

Luncheon Address, CCAR Convention, 1991

Ellen Lewis

Introduction

In 1990, the CCAR Task Force on Women in the Rabbinate and the Women's Rabbinic Network were asked to plan a series of workshops for the 1991 June CCAR convention, whose theme was "Toward a Liberal Jewish Agenda." Track II of the five program tracks was entitled, "How Does Feminism Revitalize Judaism?" Francine Klagsbrun delivered the morning address, to be followed by Dr. Harry Orlinsky's presentation on "Feminism in Biblical Literature." I was invited to deliver the luncheon address prior to an afternoon of related workshops.

Although I was invited to speak on a topic of my personal choosing, I had long since learned that what one woman rabbi said tended to become generalized to all of us. It felt like both a reluctant honor and an enormous responsibility to speak as a representative of "the women." I remember thinking that if we were inevitably to be seen as a community of women, I would try to develop a speech that would represent a genuine composite of the thinking of women in the rabbinate. I wrote to a number of my female colleagues and asked for their ideas, suggestions, anecdotes, and inspiration. It must have been with some sense of trepidation that I wrote, because I notice now how I qualified my request to them with the following words: "It will be an opportunity to communicate with male colleagues who are at the Conference and who may or may not be sympathetic to the issues." The original address, now presented in the form of the article below, is what resulted from the ensuing correspondence and phone calls. While the address normally would have been published in the 1991 *CCAR Yearbook*, neither this piece nor the other presentations made at the Conference were included due to budgetary constraints.

Luncheon Address

This coming year will mark the twentieth anniversary of the ordination of our colleague Rabbi Sally Priesand. People have been

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asking: "Should we schedule a special celebration now that we have reached the twenty-year mark, or should we wait until twenty-five, or a more Jewish thirty-six?" After all, what is twenty years in Jewish tradition? It has been time enough in which to ordain one hundred and sixty-eight women to the Reform rabbinate; and yet it is really no time at all. It is only half of a generation, in the traditional way of numbering, a time of transition; and for that reason alone, it should be acknowledged and explored. Transition is the best word I know for describing the situation of women in the rabbinate. Now that we have come halfway, it is clear to us that we can appreciate our freedom, and, at the same time, see that the Promised Land still lies somewhere in the distance.

When I say it is clear to "us," you can hear that I am speaking for a collective. Speaking about women in the rabbinate is not an unusual experience for me; using the term "we" is. Those of us who entered rabbinical school in the seventies used to be deluged with requests to speak about what it was like to be a woman rabbi. Most of us tried to be accommodating, but I will admit that, of all the times I have spoken about being a woman in the rabbinate, this may be the first time I really wanted to. I used to begin every speech with a disclaimer: "I speak only for myself," I used to say, "I do not speak for all women rabbis." Today, you will forgive my presumptuousness if I reverse my usual approach and say that I speak not on my behalf alone but on behalf of women in the Reform rabbinate. Many people have spoken about us and for us; we are delighted and privileged to have the opportunity today to speak on our own behalf, among our colleagues in the Reform rabbinate.

This is an occasion for us to say things we might not feel comfortable saying in any other context; today we talk as family, in an attempt to be understood and to open up new channels of communication. We share so much with each other: common training, satisfactions, goals, experience, and commitment to Reform Judaism. Yet within this Reform rabbinate, we women have special needs that are not common to all Reform rabbis. Within this Reform rabbinate, we as women are a unique collective, just like retired rabbis, Israeli rabbis, Hillel rabbis, gay and lesbian rabbis. We experience the rabbinate differently; and we are experienced differently in our rabbinates. Today, I ask you to listen to how we see ourselves, to understand how differently others see us, and to examine again your own perceptions of women in the rabbinate.

Much has been written about us. We have responded to numerous interviews and filled out countless surveys in an attempt to promote an understanding of who we are. But no one can describe us as well as we can describe ourselves, for we are a soul-searching

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Much has been written about us. We have responded to numerous interviews and filled out countless surveys in an attempt to promote an understanding of who we are. But no one can describe us as well as we can describe ourselves, for we are a soul-searching

group. How do we see ourselves? I have to take you back to our beginnings to be able to answer that question. We were at once enormously grateful for the opportunity given us and at the same time overwhelmed by the responsibility we felt to succeed. We knew we were an experiment—a risk, if you will. We knew we might complete five years of training only to find out that no one would hire us. If just one of us failed, it felt like the failure of all women in the rabbinate, and for good reason. In the early days, if one of us performed poorly in class, we heard back the rumor that “The women aren’t as smart as the men.” If one of us spoke too softly, we heard back from our professors that “The women don’t talk loudly enough.” If one of us had trouble balancing the Torah, we heard the rumor that “The women have trouble holding the Torah.” From the beginning, we were perceived as a collective and that collective was perceived as different.

These situations were nobody’s fault. They are the kinds of situations occurring when the first Jew is admitted to the gentile country club or the first African-American integrates a previously all-white neighborhood, or the first woman becomes a partner at the law firm or a member of the fraternity. They are the kinds of situations in which any pioneering generation finds itself. And although these issues taken independently of one another might not seem so frightening and might even seem amusing, the combination of all the above contributed to an uneasy feeling that we did not belong. The feeling of isolation was so strong at times that when we gathered together as women to try to figure out what it meant to be a woman entering the rabbinate, all we could do was fight. We did not know how to handle the competitive pressures of the school environment, and so we turned those competitive feelings on one another. We had absorbed this idea of “The Perfect Woman Rabbi” and we all competed to be it. We had little tolerance for each other’s individuality, strengths, or weaknesses, just as we felt that we were barely tolerated by the institution.

Fortunately, out of this competition grew a very Jewish response; at some point, our need for community overrode our individual struggles. We discovered that confessing our fears and inadequacies to one another was not a weakness but a strength; that we were all asking the same questions and that finding a communal response was liberating. We realized that we had each entered the rabbinate looking for individual success, but that that was not enough; we needed our group to succeed. The success of each of us as individuals ultimately depended upon the success of us as a whole, just as the overall success of the Reform Movement rests with the effectiveness of Reform rabbis as a whole. And so we founded our own groups, one in Cincinnati and one in New York,

two groups that quickly became one now called the Women's Rabbinic Network. We held our first conference in New York and laughed at the idea that this handful of women presumed to call itself a conference. Since then we have held biennial meetings in Cincinnati, Washington, Boston, Palm Springs, and Chicago. In between, we met at CCAR conventions, once enough of us began to attend. Last year, in Seattle, we outgrew the room that had been assigned to us. In fact, this year we succeeded in not having our meeting scheduled during the Open Committee Meetings slot. It would have prevented us from participating on committees of the CCAR. We see ourselves as part of this Conference. We want to participate fully in the CCAR, and yet we have additional needs.

We see ourselves as a part of this Conference, but we also consider ourselves to be in a unique position as women. When we meet, we invite a woman to be our scholar-in-residence; we provide childcare; we have business meetings; we conduct worship services which people actually attend; we dance and sing; and we talk. This year, we had our first roll call of classes. It is the only conference I ever attend where I am not the youngest one there, where the gray in my hair is valued as a sign of seniority. We have a lot to talk about; and we have learned to trust one another, so we feel free to talk about our failures as well as our successes, our disappointments as well as our victories, our dissatisfaction as well as our satisfaction, our hopes and our dreams. We have found that, just as we experienced being students at the Hebrew Union college differently from our male colleagues, so do we frequently experience the rabbinate itself differently. The fact is that the rabbinate continues to be different for many of us, not only because of how we see ourselves, but because of the continual reminders of how others see us.

Women rabbis make things look different without even trying. When I first assumed my present pulpit, I tried to do everything just like my predecessor did. I had great respect for his work in the congregation and I was not looking to be revolutionary. I just wanted to be the rabbi. What I found was that, even if I did the same things he did, when I did them they looked and sounded different. Our colleague Rabbi Deborah Prinz tells the story of her first Shabbat on the pulpit at Central Synagogue in New York. Rabbi Shelly Zimmerman had for years been changing gender language in the prayerbook; she read the same words he read. But at the end of the service, a congregant said to Rabbi Zimmerman, "See, you hire a woman rabbi, and the first thing she does is to change the prayerbook." When a woman does it, it looks and sounds different because of what people bring to the experience. That can work either positively or negatively; the point is, it is different. At the first

Bat Mitzvah I ever conducted as a student rabbi, the young thirteen-year-old girl looked up at me as we practiced on the pulpit and asked, "At my Bat Mitzvah, do you think we could wear matching dresses?" People have a different way of looking at us. Before arriving at my first pulpit, I asked the chair of the Search Committee whether the rabbis wore robes on the pulpit. He looked startled and then said, "I can handle hiring a female rabbi. I can't handle hiring a female rabbi who wouldn't wear a robe." While I am sympathetic to the feeling of many of my male colleagues who have given up on the robe as too Protestant, I am also aware that the decision has other implications for me. Besides, I admit to feeling some fondness for my robe; when I was pregnant, my pulpit robe expanded as I did. It was the only clothing I did not have to buy new for the whole nine months.

I am telling you my stories; my female colleagues have similar stories. We all know what it is like to be asked for the millionth time, "What do you call a female rabbi?" We all know what it is like after each and every Bar or Bat Mitzvah to have at least one guest come up and say, "This is the first time I ever saw a female rabbi." We know that peculiar experience at a house of mourning when someone innocently asks, "Do you count women in the minyan?" We know what it is like to stand in the "rabbi line" at CCAR conventions and be told, "You're standing in the wrong place, you belong in the 'spouses line.'" Women rabbis learn quickly that it is important to wear name tags at CCAR conventions. We know what it is like to sit through a Temple board meeting and hear a debate over whether the membership would accept a female cantor and a female rabbi on the bimah. We know what it is like to be the dream-come-true for every program chairperson of every Hadassah group within fifty miles.

It also is not surprising that our congregants see us differently when it comes to hiring and negotiating. I do not have to tell you that negotiating as a rabbi is something no rabbi looks forward to, male or female. As rabbis, we like to say "yes" to people, not "no"; we like to make peace, not demands. As women, we have been reared to accommodate, not to challenge; to agree, not to argue. As female rabbis, then, we are faced with a double whammy. If congregants do not expect their male rabbi to make demands, how much the more so when it comes to their female rabbi. A colleague told me recently about a conversation between a member of her board who had been asked by the board member of another congregation, "What are you paying your female rabbi?" Another colleague told me that a congregation which had never questioned paying family medical coverage for their married male rabbi offered only individual cover-

age to their married female rabbi. Yet another female colleague said to me recently, "When I heard that some congregations wanted women to do the same job for less pay, I didn't want to believe it. I wanted to believe it could happen to them, not to me."

I hope someday that paternity leave becomes a real issue for the Conference; at the moment, however, we are the ones who get pregnant and we are the ones who have to negotiate maternity leave. What one of our colleagues once said is true: "The Reform Movement believes in the three-child family for everyone but female rabbis." Maternity leave is not a luxury, it is a necessity, especially in a profession like this. Those of us who are mothers take this role seriously. Those of us who are mothers love to talk about our children; yet talking in public about being mothers presents a conflict for many of us. It seems to leave us open to the accusation that we are not serious enough about our work. Part of the problem is that our society understands motherhood differently from the way it sees fatherhood. I once was in a meeting with a male rabbi who announced at three o'clock that he had to leave because it was raining and he had to pick up his son at school. People's reaction? "What a good father!" I remember thinking that nothing would stop me from leaving to pick up my children but that I would never say I was going to pick up my child. I suspected people's reaction would be not, "What a good mother!" but, "Is she putting her children's needs ahead of the congregation's?" No matter how well-written they might be, all the articles written about us seem to leave people with the impression that, if we love our children, we must not be working hard as rabbis. I am not here to defend our seriousness but to reiterate what I experience as the truth: we have had to work extraordinarily hard to get to where we are. We not only are functioning in our jobs, we are functioning successfully, creatively, and happily. As Rabbi Karff said in a different context last night, "We willingly proclaim a double love." We expect our motherhood to be respected instead of having our seriousness questioned. This is a societal issue that impinges upon us; we need not fall victim to society's preconceptions.

So women rabbis are perceived differently from our male colleagues; in many ways, we are different. You have read the theories about how women and men operate differently. In Deborah Tannen's latest book, she claims that women and men use language differently; Carol Gilligan, in her writing, describes how women work differently from men to achieve community. I think a lot of this is true; and yet it is also important to remember that not all women work in the same way. For all our shared experiences, we do not all have the same personalities, strengths, and weaknesses, nor do we have the same goals. Some of us are nurturing, others are

not; women rabbis certainly do not have a corner on nurturance. Some of us prefer to be in small congregations; others enjoy the resources and stimulation of a larger congregation. Some of us prefer Hillel to congregations, part-time to full-time, chaplaincies, religious education, federation, or UAHC work. In this sense, we are no different from our male colleagues. We look to the rabbinate to welcome us with all our differences, to affirm what each individual rabbi can contribute, to broaden the diversity of the rabbinate.

My fantasy is that in twenty years, things will be different. By then, the babies we have named will have grown up in a world where female rabbis are accepted as normal. They will not have to ask, "What do you call a female rabbi?" They will assume that women should have equal opportunity and should receive equal compensation. My fantasy is that, in one generation, the transition will be complete. We may see it, but we may not be the ones to share in it. We undoubtedly will all be left behind, as were our ancestors in the desert, proud that we paved the way. But for now, we are halfway through our journey and we are determined to reach our goals. We look forward to continuing to meet as a Women's Rabbinic Network within the CCAR; to gaining experience and direction as we mature as rabbis; and most of all, to feeling that all our colleagues in the CCAR can accept our differences and value us not despite them but because of them. We hope to find more opportunities like the one given us today, the opportunity to talk honestly, to transcend the world of competition and misunderstanding. We want the rabbinate to become a better place for us all, to allow us to be responsive to our congregants and responsible to our families and ourselves. Most of all, we want to do our part to continue Jewish tradition *l'dor va'dor, may atah v'ad olam*.

Update

Twenty-five years have passed since the ordination of Rabbi Sally Priesand. At the ten-year anniversary, the Women's Rabbinic Network celebrated by giving Sally an ice-cream cake and a card signed by the thirty or so of us who were meeting in New York. Now we have made a contribution that we hope will be more enduring. As a group, we have voted to make a substantial donation to the Rabbi Sally J. Priesand Visiting Professorship of Jewish Women's Studies. We continue to be grateful to Sally Priesand for the doors she opened for us and for the sacrifices she made on our behalf. She inspires us all.

The "we" I spoke about in 1991 still functions like the collective "we" of women in the rabbinate. The increasing numbers of women in the rabbinate have not disrupted our sense of unity; if anything,

that sense of unity has been enhanced by the addition of newer members. The Women's Rabbinic Network has continued to meet in biennial conferences. Each conference has been better attended than the one before. In La Jolla this past March 1997, ninety-five women participated, a number representing almost half of our membership. We no longer all know each other, so we work to make an opportunity for the old and the new to meet. We have begun a tradition of bringing one of our Israeli female colleagues to join us. While we periodically invite outside speakers, as we most recently invited Dr. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, we have learned over the years that we learn best from one another. The workshops offered by our own members at the recent conference included "Hagar and Sarah Through Modern Hebrew Poetry and Midrash," "The Woman's Body: A Midrash Text Study," "Therapy, Supervision, and the Female Rabbi," and the Responsa Committee's "Response on the Sanctity of Same-gender Marriage."

As we have grown, we have begun to break into special-interest groups, including Lesbian Rabbis, The Challenges of Being a Parent and Working Rabbi, Non-Pulpit Rabbis, and Solo/Senior Rabbis. We have joked that at our future conferences, we will have to add groups called "Rabbis Who Wear Bifocals" and "Hot Flashes on the Bimah." Health questions concern us, thus the workshops that are offered on nutrition and exercise (Jewish Tai Chi). As a group, we love to laugh and sing and even have our own song whose words only a few of us seem able to recall. We have fun celebrating with performance art and dance or taking an early morning hike (Tefillah Sunrise).

And we talk, endlessly, in hot tubs, during walks, over meals, and late into the night. We are all aware that there is no group like this one and no experience to rival these cherished meetings. We have seen changes in ourselves over the years, some painful, some inspiring. The pain surfaces when we take a moment to remember those few of our small group who have died. The joy appears when Hebrew Union College students sit in the room with the women rabbis who inspired them to enter the rabbinate or when a member hears of the long-awaited birth of a baby to one of our group.

We still have an idea that, for all that we share with our male colleagues, our experience of the rabbinate is different. On an institutional level, we are working at making the rabbinate a more livable place for women. We continue to fight the battle for equal representation on CCAR committees, equal opportunities in placement, equal pay, and for permanent faculty appointments for women at HUC-JIR. On a personal level, we work hard at understanding ourselves and our changing needs so that we can find the right place for ourselves in the rabbinate. We struggle not to let the rabbinate shape us but to shape the rabbinate into a place where we want to be.