

One starting point for not allowing women to become rabbis goes back to the mishnah that “all the positive commandments which are time-bound, men are obligated and women are exempt,”¹ and that “anyone who is not obligated in something cannot fulfill for the other person for their obligation,”² therefore, looking up to a woman to fulfill certain obligations could not be done. Another obligation from which women are exempt is the study of Torah.³ Those, in themselves, do not hold back a woman from the position of rabbi, nor does the prohibition against men hearing the voice of a woman,⁴ though it does hold them back from serving as a cantress or singing in the presence of men.⁵ Women also cannot be called up to read the Torah.⁶

So what is the essence of the functioning of a rabbi? Is it one who is “an authority in a religious court (Bet Din) dealing with matters of personal and familial status?”⁷ The Jerusalem Talmud states that women can neither serve as witnesses nor as judges.⁸ If so, what about Devorah, the prophetess, about whom it states that she “judged Israel at that time,”⁹ and that “the children of Israel came up to her for judgment?”¹⁰ Tosafos and the Shulhan Arukh opine that she was not a judge, but that she provided instruction to the judges of Israel.¹¹ The excluding of women from being judges, and thus forbidding them from being rabbis, would seem to be the “most insurmountable barrier

¹ M. Kiddushin 1:7: “וכל מצות עשה שהזמן גרמה אנשים חייבין ונשים פטורות”

² TB Berakhs 20b: “כל שאינו מחוייב בדבר אינו מוציא את הרבים ידי חובתן”

³ TB *Kiddushin* 29b and *Eruvin* 27a.

⁴ Ibid. 24a: “קול באשה ערוה” (the voice of a woman is a nakedness)

⁵ See the Shulhan Arukh, *Orah Hayyim* 75:3 which states that one should not hear the singing voice of a woman while reciting the Shema.

⁶ TB *Megillah* 23a: “אשה לא תקרא בתורה מפני כבוד צבור”

⁷ David Novak, “Women in the Rabbinate?,” *Judaism* 33, no. 1 (winter 1984): 41.

⁸ PT *Shevuos* 17a, chapter 4, halakha 1 “למדנו שאין האשה דנה מעתה אין האשה מעידה.”; and PT *Yoma* 32a, chapter 6, halakha 1 “למדנו שאין האשה מעידה מעתה אין האשה דנה”.

⁹ *Shoftim* (Judges), 4:4.

¹⁰ Ibid., 4:5.

¹¹ Tosafos on *Bava Kamma* 15a, s.v. “אשר;” *Shevuos* 29b, s.v., “שבועת”; *Gittin* 88b, s.v., “ולא;” *Yevamos* 45b, s.v., “מי;” and *Shulhan Arukh*, *Hoshen Mishpat*, 7:5.

rough version – 14 April 2003

to female rabbinic ordination.”¹² Some rabbis would propose that “to ignore it is to destroy what makes a rabbi a rabbi as opposed to a ‘Jewish minister.’”¹³

Another reason for women having being forbidden from a position such as a rabbi, comes from the Maimonidean prohibition against women taking a role of public authority.¹⁴ Any Jew can do such things as “preaching, teaching, counseling and pastoring, none of these activities is essentially rabbinical.”¹⁵

Although there may be further and more marginal reasons for excluding women from being rabbis, the above reasons had held women back for millennia. As women were trying to achieve equal opportunities in a variety of venues in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in western countries, Jewesses were no less interested in seeking the rabbinate. An early documentation concerning this question was raised in 1889 on the front page of the Philadelphia Jewish Exponent.¹⁶ In 1922, the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR), the American Reform movement, dealt with the issue and a resolution approving the ordination of women passed, and in the 1920s and 1930s, a few women graduated without ordination from the Hebrew Union Colleges in New York and Cincinnati.¹⁷

It took another half century before the Reform movement ordained a woman as a rabbi. When the Reform and Reconstructionist movements began to ordain women in

¹² David Novak, Letters section, *Midstream* 27, no. 4 (April 1981): 60.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Novak, “Women in the Rabbinate?,” 42 n. 23: “Even though Maimonides’ exclusion of omen from all roles of public authority is not, to my knowledge, repeated in any of the other codes, it certainly reflects an opinion which would have been accepted by the overwhelming number of halakhists until this day.”

¹⁵ Novak, “Women in the Rabbinate?,” 42.

¹⁶ Pamela Nadell, “Bookends,” in *Jewish Women 2000: Conference Papers from the HRIJW International Scholarly Exchanges 1997-1998*, ed. Helen Epstein (Waltham, MA: Hadassah Research Institute on Jewish Women, Brandeis University, 1999), 188. “The journalist Mary M. Cohen asked ‘Could not - our women - be - ministers?’”

¹⁷ Hayim Perelmuter, “Rabbinical Tradition on the Role of Women” <<http://www.womenpriests.org/classic/perelmut.htm>> (14 April 2003). Originally published in *Women and Priesthood: Future Directions*, ed. Carroll Stuhlmueller (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1978).

rough version – 14 April 2003

1972 and 1974, respectively,¹⁸ the Conservative movement began to ponder whether they would allow women rabbis. Although the Reform and Reconstructionist movements don't particularly adhere to halakhah, the Conservative movement at least believes that they do.¹⁹ The question arose in the Conservative movement, as well as in all of the Jewish movements because women "had been gaining progressive recognition and equality, educationally and professionally as well as religiously."²⁰

At the end of the 1970s, the Conservative movement set up a commission to look into the ordination of women as rabbis and favored it. Among some of their findings, published on 30 January 1979, were that the aforementioned halakhah by Maimonides was "insufficient to pose an halakhic barrier to the ordination of women" and that they had already obligated women in studying Torah equal to men, and that the Rabbinical Assembly Committee on Jewish Law and Standards had in 1955 and 1973, respectively, allowed women to be called up to the Torah and into a minyan.²¹ One piece of critiquing was that it "welcomes women into the rabbinate by conceding its limitations and the secularization of its functions, offers up the present as its vision and the current job descriptions as its sufficient ideal. A religion so supremely pragmatic is not likely to inspire."²²

¹⁸ Julie Irwin, "Women Rabbis Less Rare," *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, 23 August 1998 <http://enquirer.com/editions/1998/08/23/loc_rabbis23.html> (March 2003).

¹⁹ The Conservative movement changes with regards to "emerging religious and ethical insights; and an awareness of new social, economic, political, and cultural conditions. It is clear that these factors...constitute an integral element in the Halakhic process." Robert Gordis, "The Ordination of Women," *Midstream* 26, no. 7 (August/September 1980): 36.

²⁰ Gerson Cohen, introduction to *The Ordination of Women As Rabbis: Studies and Responsa*, ed. Simon Greenberg (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1988), 2.

²¹ Gordon Tucker, "Final report of the Commission for the Study of the Ordination of Women as Rabbis," *The Ordination of Women As Rabbis: Studies and Responsa*, ed. Simon Greenberg (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1988), 16-18.

²² Ruth Wisse, "Women as Conservative Rabbis?," *Commentary* 68, no. 4 (October 1979): 62.

Other reasonings the Conservative movement followed were that although a woman “cannot be a witness under the huppa,”²³ that there was “no necessity for the rabbi, male or female, to serve as a witness at a wedding.”²⁴ The Commission also stated, “the problems associated with ancillary functions were deemed insufficient grounds for denying...[to] Jewish women...access...to the roles of spiritual and community leaders.”²⁵

Concerning the prohibition against women serving as judges,

there is no legal objection to the technical granting of the title “rabbi” to a woman. The only rabbinic function which might be questionable is that of judging. Regarding judging, there is support for the idea that women are not disqualified. Even if that is rejected, a woman rabbi serving a community would be acceptable as a judge on the grounds that they have accepted her, since rabbis today are selected by the communities which they serve.²⁶

The Conservative movement first ordained a female rabbi in 1985.²⁷ The Orthodox movement has still yet to ordain women rabbis, though there have been moves to install women as interns, such as with two women in New York, being appointed to communal leadership positions which would not lead to a rabbinic ordination.²⁸

Having been allowed in most of the major Jewish movements in North America to become rabbis, Jewish women may experience many different reactions and their own trials and tribulations. An idea which came out of the original reform movement’s flirtings with the idea of female ordination in 1922 questioned how women would be able to handle both life as a rabbi and as a mother:

²³ Joel B. Wolowelsky, “Feminism and Orthodox Judaism,” *Judaism* 47, no. 4 (fall 1988): 506.

²⁴ Robert Gordis, “The Ordination of Women,” *The Ordination of Women As Rabbis: Studies and Responsa*, ed. Simon Greenberg (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1988), 56.

²⁵ “On the Ordination of Women,” *Conservative Judaism* 32, no. 3 (summer 1979): 73.

²⁶ Joel Roth, “On the Ordination of Women as Rabbis,” *The Ordination of Women As Rabbis: Studies and Responsa*, ed. Simon Greenberg (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1988), 165.

²⁷ Julie Irwin, “Women Rabbis Less Rare.”

²⁸ Marilyn Henry and Ari Mermelstein, “Rabbis without Pulpits,” *Jerusalem Post*, 2 April 1999 <<http://www.jpost.com/com/Archive/05.Apr.1999/Features/Article-3.html>> (March 2003).

rough version – 14 April 2003

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.²⁹

Whether or not that is the case can not necessarily be attested from theory.

²⁹ Jacob Lauterbach, "Responsum on Question, 'Shall Women be Ordained Rabbis?'," *Studies in Jewish Law, Custom and Folklore* (USA: Ktav Publishing House, Inc., 1970), 245-246. Originally published in *Central Conference of American Rabbis Year Book* 32, 1922.