

Sara Hurwitz

Conferral Ceremony
March 22/Adar 26

If you had told me 15 years ago that I would be standing here today, working in a shul as a spiritual leader... I would not have believed you. When I was about 17, my parents insisted that I take a vocational test so that I would be directed towards a career path, rather than wander aimlessly through college. The result of this rigorous testing showed that I would be best suited to be clergy. I laughed. An Orthodox women working in a shul, as a spiritual leader? That just didn't exist!

Standing here today, I wonder about my uncomfortable, nervous laughter. Is a woman in the clergy really that funny? That implausible?

While women in positions of spiritual leadership are still somewhat uncommon in the Orthodox community, there is precedent for this phenomenon. The Pitchei Teshuva Choshen Mishpat quoting the Hida 7:5 records that “even though a woman is disqualified from being a judge, a woman who is wise and learned is fit to render a ruling.” If women are well-versed in law, they can become authorities on any subject matter. אשה חכמה יכולה להורות הוראה

Furthermore, the Sefer Hachinuch, published anonymously in 13th Century Spain, in commenting about the ban of entering the Beit Hamikdash in a drunken state, extends the prohibition restricting a drunk man from giving rulings, to a woman from giving psak in this state. That is to say that in a sober state, a wise (learned) woman is fit to render a ruling. “וכן באשה חכמה הראויה להורות”.

Now, I am not going to focus on the (shakla v'tarya) halachik debate of whether a qualified woman can render halachik rulings or not (although it is clear that the halachik literature supports this). I want to know: who were all these “nashim chachmot? Clearly, the Sefer Hachinuch and the Hida, commenting in the Pitchei Teshuva (R Hayyim Yosef David Azulai) were dealing with a reality—with capable learned women, who were in a

position of “rendering rulings.” And I believe that in every generation there have been “nashim chachamot” who have felt a spiritual calling and dedicated themselves to the service of their communities.

A few such wise learned women who come to mind:

Devorah Haniviah—Devorah the Prophetess who judged and served the Children of Israel in Sefer Shoftim.

Bruriah, the Tannait, about whom the gemara in Pesachim 62b says that she studied 300 laws in one day.

Yalta, wife of R. Nachman who through her expert knowledge in laws of niddah, managed to influence psak.

The wife of Jonah the prophet who it says in Talmud Eruvin 96a, attended the pilgrimage festival, and the Sages did not prevent her.

Or, Hannah Rochel Verbermacher, the maiden of Ludmir, living in the 19th (1815-1892) century, who built her own synagogue and preached led prayers and developed quite a broad following.

Or Osnat Barazani, daughter of Rabbi Shmuel Barazani, living in the 17th century who taught in her father’s yeshiva.

And these are just a few examples of nashim chachamot, of wise and learned women. I can only imagine that there were many others, who had a calling for spiritual leadership, and who despite the barriers blocking their way to achieve a public position of spiritual leadership, mastered halakha and quietly ministered to others.

But that was then.... Historical precedents aside, there has also been a strong tradition of separate spheres for men and women, and relatively few women have been able to come into positions of public leadership. Yet while it is true that people do have a natural

resistance to change, change does occur. The first woman to lobby her community to ordain her as a rabbi lived in the late 1800's but it wasn't until 1972 that the Reform movement ordained Sally Priesand as its first female rabbi. The Conservative movement followed about 10 years later. The Orthodox movement does embrace change, but the process of change is more methodical and slow.

Look around—as the gm says (Brachot 45a) “פוק חזי מאי עמא דבר”: go forth and see how the people conduct themselves ” One need not look much further than this room, to see the wise women of today, my colleagues and teachers, who have forged ahead to learn and serve the community, despite opposition to their doing so. I thank Rosh Kehila Dina Najman, Marta d'Atra of Kehilat Orach Eliezer for paving the path for all of us.

To Lynn Kaye, Assistant Congregational Leader, Congregation Shearith Israel. To Rachel Kohl Finegold, Education & Ritual Director Dr. Carol Fuchs Kaufman Rabbanit Chair at Anshe Sholom B'nai Israel Congregation in Chicago. And to Elana Stein-Hain, Community Scholar at Lincoln Square Synagogue.

So I ask again, is it really that laughable to have women in positions of spiritual leadership?

When one begins to focus on the day-to-day practical aspects of the rabbinic job, we find that there is a very short list of Rabbinic functions that women cannot halakhically perform. As of now, Orthodox women do not lead services and women are barred from acting as edim -- witnesses -- for marriage, divorce, and conversion. But at least in the Orthodox world, the specific roles of shaliach tzibbur and edim can be filled by knowledgeable non-clergy, so the ability to perform these functions should never be seen as a prerequisite for being a spiritual leader.

Beyond these few halakhic constraints, women, with the appropriate training, **can** perform the other 95% of the tasks performed by Orthodox rabbis.

First of all, a rabbinic figure must be well versed in Jewish texts. Today, there are many institutions open to women to gain higher knowledge of halakha and Jewish text. Nishmat, Matan, Pardes, Drisha, Stern and there are more, I am the beneficiary of such an education—and I am grateful both to Rabbi Silber for having the vision to found Drisha institute and Rabbi Weiss for granting me the gift of studying our vast and rich texts. Not to mention my teachers who have made it possible for me to be here today: to Devorah Zlochower who has nurtured and influenced so many women's lives—myself included. Your friendship and knowledge has been such a treasure to me. To Rabbi Yisrael Hollander, Rabbi Joshua Maroof, and Rabbi Ysoscher Katz, who each took the time to not only impart their wisdom to me, but helped me formulate an approach to halakha. Each of you have been fundamental to bringing woman to a place of higher learning.

A rabbi is an authority on halakha. I have studied halakha with an eye towards practical application. Many women are already experts on certain areas of halakha, and make authoritative decisions about niddah and sexuality. But, as long as a woman is proficient in Jewish law and practice, there is no reason why the role of women in positions of halakhic authority should not expand beyond issues relating solely to women. And I thank my mentors, especially Rabbi Yaakov Love, and others who have and continue to teach me to apply my knowledge to practical situations.

A rabbi is a pastoral counselor. Although the role of rabbi is often associated with that of teacher, the job description has evolved to include family mediator, psychologist, and counselor. It is obvious that women in positions of spiritual leadership and halakhic authority are in a unique position to provide counselling on issues relating to sexuality, infertility, and halakhic and emotional ramifications of a miscarriage. But more than that, men or women with a sense of empathy can naturally reach out to a person in their time of greatest distress and greatest joy. I thank Dr Michelle Friedman and others who have given me pastoral guidance, and the tools to touch souls.

Finally, a rabbi is a public leader. We live in a world today where women have reached and assumed significant positions of public leadership. It is no longer noteworthy to see a female head of a corporation or political office. Yet, when it comes to synagogue leadership, women are not yet in the foreground. However, in many ways, due to the vision of Rabbi Weiss, women have recently ascended into public roles in synagogues, assuming leadership positions. The mechitza of the HIR, of this bayit, ensures access to both men and women to ascend the bimah, making it viable for women, and me in particular, to address the congregation. And my colleagues with whom I have had the privilege to work here with, Rav Etan, Rav Uri, Rav Adam, have each found ways, big and small, to give me opportunities to learn, grow, and helped my ascent to the bimah. Rabbi Steven Exler-- you have stepped back numerous times to allow me to move forward. I am indebted to you, and it is in no small part thanks to your gentle nudging, that I am up here today.

And so, it makes sense then, that my title is MaHaRaT. As you have already heard it is an acronym for Manhiga, Hilchatit, Ruchanit, Toranit. It is a word that incorporates the job of a rabbi, -- a public leader, a halachik decisor, a pastoral counsellor and spiritual guide, and torah scholar.

But, we have our work cut out for us. Although this new word, this title, may not seem to have the same connotation and weight of history as “rabbi”, we can change that. Over time the title Maharat will be reclaimed to have the meaning that the title rabbi now conveys. It is my hope that the women who are already in communal and spiritual leadership positions in shuls and schools will be given the distinction of this title. And it is my dream that young orthodox girls will be able to say: when I grow up, I want to be a Maharat, and serve in the capacity of a female orthodox rabbi.

I am aware that the issue of title is controversial, but I ask that we not let title alone be the defining point of this momentous and wonderful occasion. I want to celebrate—no matter what each of our titles are, the accomplishments that my female counterparts possess. Your learning and expertise combined with keen sensitivity to communal needs will

ensure that people do seek out women, but not because of gender, but rather because of their proficiency and comfort with halakhic literature. The more opportunities women are given to flex and apply their skills, the more common it will become for the community to turn to female halakhic advisors.

And so, it is with tremendous joy and gratitude, that I stand here today, having completed 8 years of study in traditional Jewish texts and with 6 years of experience as a spiritual leader, and accept the charge of becoming a full community spiritual leader, your Maharat.

We read in yesterday's Torah portion, Parshat Pekudei, that after almost a year of tremendous effort and energy by the entire community, Moshe finished erecting the mishkan, the tabernacle. וַיְכַל מֹשֶׁה אֶת־הַמִּלְאָכָה :

The torah tells us, "so Moses completed his work" And then, almost immediately, "the glory of God filled the mishkan." וַיִּכְבוֹד יְיָ מְלֵא אֶת־הַמִּשְׁכָּן

Even though we feel a divine presence in processes of creation, there is a unique way in which finishing some work and stopping to see its finished product invites godliness to occupy it."

This moment has been a culmination of tremendous energy and hard work on the part of so many people, and standing here, right now, I too feel God's glory fill this room.

I am indebted to Rabbi Weiss, without whom this would never have happened. I remember that conversation, 5 years ago, on the way to tashlich where we began to dream. And now, you have helped me fulfil that dream, my calling, my passion. You have nurtured that seed that was planted in my heart so many years ago—when that vocational test gave me the notion that I was destined for spiritual leadership. You know, some one asked me recently if I consider myself a "trailblazer." I never thought of myself that way—I have chosen this path because I can't imagine doing anything else with my

life. You, however, Rabbi Weiss, are a true trailblazer. You have risked so much to stand behind me, and your support and faith in me has been the greatest gift of my life. It has truly been a privilege to learn and grow under your wings.

I would also like to thank Blu Greenberg whose quiet voice has helped so many women achieve greatness. You have championed the idea that working to promote women's advancement and full partnership in communal life does not have to mean leaving Orthodoxy.

To my chavrutah—my learning partner. To Sally: In the past 5 years, we have spent part of almost every day learning together. Not only have you taught me so much Torah, but you have imparted to me your tremendous values. I can only strive to be the tzaddikim that you and David are. Our time together has been invaluable. You should really be up here with me, but in your modesty and humility you chose and continue to learn lishma.

To Ronnie Becher, along with Edith Wolff and so many others who have provided broad shoulders for me to lean on, and especially for helping put this celebration together. You have been my confidants and constant support system.

To my family: first my Parents: I think the highest compliment I can pay you is to say publicly to everyone here that I am a product of your upbringing. You have been models of openness and empathy to me. You left apartheid South Africa to seek out a better life with greater opportunities for all of us. And I am eternally grateful for that decision.

To my sister and brother in law, and all of my friends—you are my greatest cheerleaders, and are always looking out for my best interest. Thanks for continuing to play that role in my life.

My aunt Judy who journeyed all the way from South Africa to be here with us—you were instrumental in my Jewish, religious journey. I could not have imagined reaching this milestone without you being here.

To my husband—Josh—I could not and cannot do any of this without you by my side. You are my partner: you are there to pick up the slack, push me forward, and are there to pick me up again. I thank God every day that we found each other. I love you

When I was a little girl, I remember losing an item of clothing. I turned to God, and davened, and prayed with all my heart that God should help me find my missing clothes. I don't remember whether I actually located it or not, but I do remember for the first time, be awakened to God's presence in my life. Today, I gain strength from Hakodesh Baruchu's presence, and recognize, in awe that, I am a beneficiary of God's many, many blessings.

And finally to the community—my community. I do not take this responsibility lightly. And I thank you all for placing your trust and faith in me as I strive to continue to do what I love so much, and continue to serve each of you as your Maharat.