



Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance
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JOFA's Letters to the Members of the Rabbinical Council of America

April 12, 2010

To: Members of the Rabbinical Council of America
From: JOFA

When Sarah Schenirer, the founder of the Beis Yaakov movement, died in 1935, she left a will—and addressed the 35,000 young girls who were studying at the 200-plus Beis Yaakov schools at that time: “My dear girls, you are going out into the great world. Your task is to plant the holy seed in the souls of pure children. In a sense, the destiny of Israel of old is in your hands.”

Seventy-five years later, a new generation of young women is also going into the great world, having had the good fortune of engaging in advanced Talmud study and mastering texts that previous generations of Jewish women had never been privileged to learn. These talented female scholars are eager to share their knowledge with others, and assume leadership roles in our schools and synagogues.

As the major rabbinic arm in the Orthodox world, the Rabbinical Council of America (RCA) is in a position to demonstrate its support of these women, thereby strengthening the Jewish community. Please encourage the RCA's members to create professionally meaningful and halakhically appropriate opportunities for women within our Orthodox institutions.

Rather than engage in semantic discussions about whether or not it's halakhic for a woman to become a rabbi, or make divisive statements about a woman's role in Judaism, we urge the RCA to focus instead on finding new ways for this motivated group of learned women to thrive. They are ready to make an impact in the Orthodox world—in our synagogues, at our schools, and within our homes. We ask that you encourage them in their journey and help find places for them, so that they may be able to transmit their knowledge and experience to others in our community, thereby enriching the Jewish community.

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I am writing to share with you my passionate commitment to the growing role of women in our community. I am inspired by the learned women I see around me and awed by those who have begun to take up the mantle of leadership. They are the courageous dreamers that many of us have prayed for.

I am writing this letter following Pesach, the holiday of liberation. Famously, it was not just bnei yisrael who sang a song of celebration at the climactic moment of the miracle by the Red Sea. The Torah tells us, “Va’tikach Miriam ha-neviah...et ha’tof b’yada” (Exodus 15:20). Miriam took a tambourine in her hand and led the women in song. One might wonder where Miriam’s instrument came from. In the rush out of Egypt, who would have thought to bring along a tambourine?

It seems that Miriam Ha-neviah had the foresight, or the idealism, to imagine the world differently. Though mired in the same slavery as her counterparts, she was actually able to project herself forward and to assert the possibility of a truly redeemed world, one whose joys would one day call for song. Her trust in God and in the Jewish people compelled her take a tambourine out of Egypt, confident that—somehow, some way—it would be put to use some time in the future. And indeed it was.

Over the course of the past few decades, Orthodox women have been blessed with expanded learning opportunities, and I myself have benefited tremendously from this. My religious life has been elevated dramatically by the contact I now have with Torah. But I have also watched with admiration as a few select women have taken even more advanced steps. They have immersed themselves in the Talmud and its commentaries. They have mastered areas of halakha. They have given their lives to Torah and to the Jewish community, all without knowing whether they might ever be trusted stewards of the tradition they so ardently embrace. They are the Miriams who have taken a tambourine in their hands, just waiting for the moment to share their song. The time for them to do so is now.

During these contentious times, I am reaching out to you to urge you to support our learned, competent, and courageous women. Moshe led our people out of Egypt. It is time that Miriam join him in leading our people into the next chapter of our unfolding redemption.

As you must know so well, religious leadership is a calling. Please let theirs be answered.