

Let me remind you what the Jewish world was like in 1976, the year I was ordained as the third woman rabbi in the Reform Movement, just four years after the ordination of Sally Priesand. I had been the only woman in my class; there were as yet no women professors teaching rabbinics. It was one year after the Reform Movement had published its new prayer book, Gates of Prayer. In the introduction to the prayer book was a radical statement: “we have been...keenly aware of the changing status of women in our society. Our commitment in the Reform Movement to the equality of the sexes is of long standing. In this (prayer) book it takes the form of avoiding the use of masculine terminology exclusively when referring to the human race in general.” Remember it was radical to assert in 1976 that women were fully part of the “children of Israel,” and the truth is, if you didn’t read the introduction you might have missed it altogether! The Hebrew remained unchanged and many of the English translations neglected to mention the God of Sarah, God of Rebecca, God of Rachel and God of Leah. And there was still no real consciousness that God transcends gender. The first feminist prayer book, created by women students at Brown University, had yet to be published.

That was also before 1979 when the CCAR Convention was scheduled to take place in Arizona, a non ERA state. At that time there were only a handful of women rabbis. Our dilemma? It felt important that women rabbis be at the convention, but we wanted to honor the boycott of non-ERA states. Not knowing what to do, I called Betty Freidan. Her advice was clear: “go to the convention and invite me to speak!” We did, and that speech was the first time Betty Friedan made a public connection between her feminism and her Judaism.

In those days whenever I was invited to speak it was on the role of women in Judaism. One memorable moment was on a radio show where the well know Jewish host demanded of me: “What is more important-your Judaism or your feminism?” I paused, and then asked him: “and what is more important to you, your heart or your liver?” Silence. And I was never invited back on the show!

In 1980 “... leaders of the Women’s Rabbinic Network (an organization of Reform Women Rabbis founded in 1980) collected data ... summarizing the accumulated fears of congregants, boards, and senior rabbis with regard to hiring women as rabbis.... Among the apprehensions cited were the following:

- I. A basic fear that women cannot do the job because
  - a. the rigors of the rabbinate are too great and women too weak for the demanding routine;
  - b. the Torah is too heavy;
  - c. women are too soft-spoken;
  - d. women do not know how to, nor care to, wield power or authority;
  - e. women will need to be protected by the board or senior rabbi in confrontational situations;
  - f. women will cry at meetings when pressured or criticized;
  - g. women will create more work for the senior rabbi because congregants won't want to employ the services of women for certain events, plus the

- senior rabbi won't want to call her late at night, in dread of pulling her away from family responsibilities.
- II. A fear that women in the rabbinate will not be able to balance a career and personal life because
    - a. the first priority will be to family and therefore either when female rabbis become pregnant or husbands are transferred, they will leave the congregation;
    - b. their work will lead to dissension within their families.
  - III. A fear that female rabbis are too political, too new, too "in," too faddy so
    - a. female rabbis may alienate the more traditional--religious and social--segments of the congregation because
      - 1. female rabbis are feminists only;
      - 2. female rabbis wish to attract public attention to themselves;
      - 3. female rabbis will give the same sermon on feminism; in towns where the ordination of women in Christianity is at issue, it may not bode well for the Jews to have a female rabbi.
  - IV. A fear of the unfamiliar: the untoward aesthetic of seeing a woman carrying a torah or wearing a *tallit* and *kippah*.
  - V. A fear of women succeeding. Women who succeed will reflect poorly on their colleagues. If women can read from the torah, preach, and teach, the rabbis' duties become accessible to every- one. The mystique is lost. This possibly leads to the breakdown of the hierarchy of the rabbi-congregant relationship.<sup>i</sup>

The last fear was well founded. The ordination of women has led to a breakdown of hierarchy between rabbis and congregation. It has led to a more inclusive Judaism, to more openness to spirituality. It has led to new questions about God—who is the God we want to speak toward and how do we find a language in prayer that reflects the complexity of how Jews experience God? It has led to new rituals that celebrate the truth that divinity is present at every moment in our lives and we can celebrate that through blessings and ceremonies that honor the Torah of our lives as well as the Torah of tradition.

In the more than thirty years since my ordination, Judaism has changed because women's voices are now fully part of the Jewish conversation. And it is a much richer and more meaningful conversation because all of us are a part of it.

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<sup>i</sup> Balin, Carole From Periphery to Center: A History of the Women's Rabbinic Network, CCAR Journal Summer 1997