

# Women in the Synagogue Today

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The recent controversy in the Conservative movement over the granting of rabbinical ordination to women is but another reflection of the serious impact of the Women's Liberation movement on the American Jewish community. Whatever the outcome of that controversy, the role of women in Jewish life has clearly been undergoing real change,<sup>1</sup> largely focused on changes in women's ritual participation.

In 1975, the Center for Jewish Community Studies undertook a study of the present state of the synagogue in the United States.\* As part of that study we surveyed the changing roles of women. The table below lists 11 kinds of women's participation together with the percentages of Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform synagogues responding "yes" to each item. A review of the results leads to a few immediate conclusions. Both Reform and Orthodox branches of Judaism are relatively homogeneous on these issues, each in its own direction. The greatest division appears within the Conservative movement. Within the Reform movement, equal participation of women is the norm; while within the Orthodox camp, sex-role segregation remains overwhelmingly dominant. Moreover, no immediate changes in either direction are contemplated — fewer than 5 percent of rabbis in any of the movements reported any of these issues "under discussion" at that time. This finding is especially significant for the Conservative congregations, which are split down the middle on a number of aspects of ritual participation of women. Given its position

as the largest branch of American Judaism, the extent of social change within the Conservative movement during the first half-decade of the seventies is especially noteworthy.

In 1955, the Law Committee of the Rabbinical Assembly (the professional association of Conservative

rabbis) published a halakhic opinion authored by Rabbi Aaron Blumenthal permitting the calling of women to the Torah. When Blumenthal surveyed the Rabbinical Assembly in 1962, of the 254 rabbis responding, only eight granted *aliyot* with no restrictions. By 1972, 7 percent of the

Table: Percentage of Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox Synagogues Responding "Yes" to Types of Religious Participation by Women

Type of Participation	Reform	Conservative	Orthodox
Mixed Seating	100	100	11
English Readings	99	89	10
Mixed Choir	100	81	0
Count in Minyan	99	47	0
Read Haphtarot	97	62	0
Open the Ark	96	65	2
Have Aliyot	98	50	0
Carry Torah on Simhat Torah	95	57	5
Give Sermon	94	78	7
Chant the Service	90	44	0
Chant Kiddush & Havdalah	87	64	2
No. of Respondents	(138)	(214)	(91)

\*The study was sponsored by the Institute for Jewish Policy Planning and Research of the Synagogue Council of America. As part of the study, a survey questionnaire was sent to rabbis of all known synagogues in the United States. After eliminating synagogues without rabbis from the universe, 1,466 synagogues remained. Of these, questionnaires were returned from 470 congregations (33 percent). Evaluation of the returns showed that they were representative of congregations of different sizes, drawn from different branches of the American Jewish community, and distributed among the several geographical regions of the United States. Included in the survey were a number of indicators of the role of women in formal religious life of the

synagogue. The major indicators of the participation of adult women in ritual life were contained in a grid in which the responding rabbi reported the status of women with regard to 11 major types of ritual participation in the congregation. In each case the respondent was asked whether or not women were allowed to participate or whether such participation was currently under discussion. The option of "under discussion" provided an informal measure of the extent of change yet to come. Prior to the mail questionnaire, in depth, openended interviews of rabbis and others were conducted in 13 cities from coast to coast. The results from those interviews were used to amplify the results of the questionnaire.

142 rabbis responding to a survey in the Rabbinical Assembly newsletter reported that women received *aliyot* regularly in their synagogues and another 17 percent reported that they received them on special occasions. Six percent reported that they counted women in the *minyan*. Eleven percent said that women were allowed to read from the Torah and one-third that adult women could read the *Haftarah* (the weekly prophetic portion).<sup>2</sup> Measured against these figures, the first conclusion to be drawn about the Conservative movement is that the extent of social change within less than a decade is great. In fact, the change in this short span is significant by every social-science and commonsense criterion.

The change has been rapid, but it has been far from universal within the Conservative movement. The small percentage of rabbis who checked "under discussion" may indicate that most of the congregations in which these questions have been raised have made their decision. If this is the case, the figures in the table reflect a true ideological split in the Conservative movement. The percentages (ranging from 45-65 percent) allowing women to count in the *minyan*, to be called to the Torah, to chant the service, and to carry Torahs on Simhat Torah bisect the movement.

If we are to move beyond the obvious and on to a true understanding of the mechanism of change acting within the community, we must try to discover why certain Conservative congregations have gone one way, others another. Within the Orthodox and Reform movements as well, deviations among congregations within the same ideological stream may help us to explain the working mechanisms of change and thus to move beyond description to understanding.

**A** number of variables in synagogue structure, location, and history may have an impact on traditionalism of practice. Moreover, traditionalism in general may be related to the granting of rights to women in ritual practice. Do the physical location of the synagogue, its age as an

institution, the predominant age-range of the current membership, the number of members, and the existence of other innovative programs within the synagogue have any relationship to liberalism with regard to sex-role differentiation?

Regionalism affects synagogues significantly, as it affects so much of life in a country as large as the United States. Our data show clearly that regional location is significantly related to such participation, with the Northeastern and Midwestern sections of the country significantly more conservative in granting women equality than the South and especially the West. Thus, for example, while 47 percent of Conservative congregations in the Northeast grant women *aliyot* 86 percent of those in the West do. Thirty-one percent of those in the Northeast allow women to chant the services, 69 percent of Conservative congregations in the West allow this.

A second aspect of location is whether the synagogue is found in an urban or suburban setting. The measures we used took the definition of the setting of the community chosen by the responding rabbi. If he defined the location of his synagogue as urban, we accepted his perception. Among the rabbis of Conservative synagogues responding, urban location of synagogues was related to traditionalism in granting women participation in rituals. Suburban congregations were more likely to permit women to participate, while small town and rural congregations were closer to the urban traditionalists. For example, 38 percent of urban congregations counted women in the *minyan* while 38 percent of suburban and 40 percent of small town synagogues did so. This same pattern was often true for Reform congregations. Perhaps in small towns or rural areas there is only one synagogue, necessitating a middle of the road pattern capable of accommodating the most traditional members as well as the more liberal. This need for accommodation would slow innovation of any type so as not to offend the traditionalists who are often perceived as central to congregational functioning.

It may be that many of the congregations

defining themselves as "urban" are found in the Northeast and Midwest regions of the United States, and that it is actually the traditionalism of those regions that we see reflected in the findings on urban-suburban location.

What we have here is a classic "frontier" phenomenon, following the thesis of Frederick Jackson Turner and his school.<sup>3</sup> Turner's frontier found its continuation in the metropolitan frontier of the post-World War II United States, a new stage in the continuing American frontier that continued the general westward movement of the American people and added to it the new dimension of suburbanization, which has been described as urban "westering."<sup>4</sup> As Turner and his school have suggested, it is the encounter with the frontier—the edge of settlement and beyond, as it were—that leads to social change. For American Jews in the post-war generation, the suburbs, the West, and, increasingly, the South have been frontiers of settlement where new institutions have had to be built "from scratch" in line with the new conditions of the frontier. Consequently, it is no accident that women's status in the Conservative synagogue first began to change in California in the 1950s just as it was no accident that the Reform movement of the 19th century developed its classic pattern in response to the rural and urban frontiers of that time.

**E**xcept in the case of a few Reform congregations, the age of the synagogue is not related to traditionalism. What is more, within those Reform congregations, the relationship is not the expected direction. Newer Reform temples are somewhat more likely to allow women to participate but this is related to their greater traditionalism rather than to their liberalism. The classical Reform synagogues, which are older, allowed little non-rabbinical participation of any type. The rabbi and the cantor, if there was one, controlled the service and the *bima*. Even today, it is not clear that lay participation is prevalent in classical Reform synagogues. However, the newer

congregations, in moving back toward tradition, have reinstated Sabbath morning services including reading from the Torah, thus encouraging more participation by members in general. A by-product of these old-new forms is the availability of honors in the Torah service to women. For example, while 45 percent of congregations founded between 1946 and 1955 had given women the right to *aliyot* before 1965, only 17 percent of those founded between 1921 and 1945 had done so.

There is no effect of age of congregation on permissiveness towards women's participation within the Conservative movement. Perhaps this is because many were not really old, but were founded after World War II. Additionally, when most of the Conservative congregations were founded, especially the older ones, they were perceived as radical for their time, particularly with respect to the issue of women. Most of the early Conservative congregations were distinguished from Orthodox by their elimination of separate seating of men and women (*mehitza*) for prayer. After World War II, the Rabbinical Assembly changed the controversial blessing of the morning service thanking God for not having made men women to a uniform blessing for men and women thanking God for creating them in His image. Thus, Conservative rabbis consistently have seen themselves and were perceived by the Orthodox community as innovative on the issue of women, this despite the fact that their dominant theme was "conserving" the tradition in contrast with the Reform movement.

Though the age of the congregation as an institution is not a major explanatory variable for traditionalism, the predominant age of the current membership is related to the introduction of greater participation by women. Thus, among Reform and Conservative congregations with most of their members in the 25-39-year-old age category, women participate more fully than within congregations of the same denomination but with membership predominating in the 40-59-year-old or 60 and older categories. For

example, in the Conservative congregations in our sample, 60 percent of those with most members aged 25-39, 56 percent of those with most members 40-59, and 39 percent of those with most members aged 60 and over allowed women to carry the Torah on Simhat Torah as of 1975. Sixty-seven percent of congregations with ages 25-39, 42 percent with ages 40-59, and 38 percent of those with most members 60 or over allowed women to count in the *minyan*. The comparable figures for *aliyot* for women were 70 percent, 49 percent, and 37 percent, also among Conservative congregations. Congregations which report that they have no one predominant age group must compromise as part of the internal dynamics of congregational life, though from our data it appears that the older, more traditional factions have the greatest effect on the decisions. Perhaps they are also more active in decision-making processes.

Among Orthodox synagogues, the relationship between age of membership and traditionalism is more complex. On some issues Orthodox congregations with a predominantly young membership are more traditional than those with older or mixed ages predominating. Perhaps those young people choosing the Orthodox way of life today are more fervent and ideologically consistent than their parents. There is a substantial body of evidence to that effect in other contexts.<sup>5</sup> For example, 7 percent of Orthodox congregations with most members between 25 and 39 permit women to read English readings, while 12 percent with most members aged 40-59 would allow this. None of the Orthodox congregations with most members 25-39 would allow women to preach, while 9 percent of those with 40-59 year olds predominating would allow this. On the other hand, within younger Orthodox congregations, certain new forms are emerging in response to the women's movement. These innovations are perceived as strictly permissible within Jewish law but were unheard of even five years ago. Thus, in 7 percent of Orthodox congregations with younger membership predominating, women carry the Torah

on Simhat Torah, no doubt in separate *minyanim*.

In sum, the predominant age of congregational membership is positively related to traditionalism with regard to women's participation in synagogue ritual in the Reform and Conservative movements and sometimes negatively related to traditionalism as measured by women's participation in Orthodox congregations.

Many decisions of groups and institutions are influenced by scale, that is the numbers in the group. Smaller groups may be more sensitive to strong feelings of individuals, while larger ones may make decisions based on a vocal minority that knows how to use the political structures and mobilize the system, while others are apathetic. On the other hand, large institutions may be able to risk avant-garde decisions because the loss of a few will not be damaging financially or lower morale.

Within Conservative congregations there is a trend toward larger synagogues granting women a greater role in participation. This is reversed only for *aliyot* and distinctions between Bar and Bat Mitzvah in the largest synagogues. In the case of *aliyot*, this may be a reflection of a social rather than a legal reality — that the competition for these honors is so great that this honor alone is not open to women. (One major Conservative synagogue in the Northeast has voted to grant women the right to request *aliyot* except on the High Holidays, precisely for this reason.) In like fashion, Bat Mitzvah, the ceremony for girls, may be confined to Friday evening because of the Shabbat morning scheduling problem which would result if Bar and Bat Mitzvah ceremonies were exactly parallel.

The final variable mentioned at the introduction to this article which might be related to (though not an independent cause of) innovation in ritual rights for women, was the coexistence in the same synagogue of other innovative institutional forms.

One recent structure developed in the American synagogue and outside of it is the *Havurah*, a small fellowship committed to group study

and ritual on a regular basis. Our hypothesis was that those synagogues sponsoring *Havurot* would be more flexible and open to other innovations than those where *Havurot* had not yet been formed. This was borne out by the data. For example, among Conservative congregations with *Havurot*, 57 percent let women chant the service, while among those without *Havurot*, 39 percent did. Among those Conservative synagogues with *Havurot*, 62 percent count women in the *minyan* compared to 44 percent in congregations without *Havurot*. The same trend holds for giving sermons, carrying the Torah on Simhat Torah, opening the Ark, and having actually given more *Aliyot* to women last month. Here, of course, we are not dealing with an independent variable. In many cases, the *Havurah* was formed after ritual rights were granted to women and what the data reflect is the general flexibility and readiness to innovate of certain congregations.

Until the recent past certain areas of the synagogue and many roles within it were considered to be male prerogatives. Exclusion of women from ritual roles carried over to exclusion from leadership in the congregational polity. Conversely, the opening of possibilities for participation in synagogue ritual, where it has occurred, will impact other spheres of synagogue life. Within the Conservative or Reform synagogue which grants women ritual equality, egalitarian treatment in the polity cannot be far behind, in fact sometimes it precedes ritual inclusion. There are signs that within Orthodoxy, equality in the polity is sometimes substituted for ritual inclusion when the latter is impossible to accomplish, demonstrating that the Orthodox establishment is not "sexist" per se but rather bound by immutable halakhic restrictions which do not reflect ill on a woman's status. Thus, Orthodox Rabbi Saul Berman in an article in *Tradition* stated that:

... we may suggest that on one hand, the exemption from communal presence seems to be a central element of women's status in Jewish law, neces-

sary to ensure that no mandated or preferred act conflict with the selection of the protected role. But, on the other hand, many of the elements of the three areas of problems ... are accidental side-effects of the status conferral, which in themselves contribute nothing, and may ultimately interfere with, the attainment of the central social goal. If such be the case, it is the unavoidable responsibility of religious leaders to do all within their power to eliminate these detrimental side effects.<sup>6</sup>

Berman, a strong liberal in such matters, is suggesting that what is not immutably ordained must be responsibly changed by Orthodox leaders to ensure the traditional Jewish women's commitment necessary to the future of Orthodox Judaism. Within the modern Orthodox community then, one can expect that exclusive male prerogatives will be more specific and less diffuse in character than they were in the past. Restrictions on women will be limited to those documented halakhically while issues not demonstrably halakhic in nature will be decided more in consonance with the spirit of the place and age. Moreover, women may seek within the religious sphere to develop new rituals or adopt old ones not clearly proscribed by the Halakha. Thus, the development of birth rituals welcoming baby girls into the world and Bat Mitzvah ceremonies is by no means limited to the more liberal religious community, though there are Orthodox dissenters on this issue.<sup>7</sup>

Berman goes beyond this when he notes:

A small number of religious women have begun donning tallit and tefillin daily, and have in so doing, discovered a vital source of religious expression and strength. Constantly increasing numbers of women are attending synagogue services with some regularity, and that trend can be expected to intensify with the increasing liberation of women from the home and with the spread of *eruvim* in religious communities. Under the circumstances, relegating women to the back of the synagogue, both physically and spiritually, will only assure their gradual disappearance from religious life. Building committees must be sensitized to the necessity of designing structures which demonstrate that

in the appearance before God, men and women are equal.<sup>8</sup>

In sum, the first policy implication of the extension of women's participation in the ritual of the American synagogue is that such extensions will cross spheres and affect every aspect of synagogue and communal life. The woman who has had an *aliyah* and knows how to read a *Haf-tara* can be president of the synagogue because, in addition to her other skills, she can fulfill ritual obligations usually delegated to officers of the congregation. Similarly, fundraising and educational activities of the synagogue may become less sex segregated. In the short run the content of adult educational programming may be more likely to include an emphasis on synagogue skills as fewer women than men were trained in them in their youth and they may now be eager to learn how to participate in those rituals. This will be more likely in traditional congregations where the change is taken seriously.

The expansion of woman's role in the ritual of Reform and Conservative synagogues may also be linked to growing demands for greater lay participation in worship. In those movements, much of the leadership of the service, the Torah reading, and the study lesson or sermon have become the province of the rabbi and cantor. Orthodoxy has been less susceptible to the problems of impersonality characteristic of so many contemporary Reform and Conservative synagogues because of the presence of more knowledgeable congregants, the predominance of small institutions with much face-to-face interaction, and fewer differences between congregants and rabbis in the definition of their obligations as Jews.

As our larger study has indicated, the movement toward egalitarianism has been linked with the growth of the *Havurah* movement, one form of repersonalization of the synagogue whereby under certain circumstances, rabbis will be seen less as directors or "stars" in symbolic shows with congregants as "audience" or bit players with "walk-on" roles. The move to repersonalization together with the availability of a larger eligi-

ble population requiring opportunities for participation may contribute to a shift in the role definitions of rabbis and congregants under certain conditions.<sup>9</sup>

Alternatively, the decentralization of worship begun with *Havura minyanim* will be broadened to enable greater participation as well as a variety of styles of worship from which the congregant can choose. All this is likely to remain a minority force within synagogues, however, as most synagogue members — male or female — will continue by choice to participate minimally in worship.

**E**xcept where there are organized efforts to stimulate women's active public participation in synagogue rituals, actual exercise of new "rights" is likely to progress slowly. A telephone survey of Conservative rabbis in the Philadelphia area in whose synagogues women had been given the option to participate in synagogue ritual over the past 25 years, conducted in April, 1979 as a followup to the original study, revealed the consensus that this was a gradual process, with most women reluctant to participate regularly in public ways. The major impact on their congregations reported by these rabbis was that of more women taking on the obligation of saying *Kaddish* as mourners and on *yahrzeits* and thus attending morning *minyan* (one rabbi reported that there had been four couples at morning services on the day of the call). All of the rabbis (who, it must be remembered, were among the earliest supporters of women's participation) saw the larger role for women as an enriching factor leading to higher levels of congregational activity. None reported a diminution in the activity of men in the congregation. In each case, the introduction of options for women was preceded by an educational process including teaching by the rabbi, public discussion, and votes by synagogue ritual committees and general membership. In order to ensure historical perspective, congregations called included one which began permitting participation of women in public ritual in the late 1950s, one in the early 1970s, and one in the late 1970s.

As was evident in the research reported here, the greatest shift in practice has taken place in Conservative synagogues. The publicity attendant to the Rabbinical Assembly's Committee on Law and Standards, decisions concerning the counting of women in the *minyan* and the subsequent "great debate" over the admission of women to the rabbinical school of the Jewish Theological Seminary have contributed significantly to the movement's current efforts to confront its own legitimacy in a wider sense. The women's issue and the Conservative search for a recognized place in Israeli society have generated an ideological debate among the leaders of the movement and to some extent among concerned laity over the nature of halakhic interpretation and the definition of the Conservative position on adherence to Jewish law. This identity crisis will surely, when it is resolved, influence the future direction of American Judaism's largest movement.

This ripple effect of the discussion of women's roles on the more general issue of the nature of Jewish law, while most evident in Conservative circles, is in muted fashion a fourth impact on the religious community as a whole. Within Orthodoxy, the Jewish feminist movement and outer societal pressures have led, for instance, to reconsideration of the plight of the *agunah* (the "anchored" woman who cannot obtain a divorce) and, as reopening of the debate on granting women access to rabbinic learning. Thus, the great historical process of the evolution of Halakha is evoked by the evolving role of women in contemporary society.

On the other hand, since synagogue activity is defined by most American Jews as leisure time activity, as women's roles increase and men no longer have exclusive responsibility for the fulfillment of certain ritual functions, men may simply turn those responsibilities over to women and decrease their own level of participation in both time and money.<sup>10</sup> As yet no systematic data are available concerning the impact, one way or another, on men's behavior as Jews when women are brought into ritual life, or on the financial impact on synagogues of the im-

plementation of the egalitarian mode.

There is some observed evidence that, for some people, the increased women's role in synagogue ritual could lead to a diminution of Jewish home observance. If women, who have in many cases inherited the responsibility for such Jewish home observance as exists among most American Jews, come to find their principal satisfaction as Jews in public participation, this public Jewish activity could replace their commitment to the home dimension. Looking at an earlier example of the expanded role of women, there are cases where the introduction of mixed synagogue choirs in Conservative and Reform congregations brought the traditional family Friday night dinner to an end in homes where women had to choose between conflicting obligations.

At present, most of those women actively engaged in the campaign for full public participation are themselves from traditional backgrounds and are rooted in their home roles. Thus, they are not conscious of this problem. But as the trend towards participation begins to actively embrace women with less commitment to traditional home practices, this could prove to be another step in the weakening of Jewish home life, unless Jewish families decide to work toward a rejuvenation of home commitments. In this respect, it would simply continue a well-established trend; historically American synagogues have functioned to transfer Jewish observance from the home to the synagogue setting whether by design or by default.

**A**ll the foregoing are at best enlightened speculations based upon initial observations. At present the whole phenomenon is too new to draw firm conclusions as to what its impact and policy implications will be. Such questions as the long-term impact of changes in ritual on attendance, participation, and commitment to synagogue life of men and women and their children cannot be answered through a one-time look at people and institutions.

All told, however, the extent of the change is likely to depend upon the

larger American environment of which American Jewry is a part, rather than internal Jewish considerations, except in the case of the Orthodox movement. In this respect, the Jews are simply reacting, even if, in their reaction, many of them seem to be leading the parade. If the larger American environment pushes in one direction, the Jews and their institutions will adapt. If it turns in another, so will the Jews.

This is abundantly clear when one looks at the same issues in Jewish communities outside the United States, including Israel. To the extent that women's equality has become an issue in the society as a whole, there have been Jewish adaptations. To the extent that it has not, there have not been. And, for the most part, there has been no effort to bring about the kinds of changes that

have occurred in the United States in the past decade.

One final implication for American Jewry to consider seriously is the degree to which adaptation to new American norms will lead to further separation of American Jewry from Jews in other parts of the world, especially Israel. While the level of personal Jewish observance is probably no stronger in most Diaspora communities than it is in the United States and may even be weaker in many, most of those communities maintain a formal public Orthodoxy in their synagogues that does not admit the kind of changes in public behavior that American Jews have come to take as a matter of course. This is especially true in Israel, where there is a far stronger Orthodox population and a far greater willingness on the part of non-

Orthodox Jews to acknowledge Orthodoxy as the only authentic form of Jewish religious observance and behavior.

Thus, in the short run at least, the movement toward equal rights for women in public ritual is intensifying the gap separating American Jews from Jews elsewhere. Whether this will be a long-term phenomenon, or whether American Jewry will have its own impact on other Jewish communities, remains to be seen. ■

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#### Notes

1. See, for example, Sally Priesand, *Judaism and the New Woman* (New York: Behrman House, Inc. 1975). Rachel Adler, "The Jew Who Wasn't There: Halacha and the Jewish Woman," *Davka*, Volume 1, Number 4 (Los Angeles), pp. 6-11. Anne Lapidus Lerner, "Who Has Not Made Me A Man." *American Jewish Year Book 1977* (New York: The American Jewish Committee), pp. 3-40. Rela Geffen Monson, *Bringing Women In: A Survey of the Evolving Role of Women in Jewish Organizational Life in Philadelphia*. (Philadelphia: American Jewish Committee 1977). Paula Hyman, "The Other Half: Woman in the Jewish Tradition,"

*Conservative Judaism* (Summer, 1972).

2. Rela Geffen Monson, Unpublished survey of Rabbinical Assembly Members. (Sponsored by *Ezrat Nashim* through the Rabbinical Assembly Newsletter, 1972).

3. See, for example, Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Holt, 1920) and Ray Billington, *America's Frontier Experience* (New York: Holt, 1966).

5. Charles S. Liebman, *Aspects of the Religious Beliefs of American Jews* (New York: Ktav, 1974).

6. Saul Berman, "The State of Women in

Halachic Judaism," *Tradition*, Vol. XIV, 1973.

7. Moshe Meiselman, *Jewish Women in Jewish Law* (New York: Ktav Publishing House and Yeshiva University Press, 1978).

8. Berman, *op. cit.*, p. 123-4.

9. Daniel J. Elazar and Rela Geffen Monson, "The Synagogue Havurah — An Experiment in Restoring Adult Fellowship to the Jewish Community," *The Jewish Journal of Sociology*, Vol. XXI, 1979.

10. Daniel J. Elazar, "Women in American Jewish Life", *Congress Bi-Weekly*, November 23, 1973.