

P.S.

Misreading the Signals

The *halacha* is clear: Women are not qualified to serve as rabbis, to lead the congregation as *chazanim* (*hazaniot*?) or to be binding witnesses in various legal-religious actions. Yet there is a good deal of agitation amongst feminists and others of radical bent to "liberalize" Judaism—giving women a fuller role to play as leaders in every phase of Jewish communal and religious life.

Some women have been claiming that they are being thwarted in religious growth and opportunities for spiritual expression by unyielding Orthodox practices that close them out, and this, they argue, is a situation that could be corrected. (In the words of Blu Greenberg's now famous *J'accuse*: "Where there is rabbinic will, there's a *halachic* way.") Others simply see *halachic* Judaism as one more area of oppression of women that has to be corrected amongst the rest. So for the sake of the sisterhood-at-large, they attack Judaism's "sexist" attitudes.

Granted, there most definitely are some women who honestly feel a yearning to experience some areas of Jewish life that are shut off from them. Unfortunately, they are misreading various signals—signals of unrest from within themselves as well as signals of exclusion from institutional Orthodoxy. But these women are not the subject of this discussion. The quest of these genuine searchers is not represented by the more vociferous critics of "Judaism's attitude toward women," and

Women in the Rabbinate *Female Rabbis or Rabbinical Feminists?*

it is the latter that are capturing the media's attention.

Political Perspective

We maintain that the majority of the would-be liberalizers are politically oriented. Perhaps the most obvious indication of this is the fact that they, in turn, attribute mainstream Orthodoxy's tenacious loyalty to *halacha* as emanating from politics and prejudice, not eternal values; and as the Talmud points out, people tend to blame others for their own shortcomings. As a prime example, the winter issue of *Judaism*, the American Jewish Congress's magazine of religious thought, ran a symposium on feminism, and all eleven contributors to the issue concurred that in their opinion, "community attitudes rather than *halacha* are the principal reasons for opposition to ordination of women." (Reform) Rabbi Robert Gordis, editor of *Judaism*, maintains that "the *halacha* neither sanctions nor forbids ordination of women—it never contemplated the possibility." Rabbi Emanuel Rackman, identified in the magazine as "the Orthodox president of Israel's Bar-Ilan University," writes that "even the Orthodox must admit that the issue pertains less to Jewish law than it does to the psychology of Jews and the sociology of the Jewish community." It is unfortunate that it was left to a Conservative rabbi, David Novak of Far Rockaway, NY, to set the record straight to a degree. He recognizes that it is religious prohibition, not

simple habit, that does not allow a woman to lead a congregation in public worship, read the Torah, serve as a witness or function in "the essential rabbinical role of judge." Novak agrees with the others, however, that the question of ordination of women is fundamentally a "political" issue . . . To him, "religious prohibition" and "politics" appear to be interchangeable.

Blu Greenberg, described in *Judaism* as "an Orthodox writer and a feminist," agrees that the ordination of women violates *halachic* tenets "as currently interpreted by leading Orthodox interpreters." (Only as currently interpreted—say, from 1,000 BCE to 1984?) "There is nothing intrinsic to the rabbinic role that a woman cannot do," she argues. "Therefore, her exclusion was only a matter of gender, which evolved from a cultural rather than a religious base."

Mrs. Greenberg, so well-meaning in her defense of Orthodoxy, nonetheless treads the well-worn Conservative path of attributing various *halachos* to the sociological schema from which they allegedly arose. She thus continues the practice by reading the trends of our times for indicators of how to "reinterpret" *halacha* anew to meet current needs: New trends bring new needs, ergo new *halachic* interpretations. (It is quite impossible to imagine a Judaism that would last for two millennia of wandering, as it did, if instead of overcoming the pressures of the environment, it responded to every quirk, fad, and trend in the surrounding host community!)

**"Rabbinically-Mandated"
Promiscuity?**

For us to identify feminist agitation against Torah Judaism as political or sociological in nature, is more than a matter of understanding Orthodoxy's critics. It also indicates the direction in which they are heading and how far they may be going. For example, the radical feminists in the secular world have extended their goal of eliminating all differences of advantage between men and women to eliminating all differences, *period*. (Thus some of the more irresponsible extremists have formed an alliance with gay liberationists, to ignore the normal, natural alliances between the sexes.) It may be shocking, but it should not be surprising, then, to read of the latest pronouncements of Dr. Judith Hauptman, who is a candidate for the rabbinate in the Conservative movement:

Dr. Judith Hauptman, a member of the Talmud faculty at the Jewish Theological Seminary, commented from a Jewish perspective on the great need for increasing the Jewish birthrate, and of the many bright, well-educated young Jewish women who do not marry. Under the circumstances, she explained, the choice to become a single mother is good both for the woman and for the Jewish people, especially since Jewish law considers these children perfectly legitimate. However, Dr. Hauptman cautioned, neither mother nor child will have an easy time of it, so single parenthood should be considered only if all other points fail.

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In calling for rabbinically sanctioned promiscuity, Dr. Hauptman speaks from a platform of spiritual leadership, and in so doing demonstrates to what extremes Conservatives can go in conforming to the social mores of the times. She also makes us painfully aware of how the feminist underpinnings of the drive for women's equality in Judaism seem to overwhelm its alleged spiritual aspects.



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