

Suggestions for Alternatives

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THE ORDINATION OF WOMEN BY THE REFORM rabbinate presents no problem since that group does not feel bound by the Halakhhah and does not require that its religious functions be performed in accordance with it. The Conservative rabbinate, on the other hand, does feel bound by the Halakhhah although it is more receptive to innovation than are the Orthodox. With regard to the ordination of women, its membership is sharply divided. Is it in good taste for one as identified with the Orthodox, as I am, to become involved in the controversy? What is even more important, do I have any unique insight to add to those already expressed by the many who have been privy to the debate from the beginning?

For the Orthodox, there is not yet a problem. Among the Orthodox, instead of a campaign for the ordination of women there is unrelenting pressure for more extensive differentiation between males and females, higher partitions in the synagogues, the elimination of co-educational schools even at elementary school levels and, certainly, at secondary school levels and in religious universities, and even the denial to women of regular membership in congregations and on their boards of trustees. Orthodox women themselves are wearing head covers, avoiding mixed swimming, raising larger families, and observing much that their mothers and grandmothers did not. In such a climate it is unthinkable that a Yeshiva would provide women with advanced training in Talmud and Codes, without which ordination is impossible. Nonetheless, 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. Orthodox Jews ought to be honest and say so.

Many years ago, an inspired and committed young woman wrote to me of her intention to become a rabbi. She knew that at least one rabbinical seminary admitted females but her preference was for a more traditional institution. She had already donned the prayer shawl and phylacteries but she wanted to achieve proficiency in the subjects which would qualify her for *Smikhhah*. In counselling her I had to utter words of caution. I could not tell her not to pursue the course of study she wanted, but I had to make her aware of the realities of the Jewish scene.

First let me clarify what we mean by the title "Rabbi." According to

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Judaism, a rabbi is not a clergyman. By that, I mean that he does not have any unique sacramental power. He is hardly more than a layman learned in the law. His *Smikhhah* is not ordination in the Christian sense of the term, but simply attests to the fact that he is a master of Jewish law — as members of the bar in the United States are deemed masters of federal and state law.

A rabbi does not "solemnize" marriages — he only monitors what brides and grooms must do. At religious services he has no special function or role whatever. One does not have to be a rabbi to preach — anyone with something to say can do so. If a rabbi presides at a conversion or a divorce — he does so as a judge, knowledgeable in the law, and a layman equally knowledgeable can do the same.

In effect, therefore, *Smikhhah*, to a rabbi, is what the L.L.B. degree and admission to the bar are to a lawyer. Rabbis, therefore, are not like Catholic priests or Protestant ministers. And anyone can become a rabbi — anyone can become master of that learning which makes one qualified to answer questions of Jewish law — male or female, legitimate or illegitimate, physically sound or painfully deformed.

Thus, I would say to any woman who craves Jewish learning with all her heart, "Apply yourself. Master it. Many women have done it before and you can do it, too." Perhaps formal admission to a yeshiva will be impossible. It may be necessary to achieve the goal by private tutoring. But many males do it that way as well.

Moreover, it may be difficult to find a rabbi who will sign a formal document authorizing a woman to resolve questions of the Jewish law. But even the formal document has no special significance. It is the knowledge that counts. And that knowledge is what creates the authority — not a formal grant of it. Jews may consult anyone with the required knowledge and not necessarily one who has a diploma.

The real problem that the young woman will face is a practical one. Will she be consulted? I would hope that many will seek her out — especially women who have religious problems which they feel too embarrassed to discuss with men. But not even constitutional amendments upholding Women's Lib can force men to seek the religious authority of men and women equally. Religious freedom means nothing if not the absolute freedom to choose one's own religious authority. And most Jews will still consult men.

However, what will be even more frustrating to the young woman is the reluctance of congregations to hire her for the pulpit rabbinate. Orthodox synagogues would not object to her preaching at women's functions or services but they will not permit her to preach when men and women attend the same service. Even Conservative congregations will hesitate to do so, insofar as they would not want to risk a great loss of members which the revolutionary phenomenon of a female preacher would precipitate.

There are, however, some specific tasks which a woman could not perform even if she were to know more than all the men in her circle. With respect to these tasks she is disqualified simply because she is a woman and Halakhists have not yet found a way to eliminate the disqualification. Many years ago, Rabbi Meir Bar-Ilan suggested a halakhic way to make possible the appointment of female judges in a democratic society and the competency of females to testify in legal proceedings (not capital cases). However, there are a few instances to which his proposal would not apply and in them only males can act. And, while these instances are few in number, they are precisely the ones in which male rabbis, committed to the Halakhah, may have to decline participation with female rabbis — to the embarrassment of both.

In the case of marriages, for example, it happens frequently that more than one rabbi officiates. Each family usually brings its own favorite spiritual leader. It might happen that one such would be a woman and her colleague might be one who would have to decline to officiate with her, disqualifying her only because of her sex. She could not be a witness to sign the Ketubah or attest to the ring ceremony!

And that is not all. If the Conservative movement undertakes to encourage women to prepare for the pulpit rabbinate, it will not only contribute to embarrassing situations between rabbis, but it will also further widen the breach between the Orthodox and the Conservative. Perhaps the movement has given up on this issue and has decided irrevocably to tighten its bonds with the Reform movement. Certainly the intransigence of the Orthodox with regard to "recognition" in Israel strengthens that trend. Yet, there are many Conservative rabbis who feel differently about moving too far way from the Orthodox and their sentiment is worthy of consideration. In Israel, they would much rather have a banner of their own as pro-Halakhists than appear as rabbis resisting the requirement that conversion to the Jewish faith shall be "according to the Halakhah." Similarly, the ordination of women by their group, as in the Reform group, will add to their discomfort among their own colleagues.

Despite all of the foregoing considerations, I feel strongly that more and more women ought to become expert Halakhists. One of them might one day do for the study of Talmud what Nechama Leibowitz has done for the study of Bible. Moreover, they might contend with peers in Talmudic erudition for the solution of many problems of Jewish family law that still trouble both them and those males who empathize with them. And there are career areas in which they are notoriously underrepresented.

One such area is academia. I suggested to the young woman who wrote to me that she consider it. Another area is communal affairs. Altogether too few communal servants are Jewishly knowledgeable. Even in fund-raising for Jewish causes she could do much. Most of the wealth of Jews continues to be in the control of Jewish women — married or wid-

owed — and they have not yet learned to be as generous in philanthropy as men have been. Perhaps a very learned and committed Jewish woman would be more effective in goading them to do their duty than the males have been.

Last but not least, I say to the young woman, "Pursue your chosen course for no professional reason whatever. Men should study Torah, not to become rabbis but because it is their right and their duty. In our day, Jewish survival requires knowledgeable Jewesses even more than it needs knowledgeable males. We are paying heavily for our neglect of the distaff side for altogether too many generations."

Needless to say, not all Orthodox rabbis agree with me. But I am happy to report that among the greatest of our day there are those who did give their daughters the same exposure to Torah that they gave to their sons — and sometimes with greater rewards. That the yeshivot are slow to follow their example is to be bemoaned. Equality of males and females in Jewish education is a desideratum.

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