
H. Sample Exercises for Search Committees

“REASONS NOT TO ENGAGE A WOMAN LEADER” AND NEW WAYS TO RESPOND

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The Rabbinical Assembly has developed new materials to help search committees discuss their readiness for engaging a woman rabbi.

This abridged version of the RA’s search committee exercise and sample responses to typical concerns and questions can be adapted for many Jewish communal organizations to open up the conversation about women candidates for leadership positions.

EXERCISE:

Divide the selection committee into three groups to discuss:

1. What does our congregation need to do become ready to engage a woman rabbi?
2. What will change in our congregation if we engage a woman rabbi?
3. What doubts, concerns, or issues will be raised that will be obstacles to engaging a woman rabbi?

After discussing in small groups and charting the answers, the larger group can convene again to explore the concerns and issues, some of which may be found among the examples below:

Sample Concerns and Responses

1. We are not ready for a woman rabbi. This is the most common response and often an inaccurate one. Congregants are more open to female clergy than the leadership imagines. Congregants are accustomed to encountering women professionals, whether female doctors, lawyers, corporate leaders, or another profession. Sometimes, congregational leaders say this without really having done their homework. Or they say “not ready” as a way to avoid possible conflict. If the congregational leadership thinks that the congregation is not ready, the leadership needs to ask, “What steps do we need to take to get ready?”

2. Since Conservative Judaism is not fully egalitarian, we do not have to hire a woman rabbi. One of the glories of our Conservative Movement

is that we are a “big tent” that embraces a range of options. Some of our congregations are more egalitarian, some are less. Our rabbis, female and male, are sensitive to the unique culture of each congregation they serve. The Joint Placement Commission respects a congregation’s right not to be egalitarian and its right not to feel comfortable with a female rabbi. On the other hand, more than 90% of the congregations in the Movement consider egalitarianism to be a core value. The JPC does expect these congregations to interview women rabbis in keeping with their egalitarian values.

3. We need a full-time rabbi committed to our congregation. A woman rabbi may not want full pulpit responsibilities because of family priorities. Or she may leave us to become a stay-at-home mom. Young rabbis, both male and female, are concerned with issues of balancing the demands of work and family. They can help model, for your congregations’ young families, how to set boundaries and find healthy balances between work and family commitments.

If your congregation is questioning the commitment or work ethic of a woman rabbi, rest assured that the time and effort women have put into establishing their careers will not be replaced with domestic issues. In addition, women rabbis are well aware of this prejudicial stereotype and understand that even though women rabbis have been ordained for twenty years in the Conservative Movement, they still have to prove themselves. Our experience is that women who go through the arduous process of training to become Conservative rabbis put 110% of themselves into their work and bring all their heart and talents to their position.

In 2004, the Rabbinical Assembly completed a study of the career trends of women rabbis. This study found that women rabbis who leave the pulpit cite job dissatisfaction and gender bias as their reasons, not family demands. If you welcome your female rabbi with a positive attitude and open hearts she will succeed and be with you for years to come.

4. Engaging a woman rabbi will be disruptive to the congregation. We already have enough conflict here. Any new rabbi, female or male, who comes to your congregation, will go through a transition period. This is an unsettling time that cannot be avoided, whatever the gender of your new rabbi. Our experience shows that the conflict and disruption

has less to do with gender than with clarifying expectations and becoming familiar with a new leadership style. The RA invites you to create a transition committee to manage this crucial period in the life of your congregation. As you know, congregations cannot avoid conflict, but they can learn to manage them wisely.

5. Women are too emotional! We can't have that here! The popular media promotes the image of overemotional women, a stereotype conceived by the Greeks. There is no evidence that this stereotype is based in reality. Furthermore, a rabbi is not just an intellectual who preaches stimulating sermons, but a pastor and counselor who relates to the entire person. The rabbi's task is to model Judaism as an organic whole, a system that encompasses our physical, spiritual, and emotional being. The ideal rabbis are in touch with their own emotional lives and comfortable with the emotional lives of their congregants. Congregations regularly tell us that they are looking for an empathic spiritual leader. Whether male or female, the best rabbi will be aware of the emotional component of life.

6. This is a man's world, with a hierarchy and a lot of competition, and women leaders just do not fit in this world. We live in a society which adores clear winners and losers. In fact, the hottest concept in the business world now is about being nonhierarchical. When hierarchical barriers are removed, there is more interaction which allows for better idea development. The biggest companies are looking for ways to flatten their organizational charts. Our Jewish community and texts have been teaching values of equality for many years, ever since the book of Genesis in which we are told that each one of us is created in the divine image. We have the opportunity to model this profound sense of equality by creating institutions that are open to all and by moving away from hierarchical and exclusionary patterns of leadership.

7. We do not want a woman rabbi because we are a prestigious congregation, and the leaders in our community will not see her or our congregation as a "winner." It has now been more than twenty years since women have become Conservative rabbis. If you do not interview women rabbis, you will be missing out on some of the most talented and accomplished rabbis of our Movement. Increasingly,

these women rabbis bring resumes deep in expertise, and they bring that wisdom and experience to their new positions. They have developed national reputations through their innovative tefillah, writings, and professional accomplishments. These women rabbis will increase the prestige of any congregation that partners with them.

8. A woman rabbi may expect us to become a "feminist" congregation. A woman rabbi will take us too far to the "left." Hiring a female rabbi does not automatically define your congregation as a feminist congregation any more than hiring a male rabbi who has lived in Israel defines you as a Zionist congregation. Both male and female rabbis will be sensitive to the unique culture of your synagogue. It is true that a new rabbi will bring changes. The process of making change is a critical transition issue, and the Joint Placement Commission believes that change should be made in a sensitive and caring way by the new rabbi. The JPC teaches that no changes should be made abruptly or unilaterally. The changes should fit into both the history and the culture of the congregation. In particular, rabbis understand that liturgical changes should be made slowly and carefully, in partnership with the congregants.

9. We engaged a woman rabbi in the past, and it didn't work out. We don't want to make the same mistake again. We all accept that there are many different kinds of male rabbis, and that having a bad experience with one male rabbi is not an indictment of all male rabbis. Similarly, each female rabbi is unique and a negative experience with one rabbi should not lead a congregation to give up on all women rabbis.

10. How will our congregation benefit from engaging a woman rabbi? A female rabbi signifies that your congregation is cutting-edge and exciting, a great message to send to the younger generations in your community. Symbolically, it may mean the congregation wants to head in a new direction or be more inclusive. The popular literature holds that female leaders tend to be more collaborative and less hierarchical. However, the main benefits of having a woman rabbi will come from her own personal strengths and experience, and the partnership she builds with your congregation.