date: Thursday, March 13, 2003

Rabbi Mira and Rabbi Sue speak to the class

Time: 9:30-10:45 a.m.

March 13, 2003, was a day that my professor, anthropologist Joëlle Bahloul, set aside to devote to the topic of women in the rabbinate. Deciding that this was a topic best addressed from the perspective of actual women rabbis, Professor Bahloul invited Rabbi Sue Shiffron and Rabbi Mira Wasserman to speak to our class. I remember arriving to class extremely early that morning and waiting around for quite some time for my classmates to arrive. As I sat waiting for my classmates, an attractive, fair-skinned young woman wearing a tailored purple suit and a yarmulke entered the classroom. Because I had already met Rabbi Sue the week before, I knew

that this woman had to be Rabbi Mira Wasserman. Yet, I remember thinking that she looked too young to be a rabbi, so I hesitated to ask her if she was one of the women who would be speaking to our class that day. I decided that she was probably one of Professor Bahloul's graduate students who was particularly interested in the subject. Soon, one of my classmates walked in and greeted the young woman, saying, "Hi, Rabbi Wasserman".... I felt like a complete idiot.

Soon, Rabbi Sue walked in dressed in one of her loose fitting pantsuits and began to chat with Professor Bahloul and Rabbi Mira as we waited for the rest of the class to arrive. We stopped waiting at about 9:35a.m., and Rabbi Sue began her presentation to the class.

Summary of information gleaned from Rabbi Sue's presentation to the class:

Rabbi Sue Shiffon grew up in a Reform household on the north side of Indianapolis, Indiana. As a child, she was always extremely active in the Jewish community. In fact, by the time she reached high school, she had already taken a very active role in her congregation and was serving on the board of a Jewish youth group. Yet, when she matriculated to Indiana University in the late 1970's to study social work, she decided that she needed a change of pace. At that time, Indiana University did not offer a lot of programming for Jewish students and the university's Hillel Center was in rather bad shape, so the future rabbi decided to take a break from her Jewish involvement for a while. She could not, however, take a break from her Jewish identity. Almost everywhere she went, she encountered people who "had never met a Jewish person before". Her life became a series of encounters with people who unthinkingly labeled her as "the Other". One day, she met a young Christian woman who tried to convince her that Jesus was the messiah by showing her Bible quotes in a pamphlet that was custom made for proselytizers. Being proselytized compelled Rabbi Sue think about Judaism in a way that she had never thought about it before. She began to contemplate what her Judaism was all about, and she came to the conclusion that her Judaism was based on being part of the Jewish community, being raised in a Jewish family, and being involved in the Jewish world. Thus, she decided that although she liked social work in terms of the connection with people, her real connection was with the Jewish community. So, she began to consider becoming a rabbi as a means of further developing that connection.

During her senior year of college, Rabbi Sue was accepted to the Reconstructionist Rabbinical School in Philadelphia. When she began her studies there in the early 80's, the college was less than half women². At that time, the Reform and Reconstructionist movements

² Today the student population at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical School is 60% women, and that number continues to grow.

were the only ones ordaining women, as the Conservative Movement did not begin ordaining women until 1985. Rabbi Sue loved studying at rabbinical school, notwithstanding the fact she admits it was kind of like living in a bubble. She became so immersed in her studies that she began to feel disconnected from the world she had once planned to alter through social work. During her years in rabbinical school, Rabbi Sue decided that she wanted to become a Hillel director, as opposed to becoming a congregational rabbi. Her decision was in part influenced by her earlier experience at Indiana University. As mentioned above, the Hillel Center at Indiana University was in rather bad shape during Rabbi Sue's undergraduate years. Thus, as an undergraduate at IU, Rabbi Sue often felt like she had no place to go on campus for help with Jewish issues.

Today, Rabbi Sue is the Executive Director at the Hillel Center at Indiana University, which has become a home away from home for about three thousand to thirty-five hundred Jewish students. As Executive Director, Rabbi Sue has been able to alter the face of Jewish life at IU considerably. She works with her staff comprised of five others to develop social, religious, cultural, and educational programs for the students. Furthermore, Rabbi Sue does a lot of work on campus to teach about what Judaism is and to breakdown barriers that were constructed in the name of anti-Semitism.

Rabbi Sue claims that although she has experienced some gender discrimination in the rabbinate, most people do not have a problem with her when they understand that she did not choose the profession in order to change the world in terms of women's issues. Rather, she chose to become a rabbi because she loves Judaism, and she wants to make the Jewish world stronger.

Summary of information gleaned from Rabbi Mira's presentation to the class:

Rabbi Mira Wasserman was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in 1971. Thus, her upbringing as a Jew corresponded to the burst of Jewish feminism in the 1970's. This feminist awakening called into question the idea that men and women cannot function equally in the public and private spheres. Rabbi Mira's mother was part of the first generation of Jewish feminists who argued that women should be able to participate in the Jewish rituals that had historically been bestowed to men. Because her mother was aligned with feminist ideology, Rabbi Mira was able to grow up in a household in which men and women were to be treated as equals at all times. Yet, Rabbi Mira's household was somewhat ahead of its time. Jewish households built on the foundations of gender equality were few and far between during the 1970's, as Rabbi Mira states, "an outsider would have thought that it was pretty crazy that before we ate on Friday night for the traditional Sabbath dinner, my mother would insist that I put on a yarmulke like my brothers".

Raised in an environment that promoted gender equality, Rabbi Mira became very distraught when she was exposed the harsh gender inequalities that permeated the walls of Jewish institutions in the late 70's and early 80's. As a young girl attending a Jewish day school run by the Conservative Movement, Rabbi Mira was not allowed to lead services like her male counterparts. This greatly agitated both her and her parents because her Hebrew was better than most of the boy's. Yet, because she was a girl who could not sing, she was virtually barred from becoming an important participant in the day school's services.

Rabbi Mira continued to pursue Jewish studies throughout high school and college, but she never really considered becoming a rabbi until well into her college years. When she started college, she was interested in social work, and it was always just kind of assumed that she would go on to law school and pursue social justice issues as a lawyer. But in her last year of college, she decided that she was not ready to leave the formal study of Judaism behind her, so she decided to go to rabbinical school in order to keep her options open. Yet, after attending rabbinical school for a couple of years, Rabbi Mira decided that she was interested in congregational work. She really enjoyed trying to forge connections to Jewish people, Jewish texts, and Jewish traditions.

As a Reform rabbi today, Rabbi Mira continues to enjoy the tasks associated with her profession. It is her view that the presence of women in the rabbinate has served to alter the role of the rabbi in American society. She believes that the role has transformed into a healing role not unlike that of a social worker. Furthermore, she is excited that women rabbis have taken upon themselves the task of creating rituals for Jewish women and girls. Due to the presence of women in the rabbinate, baby girls are now welcomed into communities with birth celebrations that were exclusively reserved for the welcoming of baby boys throughout history. Moreover, the presence of women in the rabbinate has also compelled concern for a rabbi's time and personal commitments. Women rabbis were the first to suggest that congregations and Hillels be more realistic on the limits of a rabbi's time, as many women rabbis are also mothers.

Drew's Summary of the Rabbi Mira Interview held April 4, 2003

As Megan set up a time and date when I was out-of-town, she took on the interview with Rabbi Mira Wasserman alone. The interview with Rabbi Mira on Friday 4 April was fashioned in such a way that Megan asked the questions and Rabbi Mira answered them:

Rabbi Mira perceives and does not like how women's bodies are perceived by rabbis and that men and women have different areas of religious life, though it is good that it helps the reproduction of the Jewish people, but that the rabbis feared and were disgusted at women's bodies is bad. She thinks that it is damaging to women's spiritual lives that menstruating is seen as unnatural because men do not menstruate. The rabbis see the male body as the norm and the female body as dangerous and out of control and she does not want to be teaching that girls' bodies are any less in the image of G-d than are boys' bodies. However, the family purity laws are appealing to women wanting to connect with a tradition for women. The *mikveh* does not require much study thereof beforehand, is accessible, and relatively easy contrasted with other rituals in Judaism. She immersed in a river prior to her wedding, though she did not want to deal with the rules of going to a *mikveh*.

When she was pregnant, it was reassuring for women and especially mothers that women do belong and being pregnant could be religious and spirituality to it, though she was not necessarily out to make a big show of it as she just went about her business. Women were excited about it, though she heard nothing from the men. Women liked the ideas of a female rabbi who was pregnant.

She said she never had any sexual discrimination of her, though, she might have been discriminated against her youth. Though, it was generally more in forms of patronizing. However, she did her job responsibly and once her congregants saw her work and get to know her, they accepted her.

As the role of the rabbi moved towards social work, women were entering the rabbinate, though rabbis would still be doing social work, anyways because it has to do with the needs of the congregations-they're less interested in having great orators or scholars and more in pastoral support. "Many [women] have strong skills in social work, and that's sort of their orientation." "Larger numbers of women in the rabbinate have probably helped [the shift towards more social work] happen."

"It helps people accept women rabbis when they see that a lot of the work that women rabbis do involves teaching kids, visiting people in the hospital, and being empathic and supportive in times of crises.... When male rabbis do it, it seems like 'rabbinic;' when women rabbis do it, it seems loving or maternal.... It just feels like a natural extension...of a woman rabbi's womanhood."

She does not believe that men and women are wired differently.

Regarding her children and her job, she feels required to be in two places at once and feels it a lot, but they may be complementary some times. Her congregation is the community in which she is raising her children-it is like a village that is raising her kids, like an extended family for them. It is hard on her, but she does not think it is hard on them.

Her mother and stepfather both work in the Jewish community and she has sought her mother's advice on things, though more so earlier on. Though her parents are involved with the

Jewish community, they were not the reason she got interested in becoming a rabbi. She was attracted by the intellectual rigor and that she wanted to do academic studies and be active in the world, so she thought she could leave her options open in doing poverty or justice work by attending rabbinical school. Through her experience in rabbinical school, she ended up being interested in congregational work. She found it was “very involving and engaging-it brought everything together” for her.

Megan’s Ethnographic Experience

April 3, 2003

7:30 p.m.

It was the night before my interview with Rabbi Mira, and I was overcome by a nervousness that had progressively grown into a childish fear. The fact that my Jewish colleague, Drew, would not be able to attend the interview was not helping matters much either. I had never realized it before, but I had been hiding behind Drew’s Jewish identity. As long as he was with me, I did not feel uncomfortable about interviewing the rabbis. It was as if his company served to justify my presence within the places that were built for a Jewish community. Without him, I was afraid that I would feel like an intrusive, religiously detached former Catholic who had gone to impose her secular presence upon a Jewish religious leader for a couple of hours. Furthermore, I did not want to waste Rabbi Mira’s time. She is a strong, charismatic, brilliant young woman, and notwithstanding the fact that she is only thirty-two, she has become a well-respected figure in Bloomington’s Jewish community. I began to wonder if the questions I had prepared were good enough for her. As I critically glanced over my questions, I realized that I had no idea where Bet Shalom, the Reform temple in which Rabbi Mira works, was located. So, I sat down at my computer and logged on to an Internet site to get driving directions. Much to my surprise, the directions revealed that Beth Shalom was only .3 miles away from my residence. I was dumbfounded. I could not believe that I had never noticed that the temple was right around the corner from my apartment complex. I had even seen pictures of Beth Shalom,

but somehow its location had eluded me. At that moment, I realized that there were whole worlds going on around me everyday; communities were flourishing as I speedily passed them by in my little red car. “Tomorrow I will slow down,” I thought to myself that night before I went to bed. Suddenly I was not scared anymore, for although my interview with Rabbi Mira had not yet come to pass, I had already learned something from the experience.

Date: Friday, April 4, 2003

Time: 1:30-2:30 p.m.

Location: Bet Shalom

Interview with Rabbi Mira Wasserman

I arrived at Bet Shalom about fifteen minutes early and was directed to the synagogue library to wait for Rabbi Mira. As I glanced around the library, I began to feel nervous and intimidated much like I had the night before. After all, what did I really know about Judaism? Being the rather fidgety person that I am, I grabbed an issue of *Reform Judaism* to occupy my nervous hands. As I flipped through the pages, I noticed that many of the women in the magazine looked a lot like Rabbi Mira, as they were young, brunette, tall, and fair-skinned, just like she is. While I was contemplating a modeling career for her, Rabbi Mira entered the room, clad in a pair of khakis and a horizontally striped blue and white shirt, to inform me that she would be just a couple of minutes. At that moment, I noticed what made Rabbi Mira look different from all the Jewish models in the magazines. “Of course, I thought to myself, “Rabbi Mira wears a yarmulke”. She had been wearing one the first day that I met her, and she was wearing one that day also. I remember thinking how approachable she looked that day. She was dressed so casually, so unlike the way she was dressed the first time I met her. I was relieved that she decided to go casual on the day of our interview. For some reason, a Rabbi Mira in khakis was far less intimidating than a Rabbi Mira in a tailored suit. Soon, the casually dressed

Rabbi Mira returned and suggested that we move to her office for the interview. Upon entering her rather large office, I could see that she was an incredibly organized woman. Nothing seemed to be out of place, for there were no stray papers scattered about the room, and even the pictures on the wall seemed to be placed with a certain degree of style and care. The room was divided into two sections: a business section with a desk, a phone, a stapler, a computer, and many other practical office supplies and a welcoming section complete with two comfy armchairs, a loveseat, and a table with Kleenex and flowers on it. We sat in the welcoming section for the interview.

Summary of interview held with Rabbi Mira on April 4, 2003:

My interview with Rabbi Mira lasted for approximately one hour. During that time, we discussed the ways in which religious texts written by men have served to delimit religious possibilities for Jewish women, her pregnancies and their impact on her congregation, her congregation and its impact on her family, and her motivations for pursuing a position in the rabbinate.

Our discussion concerning the delimiting effects that the religious texts have historically had on the experience of Jewish women centered on many of the laws explained in the Talmud. Rabbi Mira contends that the family purity laws in the Talmud, although seemingly rooted in a concern for reproduction and the persistence of the Jewish people, are “rooted in the rabbis’ misogyny and fear and disgust at women’s bodies”. She feels this way not because she thinks that the laws are unappealing, but because she has studied the Talmud quite extensively and believes that the male rabbis consciously put forth the message that women’s menstrual blood is impure. To her, the historical portrayal of women as impure beings has maligned the female sex and continues to damage the possibility for Jewish women to have “whole religious lives”. A “whole religious life” to Rabbi Mira is one in which the woman is able to claim ownership of her own body, menstruation, and the *mikveh*, while also being able to lay claim to the territories of religious life historically bestowed to Jewish men—namely, the religious texts, the study house, and the synagogue. She is not a votary of the belief the women and men should be separated in terms of dominion over the private and public spheres, respectively. Rabbi Mira went on to say that she does want to teach her children congregates that girl’s bodies are somehow less in the image of God than boy’s bodies, which is a message that she believes is spelled out not only in the Talmud, but also in modern society.

While we were on the subject of female bodies, I asked Rabbi Mira to explain how her congregation responded to her past pregnancies, as pregnancy is a rather blatant display of womanhood. According to Rabbi Mira, many of the women at Beth Shalom were very excited about her pregnancies. Many such women confided in Rabbi Mira that her being a pregnant

representative of official religion served to affirm that the presence of their own female bodies within the synagogue was justified. And although none of the men ever approached Rabbi Mira about her pregnancy, she did not sense any discomfort among them at the time. She went on to say that her womanhood has always been well received by her congregation and that her abilities as a rabbi have never been called into question because of her sex. Yet, she does believe that many people had a hard time taking her seriously at first because of her youth, and she wonders if this would have been an issue at all had she been a young man when she began working at Beth Shalom.

She also went on to say that the role of the rabbi has moved in the direction of social work as of late, and that this movement has facilitated the ever-growing presence of women in the rabbinate. According to Rabbi Mira, congregations no longer need great orators and scholars because they are more interested in pastoral support, which is not that much different than social work. As a rabbi today, most of Rabbi Mira's work involves teaching children, visiting people in the hospital, and offering empathy and support in times of crisis. She contends that women have been doing these types of things personally and professionally for hundreds of years now. Thus, when people see the types of things that rabbis are required to do today, they are less likely to question the ability of women to function in such a capacity.

Yet, Rabbi Mira suggests that although many people no longer question women's rabbinical abilities, they still continue to question whether or not women rabbis can be good mothers. She admits that as a mother and a rabbi, she often feels like she is required to be in two places at one time. Yet, she does not feel that her position as a rabbi has hindered her ability to be a good mother. Quite conversely, she expresses the belief that her roles can be complementary at times, saying, "My congregation is also the community in which I am raising my children". Rabbi Mira believes that her children are advantaged because of her position in many ways. She contends that her children know tons of people in the Jewish community, both young and old, and that they are growing up in a very close-knit, supportive community. Yet, this is not to say that she does not feel a great amount of pressure as a rabbi with two sons to raise. She does, but she has learned to balance her life in a way that has made it manageable for her.

As a child, Rabbi Mira was taught to commit herself not only to her own family, but also to the Jewish community in which she was situated. Her own mother was always active in the Jewish community and now serves as the head of the Association of Reconstructionist Jewish Congregations. As Rabbi Mira explained to me during our interview, she looks up to and tries to emulate her mother because she is "really caring, good with people, and committed to her work". Yet, she contends that her admiration for her mother was not the compelling force that drove her decision to become a rabbi. She claims that she decided to become a rabbi while she was attending college in New York City. As an undergraduate, Rabbi Mira simultaneously attended Barnard College and J.T.S., the Conservative seminary.³ While juggling the demands of both academic programs, she became very interested in poverty and social justice issues. Yet, she was not ready to leave formal religious studies behind in order to become a social worker. Thus, she decided to become a rabbi because it was a profession that combined religious studies with issues of social justice.

³ The Conservative Movement did not ordain Rabbi Mira. She was ordained by the Reform Movement in 1998.

Drew's Tentative Analysis

Women rabbis handle their main two roles, mother and rabbi, with the deftness that those jobs require. As no one else's life is so smooth and stressless, so, too, do these rabbis contend with various pressures. For a female rabbi, seeing, visiting, and talking with people, empathizing and reassuring them drains a lot of energy out of her as well as to be able to mother her children throughout the day, most especially in their children's infancies. These dual roles truly require a woman of valor.

Because of the changing nature of the rabbinate in America towards not only incorporating social work into one's profession, but focusing on it, women have become drawn to it. One has to question whether the rabbinate of which he spoke, more along the lines of a legal decisor is not the same which is prevalent nowadays, which is more of a pastoral counselor. As Jacob Lauterbach suggested that it not be "considered merely as a profession by which one earns a livelihood," perhaps things have changed, certainly time-wise. Rabbi Mira even suggests this notion herself: as "being a mother makes such terrific demands upon one's time and energy that it demands sometimes a negotiation of the rabbinic role." As such, women rabbis have helped negotiate that role, limiting it to better accommodate their role as a mother.

Lauterbach further warned that a married woman "cannot give to the rabbinate that whole-hearted devotion which comes from the determination to make it one's lifework." As mentioned above, the rabbinate may be less an extremely full-time endeavor and just full-time so that the woman rabbi could tend to her mothering duties. I contend that a woman rabbi is neither able to fully give attention to her job nor fully provide care and attention to her own offspring, as she must juggle both. She must attend less to her job when she has infants, but as they grow

older and go to school, her requirement of mothering is lessened and she may be more able to focus on her occupation.

Both of the women in this report I found had overlaps in their life of both roles and sometimes this overlap resulted in prioritization of one or the other, whereas sometimes, they could be fused together, such as with Rabbi Sue's children being raised at the Hillel in an environment with college students. This unique experience enabled them to grow as well as to become and feel as part of the community. This similar community-feeling occurs with Rabbi Mira's children. However, when Rabbi Mira cannot attend to her children sometimes, she feels as if she is missing out, though she does not think her children necessarily feel the same way.

In their jobs, both women provide a good amount of social work and enjoy it. Their continued presence speaks for their success in their occupational endeavors. The amount of social work-based activities fits the feminine/mothering characteristics they bring to their jobs. Although Rabbi Sue deals more with administrative functions and serving as a liaison to the university, the two rabbis very much are figures of support in addition to offering pastoral counseling and teaching classes, among other activities.

The respective places of work where each of the rabbis are serving have continued to keep the rabbis on, attesting to their success in what they do and their work. How their children will turn out is only beginning to show-how they result as adults will be the true measure of the results of their mothers' mothering along, of course, with their fathers' parenting.

Megan's Tentative Analysis:

Women Rabbis at Work

As it seems, the types of activities in which Rabbi Mira and Rabbi Sue partake as women rabbis are strikingly similar not only to the activities that David Novak dubbed “not essentially rabbinical”, but also to the activities of the women in the twentieth century Reform sisterhoods. As outlined in the introduction, these activities include teaching, pastoral counseling, fund raising, aiding the sick, and leading services. To Rabbi Sue and Rabbi Mira, these activities are “essentially rabbinical” and define what it means to be a rabbi in the twenty-first century.

Rabbi Mira herself contends that Jewish women have been doing what she does personally and professionally for hundreds of years. As a congregational rabbi, most of her activities involve teaching young children, leading services, visiting people at the hospital, and offering empathy to people in times of crises. She claims that because these types of activities correspond to the “natural” roles of women as envisaged throughout history, many people are less critical of her decision to become a rabbi when they discover how “womanly” the profession has become.

In a similar vein, Rabbi Sue’s responsibilities, although more administrative than Rabbi Mira’s, also correspond to the types of duties ladies of the Reform sisterhoods put upon themselves in the twentieth century. As the Executive Director of Indiana University’s Hillel Center, Rabbi Sue spends a great deal of her time raising funds to insure the survival of a place in which Jewish students gather. Similarly, ladies of the Reform sisterhoods established as one of their main goals the raising of funds to insure the survival of a gathering place for Jews—in this case, the synagogue. Like Rabbi Mira, Rabbi Sue also spends a fair amount of her time

teaching young people about Judaism. Moreover, she has become a maternal figure to many of the Jewish students who consider the Hillel Center to be their home away from home.

Thus, it seems important to address why the activities that were once deemed “not essentially rabbinical” fit within the job descriptions of rabbis in the twenty-first century. Rabbi Mira suggests that the role of the rabbi had already begun moving in the direction of social work by the time that women were ordained. It is her view that rabbis today are not unlike social workers, as she states, “today, congregations are less interested in having great orators and scholars as their rabbis; they are perhaps more interested in having pastoral support, which is not that much different than social work” (Wasserman, 2003). So, in her view, it is the needs of congregations that dictate what types of activities are considered rabbinical.

At this point, it seems only appropriate to address why the needs of congregations and Jewish communities may have changed over the years. Yet, to address this question, it is necessary to travel back to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to reconsider the psychological impact of The Second Great Awakening on American society. As mentioned in the introduction, Jonathan D. Sarna defines The Second Great Awakening as a period in which “there was a diminished belief in predestination and innate human depravity and a greater emphasis was placed on the ability of human beings, through their own efforts, to change the world” (Sarna, 1996: p.43). On the surface, this shift in religious ideology seems like a very positive one. Yet when one considers the implications of living in a society where people are taught that they can change the world through their own efforts, one can begin to see how such an expectation for people can serve to psychologically encumber them. In such a society, human aspirations often go unfulfilled, for people believe that they can change the world but are often faced with the realization that it is not in their power to do so. Thus, people become more and more dissatisfied

with themselves and begin to seek out the support of others who can empathize with their pain. Therefore it seems that after The Second Great Awakening, American people in general may have needed religious leaders with the nurturing abilities that have been aligned with the female sex for centuries—hence, the increasing need for pastoral support among Jewish congregations and communities today. This leads me to an important chicken-or-egg question: Did women, for personal reasons, need to become rabbis, or did Jewish society need its women to become rabbis?

Women Rabbis as Mothers

As mentioned in the introduction, an idea arose in 1922 at the Central Conference of American Rabbis that a woman's devotion to family precludes the possibility that she can exhibit a "whole-hearted" devotion to the rabbinate. Today, this idea is problematic for at least two reasons. First of all, it fails to adequately define the rather subjective term "whole-hearted", and by referring to the heart it confuses an internal emotion with an outwardly manifested devotion. Furthermore, it presents a false dichotomy between the familial roles and rabbinical roles of women rabbis, extricating them into entirely separate realms that do not interact. For many women rabbis, motherly devotions are part and parcel of their devotion to the rabbinate.

Although Rabbi Mira and Rabbi Sue experience a big tension between their familial and rabbinical roles at times, neither of the women feel that their familial roles take away from their devotion to the rabbinate. Quite conversely, both women contend that being caretakers in the home has better equipped them with the skills to be caretakers in the workplace. Rabbi Sue, in particular, stresses this point, stating, "I am very committed to family, and I feel that this Hillel is a family. Yet, I do not think I would have understood how to build that had I not had a family of

my own” (Shiffon, 2003). Thus it seems that for many women rabbis, home life serves as an alternative form of rabbinical training.

Furthermore, both Rabbi Sue and Rabbi Wasserman assert that their own children are important members of the communities in which they serve. Rabbi Sue’s children, as young Jews, have been welcomed into the Hillel community comprised of other young Jews—in this case, college students. According to Rabbi Sue, this has enabled her children to develop close-knit relations with many “surrogate brothers and sisters”. In a similar vein, Rabbi Mira’s children attend religious services, social activities, and primary school at Bet Shalom, the Reform temple in which she works. They, like Rabbi Sue’s children, have become part of the close-knit community in which their mother serves as rabbi. So, as it seems, women rabbis serve as religious leaders not only to their communities but also to their own children. Their work outside of the home is not “extralocal” in the sense that the term is most often used; rather, it is infused with and inspired by their work in the home. Their respective roles fold into one another as day folds into night, as eggs fold into batter. Thus, it seems that the presence of a woman rabbi’s children in her place of work would actually serve to increase her devotion to her profession, as opposed to taking away from it.

Conclusion

Many people would contend that women become rabbis in order to change the world in terms of women's issues. A concern for women's issues, however, was not the driving force that compelled Rabbi Mira and Rabbi Sue to pursue rabbinical posts. Both women contend that they became rabbis because they love Judaism, and they want Judaism to serve as the foundation of everything that they do. Yet, many Jews would argue that everything that they do is against Judaism, that somehow their presence in the rabbinate serves not only to break laws that never should have been broken, but also to metaphorically tear down a *mechitzah* that kept women out of what has traditionally been man's—namely, the position of public authority. And, in doing so, they have, whether or not they intended to, changed the world in terms of women's issues, as they have stepped outside of a domestic sphere that has historically been bestowed to Jewish women.

Yet, one has to question how women rabbis could be accused of invading male territory when most of their rabbinical activities are of the type most commonly aligned with feminine qualities. Rabbis have essentially become caregivers in American society, and the role of the rabbi in the twenty-first century is not unlike that of a social worker. Therefore, it seems that women not only *can* fulfill the role of the rabbi but *should*. This idea has become rather prevalent in the eyes of Reform youths, as most women rabbis are affiliated with Reform Judaism. Now seems an appropriate time to return to the story of Sally J. Priesand, the first woman rabbi to be ordained by the Reform movement. In the postscript to *Women Rabbis: Exploration and Celebration*, Priesand assesses the changes that have occurred since her ordination in 1972. One of the things that struck her the most was how children have come to view the role of the rabbi. She writes:

Let me tell you a story about something that happened in my congregation, something that I suspect has also happened in yours. A little boy was asked if, when he grew up, he might like to become a rabbi, and he responded: 'Boys can't become rabbis; only girls can'. I have been in my congregation for twelve years, and only recently did I realize that all the babies I have named have grown up believing that rabbis are women. (Priesand, 1996: p.118)

Priesand's quote is an inspiring one: it inspires one to question the future face of Judaism in America, and it compels one to contemplate what the world would be like if the term "woman rabbi" became redundant. Yet, as it seems, the term "woman rabbi" has always seemed a little odd, as the term "woman" is used as an adjective modifying the term "rabbi"(Wasserman, 2003). This leads one to question whether the term is more telling than it seems, for Jewish women have certainly served to modify the role of the rabbi in American society.

From our fieldwork project, we have come to understand that the role of the rabbi in America is becoming increasingly "feminized" for lack of a better word. We decided that in another ten years, our project might become a piece of salvage ethnography, a glimpse into the lives of women rabbis when they were still different enough to be interesting.

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Appendix

Interview with Rabbi Sue Shiffon
7 March 2003

Megan: Drew and I are doing a project on women rabbis and how their role in the public sphere relates to their role in the private sphere, especially when considering the family and different things like that. Umm, so I made up some questions and Drew is going to make his up on the fly. Umm, we just want to get a feel for how you view certain aspects of your job.

Over the years, many people have tried to justify keeping women out of the rabbinate because of the phrase in psalms that states, “all glorious is the king’s daughter within the palace”. How do you feel about this statement?

Rabbi Sue: Umm, I think that I wouldn’t necessarily interpret that statement in particular because it is only one statement in terms of Jewish life, and there are so many more statements about women. Also, I think just within the whole context of Jewish law, it’s developed over time and I think that at the time when women were more in the private sphere and men were more in the public sphere, there was a lot of Jewish law created that spoke about what the surrounding communities were doing. I think that as we’ve grown and developed that you can look and see that women, particularly Biblical women, have always had roles in Judaism in the continuation of Jewish life. Now, I think we are living in a time period where the role of women may have changed somewhat, but women have always been critical to Jewish life, and now it might be in enhanced ways or new ways, and those are different ways, but I look at it more from that perspective, as opposed to based on one particular quote because you also have quotes about Sarah. My favorite biblical quote is “everything that Sarah says, listen to her voice.” So, you know there are a lot of biblical verses that you can come up with and that you can find that point to the importance of women in Judaism.

Megan: How do you think that female rabbis have enhanced Judaism?

Rabbi Sue: I think that it has made Judaism accessible to a lot of people who may not of otherwise had access to it. Umm, generally and hopefully women can bring some of the qualities that we traditionally associate with women like the ability to multitask and a certain amount of caring and compassion, and also, maybe female rabbis have more of an ability to be caregivers, and I think rabbis are very much caregivers, so I think that job description kind of compliment the abilities, the not necessarily natural abilities, that women are socialized to give, or be, or whatever! ha ha ha ha

(phone rings a few times)

Megan: Okay, and my next question...you have a family, right?

Rabbi Sue: Yeah

Megan: so you have a kid?

Rabbi Sue: yeah..two

Megan: perfect...as a Jewish woman with a family and a female rabbi with a community, how do you negotiate between your two roles? Do you think that either of your roles make an impact on the other?

Rabbi Sue: That is a great question.

Megan: ha ha ha ha ha ha (why did I laugh so much there? Perhaps I was nervous, but I sound like a smarm.)

Rabbi Sue: That is probably the hardest thing to do. I mean, out of everything I do, the hardest is to juggle my family and professional life, and I think that would be the case for any woman in a professional role, but it is definitely a challenge. As far as the impact on my family and the impact on my Hillel community, I think that there are positives and negatives for both. For my family, I think my kids have grown up with so many “older brothers and sisters” from all of the Hillel students that they have learned to build close relationships with so many students that treated them so well and my kids have incredible self-confidence, they experience an incredible amount of security. They feel very secure and comfortable in a lot of roles. They really like life, and I think that that has a lot to do with the students always being there, giving them so much positive feedback, and being so good to them. I think that has been really positive in terms of shaping who they are. Also, both of my kids are very much committed to the community and to making the world a more fair and just place, and, to me, one of the cornerstones of Judaism is “sadaca”, which means making the world a more fair and just place. And I think that “sadaca” is something that is completely internalized for my children, and I think that has a lot to do with what I do here and how the students here have treated my children. So, I think that has been the positive piece of it. The more challenging or difficult piece for them is that they don’t always feel that they have me 100%, and they don’t always have me when they need me. I mean, there are performances of theirs that I have missed...umm, you know, certain milestones, well not milestones but things that they have done at school. There are little things like that that I have not been there for, and that’s really hard for them and me. And so I think that that has been sort of the flipside of it—that is, trying to juggle all that. Personally, it takes a toll because I basically I had two things in my life: my job, my family, and nothing else...I mean, I gave up things, well I don’t mean “giving up” in terms of regret; I don’t say that in a bitter way because I have loved every minute of it, but there have been times when there was no time for me. You know, I used to read a lot, and I don’t read as much as I used to unless it is work related and, thus, done in the office, but at home, I don’t open books...I mean, for many years, I never got to open a book for pleasure. Now, I am able to do that a little bit more because my kids are older, but there were many years when I never read books for pleasure, notwithstanding the fact that I used to do it all of the time. I don’t watch TV for the most part, no that I regret that too much...ha ha ha. I mean, I just don’t have time to do that. I have a lot of friends, but I don’t have the kinds of friendships that I did before I had kids, and I suspect that I will have them again when my kids are out of the house. Yet, again, I don’t regret that; that is not something that I say in a bitter or angry way; it is simply a fact of life. Umm, so I think that that has certainly been the tough side.

Here at work, it has been the same kind of thing, and I think that there are students over the years who felt like they may have wanted me here more, although G-d only knows how I could have been here more than I already am. I think, particularly when my kids were younger, there were students who resented my son being around more than my daughter because he was somewhat of a handful at times. I think that that is less so now, but I don't know.

Megan: So, you become like a mother to both?

Rabbi Sue: exactly And there are a lot of times that I will be meeting with people, and my kids just walk over after school and barge into my office. They are getting better though. And that isn't fair to whomever I am meeting with, so those are the things, I think, that overlap. I think I am more of a mother figure for students now than I was ten years ago. Ten years ago, I was kind of the older sister figure, and I think that sort of...and I think that I am very committed to family, and so I think really that this Hillel is a family. I mean, I hope you feel that way (to Drew). And not every Hillel you go to across the country feels that way, and this Hillel feels like a family, and I think that's really because of my commitment to family and my ability...I mean, if I didn't have my own family, I don't think that I could understand how to build that.

Megan: so it all transfers over? That brings me to my next question...I didn't write this down, but can you tell me a little about your experience with your own family growing up? How did that influence your decision to become a rabbi?

Rabbi Sue: That is a great question..umm...I think that my family influenced me a lot. I am very, very close to my parents and my brothers, but my parents in particular. I attribute it in more ways to my mom than to my Dad, but my Dad has always been incredibly supportive and has always encouraged me—well, all of us as children—to take the directions that I thought I wanted to go. Yet, it was always my mom when I was younger and didn't want to go to Hebrew school or be involved in youth group...it was my mom always saying “just give it a try”. My mom also taught me the importance of community. My mom tells an excellent story that she used to tell when I was younger, and I just heard her tell it a couple of years ago. Umm...it speaks to how we were raised. My mom grew up in Gary, Indiana, which is the murder capital of the world. So there she was in a community with a huge industry and the steal mills do no give back to the community at all. The industry never turned any of its profits back to the community; they have never done anything. When I was about eight or nine, I moved to Indianapolis, and my mom was amazed at how the community was so different. It was a community that was fighting and growing, and you have Eli Lilly, which is pretty much the biggest employer in Indiana. I mean, they have a multimillion-dollar foundation. You have so many projects and organizations that thrive because this company gives so much money back to the community. My mom had always given back to the community, as the community was always very important to her, but Lilly, I think, really demonstrated to her that you should give back to the community, and if you don't have that then your community dies. (Phone rings and Rabbi Sue gets up to answer it.)

...sorry about that.

Megan: that is okay.

Rabbi Sue: continues her story...so, that was really, I think in many ways that that encapsulates my mom's life in terms of she has always been involved in giving back to the community, financially and personally. My mom has always done that, and now that my brothers have also done pretty well in business, my mom has always been there for them saying how important it is to give back to the community, and my brothers have always been very generous financially because of my mom—well, not only because of my mom; it is because they are adults with the means who are able to make those decisions. Yet, I think they do it, in part, because my mom always stressed giving back to the community; you can't just take. So, I think that that has also influenced me. I don't give financially, but I give very much in terms of giving of myself because I have always seen my mom doing that. And certainly being Jewishly involved was something that my mother really pushed.

Megan: Yeah, that is really interesting when one considers the role of the strong Jewish woman in influencing female rabbis. Drew, did you have any questions? I have another one, but I don't want to be a hog. I am the question hog.

Rabbi Sue: hahahahaha

Drew: okay..sorry if my phrasing is not so great.

Rabbi Sue: that's okay

Drew: How do you, as a female rabbi, see yourself specifically in this job of Hillel director? I ask this because you are sort of more administrative; I mean, you do do a lot of other stuff, but...

Rabbi Sue: right

(phone rings again; rabbi sue gets up to answer it.)

Rabbi Sue: that is a great question. Sometimes I wonder if people really realize...well, sometimes I am very frustrated with the amount of fund raising and administrative tasks because I wish I was doing more teaching and, kind of, more "rabbinic" things like pastoral counseling as well. So, sometimes I do get very frustrated with all the administration, but it has to happen, although it is not my favorite part of the job. Yet, I do have to say that I really enjoy getting to know the people who give their time and get involved financially. There are some amazing connections that we have made, and I have also tried to make that a way of bringing Jewish life to the people who otherwise would not have understood how important leadership is to Jewish life. Yet, I wish I had 100% of my time to be always here with students and meeting students because that is why I do this. I love students, and I think that it is so important to translate Jewish life and build Judaism. I wish I could focus all my time on that, and it is in this way that the administrative aspect of my job becomes very frustrating at times. And as a woman, I think that, typically, those administrative roles have been held by men. So, there are certain times when there are some challenges of being a woman that are involved. For example, I have no business background, and I have had to learn an incredible amount about business, like I didn't

know how to read a budget when I started this job. Thus, some of those things have been a huge challenge.

Megan: I just have one more question...I was reading this article in Harper's Bazaar by a female rabbi who is like twenty-six years old, and she was writing about how she feels as a rabbi. Reflecting on her pregnancy, she stated, "My body was all Earth, and my talk was all Heaven.". How do you interpret this?

Rabbi Sue:

I was pregnant the first time in rabbinical school, and there were like five of us pregnant at the same time. It wasn't at all unusual at that point in time to be pregnant, but certainly here, when my daughter was born, I had only been working here for two years when she was born, so I had been a year and then gotten pregnant. That is tough. I mean, I think any woman professional faces that, but certainly, you know, when do you tell people? I mean, people are excited, but at the same time, they are like "oh no, what does this mean for your job?"

"What are you going to do?" Are you going to come back?" I mean, I never had a question that I was coming back. I knew that I was going to work, but you know, there is always that kind of awkwardness. I think it was particularly awkward for people...I mean, my daughter is eleven now, and twelve years ago, it was still not as common for women to be rabbis. Now, of course, it is not quite as uncommon because people have been exposed to women rabbis, but you know, to be pregnant and to be a woman rabbi was almost like a double whammy, you know, a thing for people to feel even more awkward about.

Megan: Do you think that that has to do with how fertility of women has been such an important aspect of Judaism.

Rabbi Sue: Yeah, and it is one thing too, I think people can sort of like get used to you like a woman being a rabbi and being there, but like when you are pregnant, people cannot forget that you are a woman. It is just so blatant. I think that is a little bit, and I think that also for young female students, they are already struggling with what it will mean for them to have a career, be in college, get married, and all of that at the same time that they are struggling with academics, and so, I actually found, in many cases, more kind of discomfort among women, sometimes more so than even from male students, because it forces them to confront some of the difficult issues that they have tried to put on the back burner.

Megan: Because you are a strong female figure in their lives and serve as a role model. So they look to you and try to see how you are dealing with it and they are kind of going...

Rabbi Sue: Shit.

Megan: ha ha ha ha ha ha ha

Rabbi Sue: I think that there have been some women that look at me and think "wow, you know, I could never do that; I'm not even going to try" that had initially come here thinking that they would be rabbis, or on the flip-side, there are those that say "wow, I think I can do that; if she can manage it, I can manage it. Yet, I think that it has worked both ways.

Drew: You were referring earlier to building Jewish life, so how much Jewishness is involved in your job, as you are in an administrative role?

Rabbi Sue:

I think that there is not nearly enough. I mean, the foundation of everything I do is Judaism, but in the realm of the mundane, I don't get to study Judaism as much as I would like to. I mean, I'm doing Jewish all the time, but I don't get to always necessarily put that into my work on a day to day basis, and I would like to. I think that there are certain things that we...the very foundation, I mean, the very foundation of Hillel is family, which is linked intrinsically with Judaism, community, and leadership. And Jewish leadership is about building, and all of that is about "sadaca". That is the foundation of everything here. It is always a challenge to infuse those concepts in a more obvious ways to the programs that we do all the time. Umm, I mean, I teach a basic Judaism course, which I love to do. We study Talmud once a week, which I love to do. In our staff meetings, we are always trying to figure out how to better infuse Judaism and Jewish content into the programming that we do, but it is always a challenge to do that.

Drew: Being in your position, you also have to work with people in the school. How has that experience been for you?

Rabbi Sue: That, actually, has been the easiest part in terms of all that I do. I have experienced such incredible acceptance and respect given to me, an part of that stems from the fact that the person here before me was not as well respected. That is probably not a very good thing to put on tape. Let's just say that the Hillel was not as effective at that point in time, and I think because of that, there were a lot of people in the administration that really wanted to see a strong Jewish life here and a strong Jewish presence here for one hundred reasons. So, when I got here, they were so happy that somebody was here and wanted to make changes. Thus, I received an incredible amount of respect and acceptance from them, almost more so than from the students. The administration looks to me as the rabbi and Jewish leader, and also, I've done a lot..I mean, not just me but a lot of people. But I have really worked very hard to build our image on campus. Our staff is always amazed because whenever they go out on campus, the administrators are like "oh my gosh, Hillel is wonderful". When you say Hillel, the doors open up on campus. The staff is always really shocked by that happening because they don't understand; they don't know before they come here how many bridges we've built. I'm on the baccalaureate committee. Last year, it was a very Christian ceremony, and Miles Brand decided that he wanted it to be a more inclusive service. Thus, he came to me and asked, "how can we do this?" And we put a committee together, and thus, last year Baccalaureate was truly an interfaith service. The doors just are really open, and communication goes back and forth. I am always on campus—I mean, part of the balancing that I do involves that. I get called several times during the week to go speak in a class, speak in a residence hall, or take part in a baccalaureate committee. Anytime that people want, I want to be there and say, "Yes, Judaism is part of this campus". There is a policy now that students can miss classes for the high holy days and not be penalized; I fought for ten years for that policy. I mean, since the day I got here, I have been fighting for that policy. When Hillel needs things, it is really give-and-take.

Class interview with Rabbi Mira and Rabbi Sue:

Professor Bahloul:

Rabbi Sue: Hi, thank you for inviting me. I am the director of the Hillel, which is a Jewish student organization here on campus. We serve about three thousand to thirty-five hundred students on campus. We are there to provide a home away from home for Jewish students, which means we have social, religious, cultural, and educational programs. We have programs and services for all of the holidays; we do the Sabbath every week. We have lots of meals, and we are also there for Jewish students if they need help on campus, or if they need help with any problems in their classes in terms of issues related to Judaism. We are there if they need someone to talk to. We do a lot of teaching on campus and a lot of work on campus to teach about what Judaism is and to bridge barriers so that there won't be as much anti-Semitism on campus, and we also do a lot of Israel programming on campus and that sort of thing. There is a staff there comprised of myself and about four or five other full-time people, so if you have questions about Hillel, I would be happy to answer them at another time.

I came to talk to you about my own personal story and why I decided to become a rabbi and some of the issues that have had to do with that. I was ordained in 1988, so I have been a rabbi for twelve years now. I think that there have been some significant changes in terms of people's perceptions about women as rabbis; there was a lot of change in that and also a little bit about Jewish tradition, and what Jews have to say about that.

First of all, I was a student here at Indiana in the late 70's and early 80's. I came here thinking that I wanted to go into social work, and so I entered the school of social work. I really loved social work, but about the end of my freshman year...and as a preview to that, I grew up in a reform household, and I had been very, very active in my congregation in high school. I had been on my youth group board and was very, very active and very involved. When I came to Indiana, I felt like I was an adult, and I was going to take a little bit of a break from Judaism. I was active but not very much, and the Hillel on campus at that time was not very active. There wasn't much to do there, so there wasn't a lot of opportunity for me to get involved Jewishly. So, I decided to take a little bit of a break; I was a little burnt out from being so active and involved when I was young. Except, what kept happening to me throughout my whole freshman year, I lived over in Foster and constantly, so many people in my dorm were coming up to me and talking about "I have never met anybody Jewish before; you are the only Jewish person that I have ever met; tell me about that". That happened a lot, and...ummm...also, I think, a little bit of not really discrimination but just people who were uncomfortable around me. People had come from towns where they had never met anybody Jewish before, so they had some preconceived notions and preconceived ideas.

So, a lot of people were asking me questions. At the end of my freshman year, somebody came up to me and said, "you know, I would really love to hear the Jewish view on. I'd really like to talk to you, and so, I went with her and she was a senior and I was a freshman, and she had just gotten into law school, and...umm...she sat down with me and said, "you know, I really have to share this booklet with you", and I said, "okay". Then, she gave me this booklet that had a lot of Bible quotes in it, and she kept turning the pages. On each page, was a Bible quote with an interpretation, and she goes, "do you agree with what this book says?" And I would say, "well, I don't really know enough about the Bible to tell you the answer to that question, but I'd kind of like to see where you are going with this". So, she kept doing this and doing this; then

she turned to the last page and gave me a quote from Isaiah and said, “if you believe all of this, then you must believe that Jesus is the messiah”. So, I just felt like someone had punched me in the stomach, and I looked at her and said, “No, I don’t believe that”. She said, “Well, you have to; you said you believe everything that I have said up to this point”. So, I said, “No, I told you that I wasn’t sure if I believed it or not”. She said, “well look, I have done all the research. I’m going to be a lawyer and am very logical, and I have decided that Jesus is the messiah, so you should believe it too”. And I said, “well, you know, I really don’t believe that”. She said, “Well, look at all of these Bible quotes”. So, I said, “look, my Judaism is not based on whether you can give me Bible quote or not. My Judaism is based on being part of the Jewish community, being raised in a Jewish family, and being involved in the Jewish world. It is about so much more than the quotes on this piece of paper. I can’t change who I am because of these quotes that you are telling me”. So, we went back and forth for a really long time, and basically, she was talking on one level; I, on another. Well, we never really reached any place where we could meet, but it is interesting because of what that experience did for me. It solidified my Judaism permanently and made me think about what it meant to be Jewish in a way that I had never thought about it before. I think that challenge caused me to consider what Judaism meant to me, and I started doing a lot more studying and realizing how important Judaism was in my life. And also, those months that I had been away from the Jewish community came together at that point, and I knew how effected I was Jewishly, and that did a lot for me, so I started taking a lot of Jewish classes, and I started learning a lot more. I started teaching at what was then called “The Bloomington Jewish Center” and what is now called “Bet Shalom”. I got much more involved, and the more I got involved and the more courses I took in Jewish studies, the more I knew that although I liked social work in terms of the connection with people, my real connection was with the Jewish community.

I needed to be involved in the Jewish world. Back in the early 80’s, there were not a lot of women rabbis, but I had grown up in a Reform congregation, so I knew that women could be rabbis. Actually, when I was in confirmation class, we had gone to Cincinnati and met the first woman rabbi that had ever been ordained, and that always stuck in my mind also. So, I knew that that was an option that was open for me in a way that I think had I not been involved in the Reform movement, I may not have known. So, I kept thinking about that, and the more I thought about it, the more I got involved, the more I knew that wanted to do was to become a rabbi. So, I started telling people very slowly. I told my family first. They were incredibly supportive and wonderful; and they thought it was just great. That gave me the courage to talk to my own rabbi in my congregation and he said, “I knew that you would be the first woman rabbi out of our congregation”. So, I got a lot of support and got accepted to rabbinical school when I was a senior—the Reconstructionist Rabbinical School in Philadelphia. When I started there, the college was less than half women, and now it is at least 60% women, and that number has grown. At that point in time, the Conservative movement was not ordaining women. About halfway through my rabbinical school years, the Conservative movement began ordaining women. So, I really only had open to me the Reform and Reconstructionist movements. Although, even if the Conservative movement had been open to me, it wouldn’t have been something that I would have pursued. In 1984 or 1985, the Conservative movement started ordaining women because I remember when that happened. That was something really huge in the Jewish world. All except the Orthodox were ordaining women. When the Conservative movement started ordaining women, that caused a split in the Conservative movement; there was a lot of controversy because when the Conservative movement started ordaining women, they

had what is called a halakhic process, which is the word for “purda”, or Jewish law. When they do things and make changes in Jewish law, they do it through this halakhic process, and what happened was the president of the Conservative movement’s seminary decided that he really wanted to see women ordained before he retired, and so, thankfully, he made somewhat of a unilateral decision that women could be ordained without going through this huge halakhic process. For that reason, it caused a split in the Conservative movement, and there was a lot of controversy over it. My guess is that even if they had gone through the normal halakhic process, there probably still would have been a controversy, but this gave another excuse for there to be a controversy over it.

So, here I was. I was studying. I loved rabbinical school, notwithstanding the fact that it was kind of like a bubble. It was a very safe place to be because everyone around you is also in rabbinical school. In some ways, you are almost not connected with the real world because you are immersed in your studies. You don’t really deal with a lot of the issues of what it really means to be a rabbi at that point in the same way that you do once you are ordained. Yet, I also knew that I didn’t want to be a congregational rabbi when I went through rabbinical school. I knew that I wanted to work in Hillel. Part of that was because of my own college experience because the Hillel here was not very strong, and I felt disconnected and like there was no place for me. I felt like here I was, somebody who had been so actively involved in the Jewish world who had had an experience here with someone who tried to proselytize me. I didn’t even feel like I had a place to turn to to answer my questions about this, so I really wanted to see the Jewish life on campus become stronger. Yet, I didn’t know that I wanted to come back to Indiana until much later, but that was something that I really wanted much later. But I did have some experiences. I worked in student positions all through rabbinical school, and after graduation, I became the director of a Hillel at the university of Delaware for a time while I was at rabbinical school, and there were students there who I knew were uncomfortable with the fact that I was a woman who was going to be a rabbi, but I didn’t find issue with that unless they wanted to address it with me. Most of them didn’t feel comfortable enough to address it with me, so I just tried to be supportive in the same way I would to anyone. Well, we had a student president who had come from a pretty traditional, conservative family. I knew that he was really uncomfortable with me being a rabbi, but I think that he also liked me as a person. So, we started to build a friendship. His sophomore year was when I started there...no, it was his freshman year that I started there, and I was there for all four years that he was. Right before he graduated, we had developed a very, very close relationship. After he graduated, he came to me one day and said, “you know, I want you to know I was really uncomfortable with the fact that you are a woman who is going to be a rabbi”. And I said, “I know that Gill”. And he said, “You know that!?” And I said, “yeah, I have always known that because you never said anything”. And he said, “yeah, I know that I never said anything, but you know what it doesn’t matter anymore because I’m not uncomfortable anymore. I’m really okay with it. You are going to be really good at what you do”. And I said, “Well, thank you”. That experience, to me, is exemplary of the many, many people who are uncomfortable with women being rabbis. There are halakhic issues about women being rabbis, and I understand that. Yet, there are also emotional issues that have to do with women rabbis. I think that Jews who have not been exposed to women being rabbis...I think that there is discomfort, understandably, and I think that there are also the halakhic issues. But I think for many people, particularly for nonobservant Jews...Jews who are observant and following halakhah, I think that there is a different set of issues. And Gill was nonobservant, notwithstanding the fact that he came from a traditional

household. He just wasn't very observant in college. Yet, for people who are following traditional Jewish law, there are certain obstacles to overcome. For people who aren't, there are a lot of emotional issues that they deal with. Thus, for people who aren't following Jewish law, the emotional and political issues are easier to overcome as they get to know me, and they understand that I am not here to change the world in terms of women's issues. I'm not here to change the world in terms of Jewish issues. I'm here because I love Judaism, care about Judaism, and want to make the Jewish world stronger. And I think that once people get to know me for who I am, it's much more like the Gill situation. I understand now that that's okay. I think when you are dealing with halakhic issues, the issues of Jewish law, there are a lot of other issues that come up. However, I think that for people who are observant in following traditional Jewish law, I think that we end up having a very good, strong relationship on different level. We can talk more. If you are interested, we can talk more later about that—that is, what the traditional Jewish issues are.

The year before I was ordained, my now fifteen-year-old boy was born. There are a lot of issues in terms of having a career and having a family. Umm..I think that whether you are a rabbi or in any career, being a woman and having a family is always a struggle. That struggle has been worth it to me. I would never even consider not working while I had kids, but it's always a struggle. Umm. there will always be issues of negotiation in public versus private life. There are always issues of who the primary caregiver will be. If you are married, if you're a single parent, there are a lot more issues, which I haven't faced. But when you are married, there are always negotiations about who's going to do the driving and who is going to be watching the children, and who is going to be the primary caregiver. All of that, to me, has been more than worth it. And..umm...to me, my first commitment and my first priority is my family, but I don't want to ever have to chose between the two because I love them both. Yet, struggles and conflicts are inevitable in these situations. And when I was a pregnant rabbinical student I think that issue was even more...you know, sometimes people kind of forget that you are a woman; when you are pregnant, that is harder to forget—if that makes any sense. Over the years, the thing that I have seen change a lot in terms of being a woman and being a rabbi was when I first started, I would meet so many people who had never met a woman rabbi. Now, that doesn't happen anymore. You know, ten years ago there were a lot of people who never had any experiences with women rabbis, and I was the first, which meant I represented all women rabbis to them because they had never met anyone else who was a woman rabbi before. Now, it is not very often that I meet, at least Jews, that have not met or at least heard of women rabbis. So, it is much more normative now. I mean, some of the issues that I saw when I first started are very different now and not as pronounced as they were some time ago.

Professor Bahloul: Thank you. That was very nice.

(clapping sounds coming from the students)

Rabbi Mira:

I also want to thank you for having me here this morning. Umm...I'm lucky that I get to go second, so I get to reflect on some of the issues that Rabbi Sue brought up, even as I tell my own story. Umm...I'm a little bit younger than Rabbi Sue, and I'm a good decade younger as a rabbi. I have been a Rabbi since 1998, and umm...because the history of women rabbis is so short, that one decade probably mad quite a difference. So, my experience was probably significantly

different from Rabbi Sue's. Ummm...one thing that I would like to bring up, and maybe I will return to that at the end of my remarks, is the term "women rabbi", which is a term we all use, but it is somewhat curious in that it uses the word "women" as an adjective, modifying the word rabbi. I think it is a good question to ask whether or not there is a distinctive role of a woman rabbi. Are rabbis who are women functioning significantly differently than men who are rabbis? ummm..or is it something a bit more complicated? Of course, it is going to be something a little more complicated, but I like to raise that question in the beginning. Umm..my upbringing, as a Jew, corresponded almost exactly to the burst of Jewish feminism in the 1970's. I was born in 1971 in Philadelphia. Umm, and my mother's awakening as a feminist generally happened shortly after my birth, so my mother was raised in a traditional, Conservative Jewish family. Ummm..her father was a doctor, and my mother was very good in school, both public and Hebrew school. But, it never occurred to her parents that she, herself, might want to pursue a profession because of the time that she grew up in. Yet, as she grew older, she was in her twenties in the 1970's and had a real awakening with feminism, which questioned the idea that men and women could not function equally in the private and public spheres as men. This happened in American culture generally in the 1960's and 1970's; it also happened in the Jewish world...and...umm..my mother was in the first generation of Jewish feminists who tried to organize, held conferences, and participated in small study groups. They were really adjusting to the notion within the world of the synagogue and public Jewish life that men and women should be able to function equally. So, just as they were arguing that women should have no barriers in terms of pursuing professions like law and medicine, they were also arguing that women should have no boundaries within the synagogue—that they should read from the Torah, just like men had for centuries; they should be counted in the minyan, the forum required for prayer, just like men did. They were arguing that women should have the opportunity to engage in all the Jewish rituals more commonly associated with men, like the wearing of the prayer shawl. ummm... and I grew up in a household that was governed by the assumptions that Jewish boys and Jewish girls were to be treated equally. That is very unusual, I think—maybe not so unusual today, and probably for my kids and Rabbi Sue kids, all of this is taken for granted. Yet, in the world I grew up in, it was pretty crazy. I mean an outsider would have thought that it was crazy that before we ate on Friday night for the traditional Sabbath dinner, my mother would insist that I put on a yarmulke just like my brothers. This was really unheard of in the 1970's, and we went to Jewish day school..umm, that were run by the Conservative movement and where such a quality had not developed yet, so in school, only the boys wore yarmulkes. Although at home, I put my yarmulke on. Ummm...another unique thing about my upbringing is that I grew up in Philadelphia, where when I was a child, the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, where Rabbi Sue studied, was founded. Many of the teachers and the students in the college were people that my parents knew. So, as I was growing up, actually, I knew beginning in the first grade, that my best friend's mother was studying to become a rabbi. Umm...this is when there was barely a handful of women rabbis, and actually when I met this woman who was going to be a rabbi, there were only three women rabbis in the world, so from a very early age in my mind, I had the possibility of becoming a rabbi and also had a sense that there was nothing very new or strange about Jewish women enjoying total equality with Jewish men. Ummm...it was only later that I came to understand actually what a radical break this was with Jewish tradition and Jewish law. The Conservative Jewish day school that I went to treated boys and girls the same way in the classroom, but in the services everyday, only the boys were allowed to lead the service, so I'm not a singer; I never have been, but my Hebrew was very good. My parents were appalled that

even though my Hebrew was better than so many of my male classmates, I was never allowed to read from the Torah or to lead the services. So, they sort of encouraged me in a movement for equality in the services at my school, and I ran for president of my eighth grade student council, and my platform was based on this notion that girls should be able to lead the services like the boys. All of this unfolded, though, before I had a real grasp of what the Jewish legal issues were.

In the world that I lived in, it was kind of a given that boys and girls should be treated as equals, and it was sort of an obvious and apparent thing that I should be able to do whatever a boy could. Umm...it was only later when I continued to study Judaism that I got a sense of what a tremendous break this was in Jewish history. I continued to pursue Jewish studies in high school, in a Jewish day school, and then in college, it never really occurred to me...ummm..to become a rabbi until maybe my last year of college. Ummm...but I really was very engaged by Jewish studies. I loved studying Jewish texts, and I always presumed that I was to be doing something public in my work life. I was interested in social work. Also, I had always presumed that I would go to law school and work on social justice issues as a lawyer. In my last year of college, it sort of came to me that this would mean leaving the formal study of Judaism behind me. That was not something that I was prepared to do. So, in college, I decided to go to rabbinical school sort of as a way to keep my foot into Jewish studies and to keep my options open, and I figured even with a rabbinical degree, I could still go on to work in some sort of public policy perhaps in the Jewish world, but at least it would buy me four or five more years to pursue Jewish studies. What happened, which was a great surprise to me, is that once I started rabbinical school, and part of our training is to work with congregations, I found that beyond the academics, which was what really appealed to me about Jewish studies, I was really drawn to the work of working with Jewish people, and trying to make connections between the Jewish texts, Jewish traditions, and the Jewish people who had not discovered meaning in their life. Umm...and also, I think, because of Judaism, especially liberal Judaism's emphasis on social justice, I didn't feel that I was necessarily leaving my initial goal behind.

I was ordained in 1998, and this was my first job here in Bloomington at the local Jewish congregation. I did all my interviews during my last year of rabbinical school when I was seven months pregnant. Ummm...I began working when my first child was two weeks old, which means...I went to rabbinical school in the Reform Movement in Cincinnati, and they have these ordination pictures from every class..you know, we are wearing these robes with the prayer shawls and it is all very official with the president of the college, and you wouldn't know this, but I had a little, tiny, two-week-old baby in that picture and it took forever for the photographers to organize everyone to make sure that we were in alphabetic order. While we were standing there, my baby who was used to breast feeding at like every hour and a half to two hours at that point just totally lost it and started screaming, so actually, in the official picture on the wall of my college, I have a tiny infant under my prayer shawl who is actually nursing! Only my classmates know this, and you have to sort of look for a little bulge under the prayer shawl. For me, this story is very telling about the challenges of being a mother and a rabbi. Thus, I am sort of proud of that picture in sort of a deviant and secret way. I think it says something about the total arrival of women—that is, that women are not forced to chose anymore between a quite traditional Jewish role as mothers and having a more public role as rabbis.

One of the things I discovered while pursuing Jewish studies was that, and Rabbi Sue alluded to this, there is sort of a real conflict in traditional Jewish law about the role of women rabbis. I think that the conflict isn't as big as it is made out to be, but it is significant. I've grown to take the conflicts more and more seriously, and one of the things I discovered in the

course of my Jewish studies is that there was a whole realm of Jewish women's experience that the early generation of Jewish feminists on their emphasis on equality between men and woman had almost willfully forgotten. And, I grew up in a very observant Jewish household: we kept kosher in the house; we walked to synagogue every Saturday; there was even a lot of Hebrew in my house. I had no clue about Miqveh and the laws of niddah, which many of you have studied. Umm, so I was quite advanced in my Jewish studies, and it seems to me that something happened at the same time. There was sort of this simultaneous development, and I am not sure if the two are related or not, but I think that what we looked at for the traditional roles of women in Judaism was the strong divide between public Jewish practice and private Jewish practices. In private Jewish practice, I would put the Jewish rituals connected with the home like keeping kosher and keeping the laws of niddah. In both of these areas, it is really women who are powered to be in charge. In the public roles of Judaism, I would put prayer, synagogue, and study, for the majority of Jewish history, those have been exclusively male domains. But by the time I was a child, much in the liberal Jewish community interests in the private Jewish ritual had fallen off to a large degree. So, this was before there were ever women rabbis. I think the majority of American women didn't know and didn't care about the purity laws; kosher was something in the Conservative movement, though, that has remained serious until today. For Conservative Jews even, niddah is not something that was emphasized in Jewish schooling, so when I was growing up with the suggestion that girls and boys were to be equal in the Jewish world, I really had no sense that there had been any content to a Jewish woman's experience until that time. I had a sense that Jewish women sort of did nothing and that Jewish men did everything. Yet, equality demanded me as a girl to do everything as the boys do. It was only much later that I began to have a sense that Jewish women throughout the ages had had meaningful Jewish experiences...umm...that were different than those of Jewish men. Umm, because I am academically oriented, it has been the experience of Jewish men that has interested me more—that is, I like studying Jewish texts, and that is a traditionally male domain. But one thing I think that I have become awakened to is to try to go back to traditional women's experiences throughout history and try to find some meaning in them and even try to bring them into our Jewish classes today. I wanted to close with the suggestion about how women rabbis are changing the face of Judaism, and I have a few very sketched, basic suggestions. Jewish women and perhaps women rabbis especially have encouraged Jews to start looking back at the traditions...umm...for places, texts, and rituals that are especially meaningful to women. So, actually, I think it is women rabbis who have tried to perhaps resuscitate the Miqveh as a place of Jewish ritual that might be interesting or relevant to people today, not in the traditional context of niddah laws, but rather to create faces that belong exclusively to Jewish women and connect Jewish women to earlier generations. So, that is one place that I think women rabbis have sought out a tighter connection with Jewish tradition. At the same time, I think it is when the rabbis and Jewish women leaders generally who have taken upon ourselves the task of creating Jewish rituals for girls and women. The best example of this is developing new rituals and celebrations for welcoming baby girls into the Jewish community...ummm...I think it is very rare now to find a Jewish family that is affiliated with the Jewish community that won't somehow mark the birth of a baby girl under a Jewish context. Sometimes with big celebrations, which can be compared to circumcisions for baby boys, but I think that we have gotten into the habit of marking an occasion of birth of Jewish girls, and this has only really happened in the last five or ten years. Now, it is almost a universal that something will happen when a baby girl is born. So that is another example I think, and I think male rabbis have done things like that too, but women rabbis

have really been the force behind creating new rituals. Umm..I suggested before just a moment ago that before the age of woman rabbis, the practice of Jews, especially in America, had already shifted away from some traditional rituals. Umm..and I think that by the time women were ordained in the liberal movement, the role of the rabbi had already changed significantly from what it was in past generations, by which I mean, from the beginning of modernity, many Jews had no longer looked to rabbis to make legal decisions—that is, he interpreters of Jewish law because many Jews no longer, and this would be true in Western Europe and in the United States..umm, many Jews no longer found themselves to be bound by Jewish law..umm..so, they felt very compelled by Jewish tradition and Jewish practice. Umm...and so, beginning with the Reform Movement, which was in the early part of the nineteenth century, rabbis began functioning primarily in a pastoral role..umm...and left behind the legal authority that was traditionally associated with rabbinic functioning. And that happened for ideological reasons early in the nineteenth century in big parts of the Jewish world, so once women were ordained, the rabbinic role had already changed significantly, and rabbis were already functioning in much the way that Christian ministers function as leaders of the community, caretakers of the community, teachers and people who would be there for you in the counseling role..umm..and so, in some ways, once women were ordained, the position of rabbi was already closer to the world that women would have traditionally and that is teaching and social work, which are related to today's rabbinic role of women. So, when people talk about the feminization of the rabbinate, sometimes they are just talking about how there has been an explosion in numbers, but they could also be talking about how women have changed the rabbinate, making it more like a healing profession, like social work, and like teaching. Another thing that I don't quite accept because I think the role had already shifted significantly before women were ordained, but certainly, I think, women have tended to make some changes in the profession...umm and umm...the biggest changes I think the biggest changes that women have introduced into the profession have less to do with the femaleness of women rabbis and more to do with women rabbis tendency to also be mothers. And as I said before, I think being a mother makes such terrific demands upon one's time and energy that it demands sometimes a negotiation of the rabbinic role. Umm, traditionally rabbis, whether functioning in the new way or old, were expected to be working in the public realm as rabbis around the clock, whenever they were needed. Umm, and so, that is they way that most rabbinic job descriptions were understood—it is not written down that way. I think women rabbis have generally done a good job in various rabbinic organizations of protecting rabbis' time and suggesting that we need to be more realistic about the limits on a rabbi's time. So, some of this happened officially in the REFORM Movement, where there is a huge number of women rabbis. Women rabbis have made sure that there are things like parental leave when one has a child, which benefits both women and men. They have also, I think, initiated a slight shift in the rabbinic culture, for it used to be presumed, in the Reform movement especially, that professional success in the rabbinate could be measured by the size of your congregation. That is to say when one advanced, he would be asked to go to a bigger congregation. This was sort of the very clear ladder of success. Women rabbis suggested two things:

- a whole array of rabbinic jobs not necessarily related to the profession
- de-emphasis on size being the measure of rabbinical success

So, women started this, but now you find an increasing number of male rabbis as well who are choosing to keep that traditional path of taking ever-larger congregations because with a larger congregation comes more money and more demand upon one's time. There are more rabbis who

are constructing lives for themselves in smaller congregations and choosing not to upsize. This allows them time to do more meaningful work and more possible congregational jobs. I'm trying to think if there was anything else I wanted to say... To close, I want to say that I went to the Conservative Rabbinical Seminary, not for rabbinical school but as an undergraduate, and I was there for the tenth anniversary of the ordination of women in the Conservative Movement. Many of the Conservative women who had been ordained came back to talk about what their lives were like. I was sort of stunned to find that one woman who was there was insisting upon the fact that in almost every way she can think of, her work could not be distinguished in any way from that of her male colleagues and never could be. And it seems a bit odd to me that she was not willing to say that there was any difference. But I have to say, I have been a rabbi for five years, and I have to say that the same is true for me. Coming to this community, my predecessor in my congregation was a woman and Rabbi Sue had been working her for so many years that I never encountered anyone who was the least bit surprised to see me as both a woman and a rabbi. Umm...and I think that in an immeasurable way, I'm sure my being a woman, and especially my being a mother effects the work that I do. Ummm...but it is nothing that I can point to in a very distinctive way, and it's actually not something that I think about hardly at all. So, I appreciate the opportunity to be reflective about it.

Professor Bahloul: I am so thankful that you are talking because my voice is failing me.

Transcription of interview with Rabbi Mira held on Friday April 4, 2003:

Megan: As I wrote in my e-mail, I kind of just want to ask you some more questions about what you talked about in class. UMM...I want to begin with questions concerning the physicality of woman and your views on family purity laws and how you think your experience as a rabbi has helped to shape those views. I know you mentioned in class that you have some problems with them. Can you tell me what those are?

Rabbi Mira:

Yeah, um, I think like most liberal Jews...umm... my sense of them is that they limit the possibilities of Jewish womanhood by focusing exclusively on women's bodies and not on women's minds or spirits. Umm...and one thing that I come up against again and again is that they reinforce the sense that Jewish men and Jewish women have different areas of religious life (spatial conflict), as if the woman's body, menstruation, and miqveh all belong to the woman exclusively (umm)it is easier to say then that the synagogue and the study house belong exclusively to the man. Umm...so that's not necessarily the case. It is possible that a woman can participate in both, and you see that in the Orthodox world. But having read the texts of the Talmud, I have to say that some of the texts where the laws are put out I think umm while they might be rooted in concern for reproduction and the persistence of the people, I think a good bit of it is also rooted in the Rabbi's misogyny and fear and disgust at women's bodies, and that's just there in the text. You can take it away and still have the laws, and there are feminists alive today who keep those laws, and they don't like the misogyny in the Talmud. They say it's (the misogyny) not inherent in the law, but since I have seen it and know that it comes out of that context that women's bodies are dirty and there is something about the blood...umm, which is "impure". I think all of the connotations of it are really damaging to women having whole spiritual lives and feeling like they have direct access to God and that they don't have to go through men. So, that is my problem with it. Umm...my problem with it basically turns on it all being rooted in menstruation. ummm...and I think it reinforces a societal perception that menstruation is unnatural just because men don't do it.

Megan: like it's pathological?

Rabbi Mira: right, there is some pathology about it, which suggests that there is some pathology about women's bodies. Because women's bodies don't act the way men's bodies do, they have to go through these extra contortions to correct themselves so that they're more like male bodies. I guess now that I am talking and talking, I think that's at the heart of it: it sets up the male body as the norm and makes the woman's body seem as if it were dangerous and in need of control. Umm, and I just reject that, and I don't want that to be the basis for my relationship with God, and I don't want to be teaching children that the girl's body is any less in the image of G-d than the image of the boy's body. Yet, I do think that there is something very appealing about connecting with a tradition that has been exclusive to women for generations. UMM, for some women, it certainly has been very, very meaningful, and there is a lot of power in it that I am interested in connecting to. For better or for worse, also the Miqveh itself is one of the few rituals where you don't need to know a lot of Hebrew.

Megan: Oh, okay, so it doesn't limit?

Rabbi Mira: it is a very accessible kind of Jewish experience. You don't have to study a lot before you do. Whereas in things like keeping kosher...it is A LOT of work, or studying Torah, of course, or even keeping Shabbat. Umm, it's very rule-bound. Umm...the laws of Niddah are very rulebound, but actually, going to the Miqveh is something that is really easy, acceptable, and instantly gratifying, so there is a lot of appeal in that..ummm.... Personally, I'm very attracted to studying Talmud and I like studying Jewish law, so I appreciate those rituals which are very complex and rich, but I also like the Miqveh in that it is not demanding.

Megan: didn't you say that you immersed?

Rabbi Mira:

Uh huh, before my wedding. I didn't go to a traditional Miqveh because in the town where I got married, the Miqveh was controlled by part of the Orthodox community, and I didn't really want to be interviewed by the rabbite son who ran things. It's sort of matter of fact. I understand it, but people who are going to keep the niddah laws and all their strictures, they interview about when there last period was, are you spotting, have you dah dah dah dah? And since I didn't care about all of those strictures, I didn't really want to go through that. And frankly, I wasn't sure if I would have had all those days done before my wedding, but I didn't care because I didn't feel like those were laws that I wanted to keep. but I did want to go to the Miqveh before I got married, so I went in a river instead with some friends. It was a great experience. and it's absolutely kosher to do that. You don't have to go to a Miqveh to immerse, you can go to a natural body of water. So, I went before I got married and after my first child was born (not immediately after), and before...when we decided that we wanted to have a second child.

That brings me to...I was going to ask you...I'm sorry If I seem flustered. I had my car towed this morning. I was going to ask you...when you had your children being a rabbi and being pregnant, and you know, all of a sudden other people could see because pregnancy is often considered pathology. I mean in medical school, they teach people to look at pregnancy as pathology. How did you feel as a rabbi being pregnant? Do you think that people looked at you differently than they did when your physicality wasn't so visible?

Rabbi Mira: Yeah, this is a great congregation too. I interviewed here when I was seven months pregnant, so it was sort of right in their face. I mean literally...ummm. I think for women and especially for mothers, ummm it was absolutely a reassurance because I was representing official religion for them. I mean it was an absolute reassurance that they belonged and ummm (phone begins to ring) . I think it was a model for people...ummm...that pregnancy was a religious thing and that there was spirituality in it. And I think women sort of feel that, but they feel like it is private. They feel like it's not something that their religious community takes part in, so I think it was sort of bringing it out into the open in that way. Umm, not that I talked about it a lot; I just went about my business. Both times I was pregnant, I just did my job. My congregation got to celebrate the babies with me. Pretty much, I was just trying to do my job as best I could. Umm, but I think also for women...ummm...even as I was trying to do my job just like any rabbi would... you can't get away from your femaleness when you're pregnant, so I think it was very affirming that I was female and a rabbi at the same time. I think the women

were excited about it. I'm not sure, I mean it might have been strange for the men, but I don't know. I didn't hear anything about that. I only heard from women who liked the idea of having a female rabbi who was pregnant. I think a pregnant rabbi felt like a bigger jump than even a female rabbi. It was sort of like: you are not a rabbi despite your femaleness, Somehow, your femaleness is right in there when you are pregnant.

Megan:

With the men, though, do you sense any opposition to your position?

Rabbi Mira:

I haven't. No. I haven't at all. I mean I think in my youth is more problematic than my being a woman. I think especially when I first started, there was a sense that I couldn't possibly have the authority to make good decisions or good judgements. Umm...but I do think for the vast majority of the congregation, I have been able to prove myself. I know what I need to know to do what I need to my job responsibly, so I think that fell away once they got to see my work and got to know me. Ummm, but I don't think really my being a woman would be an issue for the men. Though, my youth probably wouldn't have seem so bad if I was a young man, but the combination, I think, particularly with older men, which doesn't mean there was any sort of antagonism or anything like that. Ummm...I just think it was easier for people to sort of be patronizing and say things like "how sweet" instead of taking me seriously. You know, I don't feel that at all anymore, and at the same time, I don't stop being a young woman just because I'm a rabbi. A certain amount of that is appropriate.

Megan: How old are you?

Rabbi Mira: I'm 32.

Megan: yeah, you looked really young to me when I first saw you. I was really surprised when I first saw you. I didn't have any idea that you were young, and I thought "wow, she's not that much older than me".

Rabbi Mira:

Yeah some people think I look younger than I do.

Megan: you do look young, but that's not a bad thing.

Rabbi Mira: I think 32 is still pretty young. And I started five years ago, so I was in my twenties. So, part of that is really appropriate, especially when there are older people who live their whole lives as Jews. Even if they haven't gone to rabbinical school, they have a whole lot of life experience, which I respect. I think there is a certain place for them...I mean, to treat me as a young woman.

Megan: Drew has some questions he wanted me to ask you. He wanted me to ask you about the nature the rabbinical profession for females and how it relates to social work.

Rabbi Mira: I said something a little bit different. What I said is that I think the role of the rabbi generally has moved more in the direction of social work recently. It happened around the same time that women entered the rabbinate, but I think they are kind of two separate processes, which are interacting. Uh, so even if there were no women in the rabbinate, rabbis would still be doing more social work today than they used to, and that has to do with the needs of congregations and the needs of congregations. Today congregations, I think, are less interested in having great orators or great scholars, and they are more interested in having pastoral support, which is not that different from social work or counseling. At the same time that that's happening, women have entered the rabbinate in great numbers, and many of them have strong skills in social work, and that's sort of their orientation, so I think for all rabbis, the rabbinate has moved more in that direction, and larger numbers of women in the rabbinate have probably helped that happen.

Megan: Yeah, it made a lot of sense to me when I read Drew's e-mail because social work is traditionally a female occupation, so do you think those processes happening at the same time kind of bolstered one another?

Mira: Of course...they are separate, but they do interact. And I also think it helps people accept women rabbis when they see that a lot of the work that women rabbis do involves teaching kids, visiting people in the hospital, and being empathic and supportive in times of crises. I mean, male rabbis do these things too, but I think when male rabbis do it, it seems like "rabbinic"; when women rabbis do it, it seems loving or maternal. Of course, it's also "rabbinic", but women have been doing these things for hundreds of years professionally or not professionally. It's not jarring, it just feels like a natural extension, I think, of a woman rabbi's womanhood.

Megan: So, as a woman, you are able to have a relationship with people on a different level because of a possession of the qualities inherent to womanhood?

Mira:

I don't totally buy into all of that. I mean, I don't really believe myself, that women and men are differently wired. I mean I think there is something to it but not necessarily. There is something to that...

Megan: okay...How do you negotiate being a rabbi with a congregation and being a woman with a family? Do you feel that your respective roles are complementary, or do you feel that sometimes things just get really tough?

Mira: A lot of times, I experience it as a big tension in terms of time. I'm really required to be in two separate places, and I feel that a lot. But that's not to say that my roles are not complementary in some respects. My congregation is also the community in which I am raising my children. Because I am here so much and because my family has also been welcomed here, this really is sort of a village that's raising my kids a lot. I mean we don't do that just for my kids, but we do it more for kids who are here a lot like mine are, so my kids know tons of adults in the community, and they know older kids, and they go to school here, and this is a really warm, supportive environment for them to grow up in, so I love that. I love that they have a real sense of a close-knit community. It has really been an extended family for them, and I think it is great. I mean, it's still hard on me, but I don't think it is hard on my kids.

Megan: In class, you talked about your mother being a strong influence when you were younger. How has her influence helped to shape who you are as a rabbi?

Mira: Umm...that question is kind of too big to answer. My mom works in the Jewish community. She has always worked for the Jewish community. For many years, she worked in development; now she is actually the head of the Association of Reconstructionist Jewish Congregations. Thus, she is very much in the same field that I am. So, I kind of look to her for practical advice. I did a lot more when I first started—like if there was an issue with our volunteer board.

Megan: Was your Dad also involved with the Jewish community on an occupational level?

Mira: My stepfather is a rabbi, but I try to be a different kind of rabbi than my stepdad. I think my mother is really caring and really good with people...umm and really committed to her work and I emulate her. Those are things in her work life that I consciously model myself after. She really cares about Judaism and about people. My Dad, I think what I respect most about my Dad is that he is really an exciting and charismatic teacher, and he is extremely creative, and umm...he is really committed to making Judaism fun. So, those are things that I have taken from my dad.

But I did not consciously follow in my parent's footsteps. Actually, what attracted me about the rabbinate...umm, I mean partly I wanted something that was going to be a little more intellectually rigorous of being a rabbi, as opposed to being a Jewish educator or social worker—that is what my parents are. But I wanted something a little meatier. I wanted academic challenges, but really it was the intellectual rigor that attracted me. Umm, and that I didn't see in either of my parents' occupations, but I think that they do very, very important work, and I try to emulate them in all kinds of ways.

Well, I'll tell you why I decided to become a rabbi. I was really torn between the academic study of classical Jewish texts and being active in the world. I mean, I was thinking about poverty. I mean really what I was very drawn to was not doing social work per se but doing things that would improve people's situations in life, and I was really drawn to working on poverty and hunger issues. I was living in New York at the time. Umm, I chose the rabbinate because I thought I could sort of leave my options open in doing poverty or justice work, while also having a really intense intellectual experience in my training as a rabbi. What happened...well, it was sort of a surprise to me that I was really interested in congregational work, but I just found it very involving and engaging; it brought everything together for me.

Megan: You lived in New York?

Mira: Uh huh. That is where I went to college...in New York city. I went to Barnard, which is part of Columbia, and I was also going to J.T.S., the Conservative seminary; they have an undergraduate program, so I did both at the same time. But I didn't become a rabbi at J.T.S.; it was an academic program. I went on to the Reform movement.

Megan: I just have one more question. Who is your favorite biblical matriarch and why?

Mira: Wow...that is a really interesting question. I have to think for a second. Umm, can we just say any female figure, or does it have to be a matriarch? Umm...I think Deborah is the one that I identify with the most because she is a public, communal figure. Almost all of the other women, from what we know about them in terms of their family life, are known as mothers, sisters, and wives, and they are important to me in all of those ways...you know, as a mother, a sister, and a wife. But Deborah, as a judge, has some authority and I read in her story some depth of intellect...umm. And her leadership, unlike say Miriam's, is for the Jewish people (Miriam is a leader for the women) I think that is why I relate to her more than Miriam.