

## The Sisterhood 50

*America's Influential Women Rabbis*

**By Gabrielle Birkner**

Published July 21, 2010.

[The Sisterhood](#), the Forward's women's issues blog, [has twice called attention to the chronic underrepresentation of women](#) on Newsweek's annual "50 Most Influential Rabbis" list. Compiled by Sony Pictures CEO Michael Lynton and his friend Gary Ginsberg, [this year's Newsweek list](#) had only six women on it — and most of them were on the bottom half of the rankings.

The results got us thinking about all the female rabbis whose influence cannot necessarily be measured by their national/international profile, their media presence or the size of their constituencies — some of the criteria on which Newsweek bases its rankings — but who, nonetheless, are playing important roles in shaping the Jewish story.

So we decided to select 50 of the most influential women rabbis in America, plus five in Israel, for this inaugural Sisterhood 50 list. These women span generations and the denominational spectrum; they are pulpit rabbis, teachers, academics, pastoral caregivers and organizational leaders. All of them have made it their life's work to put Jewish values into action — and, as a result, are changing lives in and beyond their communities. This alphabetical list contains a lot of "firsts," which is evidence of just how much ground there's been to break in recent years.

While The Sisterhood 50 has on it only three Orthodox women, many more hold key religious leadership roles in their communities — even if they lack a path to the Orthodox rabbinate because of their gender.

Nominations came in from Forward and Lilith editors, Sisterhood contributors, prominent rabbis and others. When we sought recommendations from [Letty Cottin Pogrebin](#), an author and a founding editor of Ms. magazine, she shared with me the female-centric [list of "top rabbis"](#) that she created back in 2007, after the first Newsweek list was published. Forward readers also submitted nominations in response to [this Sisterhood blog entry](#) and a related post on the Forward's [Facebook](#) page. A special thanks goes to Forward web producer Nadja Spiegelman, who contributed research and reporting to this feature.

In addition, the Forward invites you to tell us, on [this commenting page](#), about other influential female rabbis, and the impact they are having.

[Read the Forward editorial on The Sisterhood 50](#)

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### **B. Elka Abrahamson (Reform)**

[Abrahamson](#) is vice president of leadership programs for the Wexner Foundation. She oversees policy and strategic planning for the Ohio-based foundation, which offers fellowships to rabbinical and graduate students, provides intensive Jewish learning opportunities to volunteer leaders and, in partnership with Harvard, supports a midcareer master's degree program geared toward Israelis working in the public sector.

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**Laura Baum (Reform, Humanistic)**

Baum founded [OurJewishCommunity.org](http://OurJewishCommunity.org), through which she works to engage Jews via technology and social media. She blogs on the site, and produces video podcasts available on the site's [YouTube channel](#). She is a rabbi at Congregation Beth Adam, a Humanistic congregation in Loveland, Ohio.

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**Sharon Brous (Conservative)**

*Newsweek Pick, 2010*

[Brous](#) is the rabbi at IKAR — the fast-growing Los Angeles “Jewish spiritual community,” which helped to found in 2004. She writes and speaks widely about new trends in Jewish life, and serves on the faculties of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion and of Reboot. She has appeared on the [Forward 50](#).

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**Angela Warnick Buchdahl (Reform)**

Ordained as a rabbi and invested as a cantor at HUC-JIR, [Angela Warnick Buchdahl](#) — the daughter of a Jewish father and a Korean-Buddhist mother — is the first Asian-American member of the Jewish clergy. Buchdahl is the cantor of [Central Synagogue](#), a large Reform congregation in Manhattan. She has served on the board of the Jewish Multiracial Network.

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**Nina Beth Cardin (Conservative)**

Cardin founded and runs the [Baltimore Jewish Environmental Network](#). She is the author of the books “Tears of Sadness, Seeds of Hope: A Jewish Spiritual Companion to Infertility and Pregnancy Loss,” and “A Tapestry of Jewish Time: A Spiritual Guide to the Holidays and Life-Cycle Events.”

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**Ayelet S. Cohen (Conservative)**

Cohen is a champion of progressive causes — particularly gender equality and gay civil rights. Since 2002, she has served as a rabbi at [Congregation Beit Simchat Torah in New York](#), the country's largest synagogue geared toward lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Jews. Cohen is currently on maternity leave, and will be leaving her position at CBST at the end of July.

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**Sharon Cohen Anisfeld (Reconstructionist)**

Since 2006, [Cohen Anisfeld](#) has served as dean of the transdenominational rabbinical school at Hebrew College in Boston. She worked previously as a Hillel rabbi at Tufts, Yale and Harvard universities.

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**Rachel Cowan (Reform)**

Born and raised a Unitarian, Cowan converted to Judaism — after 16 years of marriage to her Jewish husband — and went on to receive ordination at HUC-JIR. The former director of the Jewish Life and Values Program at the [Nathan Cummings Foundation](#), Cowan, a past Forward 50 selection, now serves as executive director of the [Institute for Jewish Spirituality](#).

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**Ellen Weinberg Dreyfus (Reform)**

*Newsweek Pick, 2010*

Dreyfus [presides over the Central Conference of American Rabbis](#), an international organization that represents about 2,000 Reform rabbis. She is a founder and past president of the [Women's Rabbinic Network](#) — an advocacy organization for female Reform rabbis and rabbinical students. Dreyfus is a senior rabbinic fellow at Jerusalem's Shalom Hartman Institute.

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**Rebecca Dubowe (Reform)**

[Dubowe's](#) 1993 ordination from HUC-JIR made her the nation's first deaf female rabbi. She is currently a rabbi at [Temple Adat Elohim](#), a Reform congregation in Thousand Oaks, Calif. She recently went on a national speaking tour.

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**Denise L. Eger (Reform)**

[Eger](#) is the first woman and openly gay rabbi to serve as president of the Board of Rabbis of Southern California. She is the rabbi of Congregation Kol Ami, an LGBT-oriented Reform synagogue in West Hollywood, Calif. Read a Forward story about Eger [here](#). She was on the [Forward 50](#) in 2008.

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**Amy Eilberg (Conservative)**

[Eilberg](#) was the first woman to receive rabbinic ordination at the Jewish Theological Seminary, an experience she reflected on in [this recent Forward op-ed](#). She has devoted much of her life to chaplaincy work and to teaching Judaism and healing. Eilberg helped develop new Jewish rituals for women who have had a miscarriage or an abortion.

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**Mimi Feigelson (Orthodox)**

[Feigelson](#), who goes by the title "Reb," received rabbinical ordination from Shlomo Carlebach back in 1994. She teaches rabbinic studies and serves at the mashpiah ruchanit, or spiritual counselor, at American Jewish University in Los Angeles.

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**Tirzah Firestone (Renewal)**

A student of Jewish Renewal movement founder Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, [Firestone](#) who is also a psychotherapist, is the spiritual leader of Congregation Nevei Kodesh in Boulder, Colo., and the author of “The Woman’s Kabbalah: Ecstatic Jewish Practices for Women.” Firestone is on the board of Rabbis for Human Rights – North America.

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**Dayle Friedman (Reform)**

[Friedman](#), a former nursing home chaplain, is the founding director of [Hiddur: The Center for Aging and Judaism](#) at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, where she is reframing the conversation about the challenges of America’s aging population. She is the author of “Jewish Visions for Aging: A Professional Guide for Fostering Wholeness,” and was on the [Forward 50 in 2008](#).

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**Elyse Frishman (Reform)**

She edited the Reform movement’s newest prayer book, Mishkan T’filah, and is the spiritual leader of Congregation B’nai Jeshurun, Nathan Barnert Memorial Temple in Franklin Lakes, N.J. She was on the [Forward 50 in 2007](#).

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**Nancy Fuchs-Kreimer (Reconstructionist)**

Promoting interfaith dialogue is central to [Fuchs-Kreimer’s](#) work. She serves as the director of the Department of Multifaith Studies and Initiatives and an associate professor of religious studies at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College.

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**Laura Geller (Reform)**

Geller, a 2007 [Forward 50](#) selection, is the [senior rabbi at Temple Emanuel](#) in Beverly Hills, Calif. — one of the largest Reform congregations in the Los Angeles area. Back in 1976, she became the third woman to receive rabbinic ordination from HUC-JIR.

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**Jill Hammer (Conservative)**

She is the founding director of [Tel Shemesh](#), a website and community devoted to ecology and spirituality, and the co-founder of [Kohenet: The Hebrew Priestess Institute](#), a program for women’s spiritual leadership. She is Director of Spiritual Education at the transdenominational Academy for Jewish Religion.

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**Judith Hauptman (Conservative)**

[Hauptman](#), who holds a doctorate in Talmud from JTS and rabbinic ordination from the Academy for Jewish Religion, is the E. Billi Ivry Professor of Talmud and Rabbinic Culture at JTS. Her research focuses on the historical implications of Jewish texts and on women's roles in Judaic thought. She founded the outreach organization [Ohel Ayalah](#), which provides free walk-in High Holy Day services.

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**Sara Hurwitz (Orthodox)**

*Newsweek Pick, 2010*

Hurwitz, a protégé of activist Rabbi Avi Weiss, serves in a rabbinic role at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale, an Orthodox congregation in Bronx, N.Y. Earlier this year, her title was changed to “rabba,” the Hebrew word for a female rabbi, from “maharat” — an acronym for a person who is public leader, halachic decider, spiritual guide and Torah scholar. She was on [the Forward 50 in 2009](#).

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**Jill Jacobs (Conservative)**

*Newsweek Pick, 2010*

Jacobs is among the most prominent voices on the importance of social and environmental justice within Judaism. She has served as the rabbi-in-residence at the Jewish Funds for Justice, and is author of “There Shall Be No Needy: Pursuing Social Justice Through Jewish Law and Tradition.” Jacobs, who was on the Forward 50 [in 2006](#) and [in 2008](#) is a [Forward columnist](#).

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**Sharon Kleinbaum (Reconstructionist)**

*Newsweek Pick, 2010*

[Kleinbaum](#) is the senior rabbi of the LGBT-oriented Congregation Beit Simchat Torah in New York. She speaks across the country on Judaism and homosexuality, and has testified before the U.S. Congress in favor of same-sex marriage. Kleinbaum was an early advocate for providing pastoral care to those with HIV/AIDS, and their families.

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**Jacqueline Koch Ellenson (Reform)**

[Koch Ellenson](#), executive director of the Reform movement's Women's Rabbinic Network, has long been a tireless advocate for and mentor to female rabbis and rabbinical students in the Reform movement. Last year, in support of Nofrat Frenkel — who was arrested at the Western Wall while wearing a tallit — she helped organize a Day of Solidarity and Support for Women of the Wall.

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**Stephanie Kolin (Reform)**

[Kolin](#), who heads the Los Angeles office of the Union for Reform Judaism's [Just Congregations](#) program, has been a driving force behind the Jewish Funds for Justice's [Leadership for Public Life](#) fellowship. The program teaches fellows — rabbinical and cantorial students at five seminaries — how to use congregation-based

community organizing to bring about social change.

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### **Bonnie Koppell (Reconstructionist, Reform)**

[Koppell](#), a U.S. Army colonel, was the first female rabbi to serve as a U.S. Army chaplain. She provided pastoral care to wounded veterans during Operation Desert Storm in 1991, and in 2005 served in Iraq as part of Operation Iraqi Freedom. Koppell is currently the rabbi at Temple Chai in Phoenix.

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### **Jennifer Krause (Reform)**

A self-proclaimed “rabbi without borders,” [Krause](#) speaks and writes widely on Judaism and spirituality. She is the author of “The Answer: Making Sense One Question at a Time,” and serves as the High Holy Days rabbi at New York’s 92nd Street Y.

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### **Joy Levitt (Reconstructionist)**

As executive director of the [JCC in Manhattan](#), she has helped turn the Upper West Side institution into a major cultural force.

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### **Naomi Levy (Conservative)**

#### ***Newsweek Pick, 2010***

Levy, who was in the first class of women to enter JTS, is the founder of [Nashuva](#), the Los Angeles-based Jewish outreach organization that emphasizes the power of prayer and the importance of fostering an inclusive Judaism. [Levy](#) is the author of “To Begin Again: The Journey Toward Comfort, Strength, and Faith in Difficult Times,” “Talking to God: Personal Prayers for Times of Joy, Sadness, Struggle, and Celebration,” and the forthcoming “Hope Will Find You: My Search for the Wisdom to Stop Waiting and Start Living.”

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### **Ellen Lippmann (Reform)**

[Lippmann](#) is the founder and spiritual leader of brownstone Brooklyn’s Kolot Chayeynu/Voices of Our Lives — a progressive congregation that prioritizes inclusiveness. She is co-chair of Rabbis for Human Rights - North America, and serves on the rabbinic council of Jews for Racial and Economic Justice.

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### **Janet Marder (Reform)**

The senior rabbi at [Congregation Beth Am](#) in Los Altos Hills, Calif., Marder was the first woman to serve as president of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, representing some 2,000 Reform rabbis. Her sermons can be downloaded free of charge on iTunes.

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**Myrna Matsa (Conservative)**

Ever since Hurricane Katrina, [Matsa](#) has been working in the region on the Gulf Coast recovery. In recent months, she has also turned her attention to helping those affected by the BP oil disaster. She serves as a rabbinic pastoral trauma counselor in Mississippi, New Orleans and Baton Rouge, La. — a federation-funded position, overseen by the New York Board of Rabbis.

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**Avis Miller (Reconstructionist)**

[Miller](#) is president of the Maryland-based [Open Dor Foundation](#), an outreach organization geared toward unaffiliated and marginally active Jews. She is rabbi emerita at Adas Israel, a Conservative synagogue in Washington, D.C.

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**Debra Newman Kamin (Conservative)**

[Newman Kamin](#), who has been the sole rabbi at congregation Am Yisrael in Northfield, Ill., since 1994, was the first woman to serve as senior rabbi of a major Chicago-area congregation. She serves on the Chancellor's Cabinet at JTS, and is on the executive council of the Rabbinical Assembly.

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**Sara Paasche-Orlow (Conservative)**

[Paasche-Orlow](#), the great-niece of a Nazi officer, is a JTS alumna and the director of religious and chaplaincy services at the Boston-area Hebrew SeniorLife. She developed an accredited Jewish geriatric clinical pastoral education program. Read more about Paasche-Orlow in [this Forward story](#).

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**Marcia Prager (Renewal)**

Prager is not only a rabbi, but also a storyteller, an artist and a marriage and family therapist. She is dean and director of ordination programs at ALEPH: Alliance for Jewish Renewal and the rabbi of Philadelphia P'nai Or Jewish Renewal Community, started by Jewish Renewal movement founder Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, the rabbi who ordained her.

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**Sally J. Priesand (Reform)**

Back in 1972, she was the first woman in America to be ordained as a rabbi. [Priesand](#) is rabbi emerita at

Monmouth Reform Temple in Tinton Falls, N.J.

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**Jennie Rosenn (Reform)**

[Rosenn](#) is the program director at the Nathan Cummings Foundation, which funds health, ecological and Jewish social justice initiatives. She is an outspoken advocate for service and social justice within Jewish tradition. Rosenn was on [the Forward 50 in 2006](#).

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**Danya Ruttenberg (Conservative)**

[Ruttenberg](#), senior Jewish educator at Tufts University Hillel, is the author of the Rohr Prize-nominated memoir “Surprised By God: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Religion,” the editor of “The Passionate Torah: Sex and Judaism,” and the co-editor with Rabbi Elliot Dorff, of a book series on Jewish ethics. She was ordained at the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies at American Jewish University in Los Angeles. Read [a Forward profile of Ruttenberg here](#).

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**Joanna Samuels (Conservative)**

The former senior rabbi at the Congregation Habonim in Manhattan, Samuels now advocates for gender equity and women’s advancement in the Jewish work force. She serves as director of strategic initiatives at the nonprofit organization [Advancing Women Professionals and the Jewish Community](#), and is a contributor to the Forward’s [Sisterhood blog](#).

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**Sandy Eisenberg Sasso (Reconstructionist)**

[Sasso](#) became the first female Reconstructionist rabbi in 1974. She has written numerous Jewish-themed children’s books.

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**Susan Schnur (Reconstructionist)**

For more than two decades, the Jewish feminist magazine [Lilith](#) has been [Schnur's](#) “paper pulpit,” where she has written about everything from hamantaschen’s erotic history to the dating habits of rabbis’ daughters. Schnur is a founder of [String of Pearls](#), a Reconstructionist congregation in Princeton, N.J.

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**Julie Schonfeld (Conservative)**

In 2009, Schonfeld became the first woman to lead the 109-year-old Rabbinical Assembly, a 1,600-member

association of Conservative rabbis. She [advocates for](#) increased religious pluralism in Israel. Schonfeld was on [the Forward 50 in 2008](#).

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**Felicia Sol (Reform, Transdenominational)**

[Sol](#) is a rabbi at B'nai Jeshurun, the nondenominational synagogue on Manhattan's Upper West Side. She serves on the board of Jewish Funds for Justice.

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**Mychal Springer (Conservative)**

[Springer](#) is the director of the Center for Pastoral Education at JTS, where she holds the Helen Fried Kirshblum Goldstein Chair in Professional and Pastoral Skills.

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**Toba Spitzer (Reconstructionist)**

[Spitzer](#) is the spiritual leader of Congregation Dorshei Tzedek in West Newton, Mass. She was the first openly gay rabbi to head a rabbinic association — serving as president of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association from 2007 to 2009. Spitzer was on [the Forward 50 in 2007](#).

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**Alysa Stanton (Reform)**

Born into a Pentacostal family, Stanton converted to Judaism and, in 2009, became the nation's first black female rabbi. She was ordained at HUC-JIR, and now serves as the spiritual leader of Bayt Shalom in Greenville, N.C. Read [a Forward profile of Stanton here](#). She was on [the Forward in 2009](#).

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**Melissa Weintraub (Conservative)**

Weintraub is the co-founder and co-executive director of Encounter, which aims to foster conversation between Jews and Palestinians, and among Jews from across the political spectrum.

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**Shohama Wiener (Renewal, Postdenominational)**

The former president and spiritual director at the pluralistic Academy for Jewish Religion, [Wiener](#) was the first

woman to hold the top job at a Jewish seminary. She now serves as the director of spiritual direction and development for ordination programs at ALEPH, the Jewish Renewal seminary. She is the rabbi of Temple Beth-El of City Island, in the Bronx, and created the spiritual-healing program Shoham.

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### **Marcia Zimmerman (Reform)**

Since 2001, [Zimmerman](#) has been the senior rabbi at Temple Israel, a Reform congregation in Minneapolis. She is the first woman to serve as senior rabbi of one of the 10 largest synagogues in America. She has prioritized outreach to interfaith families, and dialogue with other faith groups.

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## *Five Women Rabbis in Israel Making a Difference*

### **Tamar Elad-Appelbaum (Conservative)**

[Elad-Appelbaum](#) was ordained at Israel's Schechter Rabbinical Seminary, where she is slated to become associate dean this fall. This past year, she was an interim rabbi at Temple Israel Center in White Plains, N.Y. She is an advocate for religious pluralism in Israel.

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### **Miri Gold (Reform)**

[Gold](#) is the spiritual leader of Israel's Kibbutz Gezer. She has petitioned the Supreme Court to be recognized as a community rabbi, and be given a government-funded salary like those granted to community rabbis who are Orthodox. The Court ruled that State of Israel is required to release its criteria for selecting rabbis that receive government money, but the State yet to do so.

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### **Naamah Kelman (Reform)**

[Kelman](#) comes from a long line of rabbis, and followed in the family tradition. In 1992, she became the first woman to receive rabbinic ordination in Israel. She was named dean of HUC-JIR's Jerusalem campus in 2009, and is a doctoral candidate at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, where the focus of her research is non-Orthodox weddings in Israel.

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### **Haviva Ner-David (Orthodox, Post-Denominational)**

In 2006, [Ner-David](#) was granted Orthodox rabbinic ordination from Rabbi Aryeh Strikovsky, of Tel Aviv. A self-proclaimed post-denominational rabbi, Ner-David is the founding director of Sh'maya: A Spiritual and Educational Mikveh in the Galilee, and the founding director of Reut: The Center for Modern Jewish Marriage. She is the author of "Life on the Fringes: A Feminist Journey Towards Traditional Rabbinic Ordination," and of the forthcoming "Giving Chanah Voice: A Feminist Rabbi Reclaims the Women's Mitzvot of Baking, Bathing, and Brightening."

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### **Einat Ramon (Conservative)**

In 1989, when she was ordained at JTS, [Ramon](#) became the first Israeli-born woman to become a rabbi. She currently teaches Jewish thought and literature, and Jewish feminism at Jerusalem's Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies.

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