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Rabbi Laura Geller

Senior Rabbi, Temple Emanuel of Beverly Hills

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The (Ongoing) Advancement of Jewish Women

On this 100th anniversary of International Women's Day, there is much to remember. I remember in particular the story of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire of March 25, 1911, a fire that killed more than 140 workers, most of them Jewish and Italian young women immigrants. This tragedy focused national consciousness on working conditions and eventually led to significant changes in American labor practices. It influenced the consciousness of Jewish women like me. I heard the story from my grandparents, and it helped shape my vision of social justice and maybe even the sense that women could change the world.

We have moved from behind the *mechitza* (the barrier that separates men and women during prayer) to the front of the synagogue, from being relegated to the private sphere of religious life to the very center.

New rituals have changed the face of American Judaism, from bat mitzvah (the first was in 1922) to covenant ceremonies for daughters, to rituals for menarche, miscarriage and abortion.

Women's scholarship has transformed the questions we ask about history and sociology and women's study of traditional Jewish texts, like the groundbreaking Women's Torah Commentary, published by the Reform Movement, that has changed the way we look at Torah and sacred text. Women are not only fully part of the Jewish conversation, but also women's voices and women's experiences have transformed the conversation. The revolution in the way Jews think about God, spirituality, and prayer is largely attributable to women taking their experience seriously and sharing it with the entire community. And women have helped the Jewish community become much more inclusive as we challenged our own sense of marginality, leading us to be more sensitive to others who had also been excluded -- gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transgendered individuals, Jews of color, Jews by choice, poor Jews, old Jews, young Jews, Jews with disabilities. And the list goes on.

There is much to celebrate and much work yet to do. Anniversaries like this remind us of other anniversaries. Next year will mark the 40th anniversary of the ordination of the first American female rabbi.

Forty years: we're almost out of the wilderness, perhaps, but we're not yet in the Promised Land.

According to Advancing Women Professionals, 70 percent of the Jewish professional workforce are women, yet there are still very few women in top leadership positions. Gender equality remains a challenge and continues to discourage many talented women from entering Jewish professions. And although the Jewish community talks the talk about being "family friendly," for many female (and male) Jewish professionals, it hardly walks the walk, making it more difficult for women (and men) to want to choose this work. Female rabbis still earn less than their male colleagues, even when you control for size of congregation and years of experience. A recent study by the Forward determined that female executives (the few that there are) earn \$0.61 for every dollar earned by their male colleagues.

So we remember, we celebrate and we recommit to do the work we learned from our grandparents as they told us the story of those who died in the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire. We need to continue our work to create a world where all human beings can be part of the conversation, where all of us are safe, protected and fully engaged in the world as equal players with equal opportunities. A promised land we may never enter, but a vision that continues to inspire our work to change the world, for women, men and for all of our children.