

**SAGE PUBLICATIONS: GENDER AND WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP**

**WOMEN LEADERS IN JUDAISM**

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### **WOMEN LEADERS IN JUDAISM**

#### **Introduction**

Judaism is a religion and also a form of ethnic identification. This chapter considers how Jewish women's leadership has been made manifest in the religious sphere and in the cultural, political and communal forms of Jewish people-hood in America.

The patriarchal nature of the Jewish religion limited women's roles to the domestic realm for many centuries. Religious law and social constructs prevented women from participating equally in prayer, ritual and learning. (Hyman) Starting in nineteenth century Europe, liberal Jewish communities allowed women to participate in secular and religious education. The emergent American Jewish community, populated first by German and later by Eastern European immigrants, started synagogues and created many organizations to acculturate and serve the needs of their co-religionists. Jewish women became active as volunteers, lay social workers and teachers. Individual Jewish women attained prominence in suffrage and the labor movement. For most of the twentieth century, women contributed as volunteers in the sisterhoods and auxiliaries of Jewish organizations led by men, and in new women-only organizations such as Hadassah and the National Council of Jewish Women where leadership opportunities were more abundant.

Jewish feminism in the 1970's marked a sea change, reflecting social changes happening elsewhere in America. Jewish women questioned male-only hierarchies in religious leadership. This led to the ordination of women as rabbis in all but Orthodox denominations. Greater participation of women in religious life contributed to a renaissance of Jewish spirituality, with new rituals, publications and organizations inclusive of women's voices and perspectives.

Jewish communal organizations proved more resistant to gender equity. In the 1990's and early 21<sup>st</sup> century, research studies documented gender inequalities throughout the mainstream American Jewish community. Women activists, rabbis and intellectuals started new ventures, institutes and archives to celebrate the history of American Jewish women, advance women's leadership and support inclusivity and diversity for lesbian and gay Jews, Jews of color and the next generation. Jewish women in America now have a broad array of choices for achieving leadership, both within and outside the Jewish community. The effort to expand access for women has been interwoven with creative initiatives to transform the Jewish community. Even Orthodox women, whose roles in public ritual life are proscribed by traditional interpretations of Jewish law, have experienced advancement in communal and social roles.

### **Women in the Jewish Religion**

As one of the world's major religions, Jews have created texts, rituals, and life cycle events over 3,500 years that continue to inform religious practice in modern times.

Every week in the synagogue, Jews read a portion of the Old Testament. Even in the 21st century, Jews who want to be considered “literate” are expected to be fluent in the Old Testament, the foundation of Jewish knowledge, and in the Talmud, the repository of Jewish scholarship, laws, ethics and history. These ancient texts tell the story of the Jewish people largely through the vision and leadership of men.

Traditional interpretations of Jewish law (*halakha*) limited the role of women in most public ritual and teaching, preventing them from serving as rabbis, cantors (leaders of public prayer), and scholars. Judaism was shaped and transmitted from generation to generation by male rabbis, educators and scholars. Communal norms, grounded in Jewish tradition, also constrained women from professional and lay leadership.

### *Prayer, Ritual and Leadership*

Jewish religious life is now comprised of four major “movements”– Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist. Each movement oversees its own synagogues and seminaries and determines how Jewish law and tradition can be interpreted.

Rabbis function as the spiritual and intellectual leaders of the Jewish community. It was not until 1972 that the first woman was ordained as a Reform Rabbi and in 1983, a Conservative rabbi. In the Orthodox denomination, the most traditional of the religious streams, women still cannot be ordained as rabbis.

Women are now assuming leadership roles as rabbis and in the administration and academics of the seminaries. This was not always the case. Until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as

noted by historian Paula Hyman in *Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History: The Role and Representation of Women (1995)*, participation for women in public religious practice was extremely limited. Public prayer and study “constituted the heart and soul of traditional Judaism and they were the pursuits almost exclusively of men.” Women were relegated to separate quarters in the balcony or on the sidelines of the synagogue.

### **Women as Leaders in Modern Jewish History**

#### *Gender Roles – Traditional and Complex*

The specific character of Jewish gender roles in modern Jewish history influenced perspectives on domestic, religious, and community leadership. Because of anti-Semitism, Jewish men were limited as to where they could live and how they could earn a living. As described by Hyman, this disenfranchisement led to a culture in which Jewish men “expressed their masculinity in the synagogue and in the house of study, not on the battlefield and not through the physical oppression of their women.” Shunning the typical “manly” physical pursuits, Jewish men asserted their dominion over intellectual and spiritual studies.

#### *Wives, Mothers, and Breadwinners*

For Jews, the home was considered a safe haven from the persecution of the outside world. Jewish women were respected for their contribution to making Jewish homes, bearing children and contributing to the continuity of the Jewish people. (Hyman)

Earning a living, however, was not alien to the Jewish woman's experience. In the most traditional Jewish environments, the poor *shtetls* of Eastern Europe, wives often worked alongside their husbands in small businesses. Some Jewish mothers were the sole providers, enabling their husbands to devote themselves fully to religious study. In the late nineteenth century, financial needs, as well as societal shifts meant that some non-religious Jewish women left their village homes in Eastern or Central Europe to study or work in the cities.

### *The Haskalah and Women's Education*

The Enlightenment of 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe motivated educated, more prosperous Jews to seek acceptance in secular society. They adapted the principles of the Enlightenment to create their own Jewish "Haskalah." Jewish women in Germany took advantage of opportunities for secular and Jewish education during this period. Women and girls were permitted to study Biblical history, ethics and Jewish customs, albeit with a less rigorous curriculum than their husbands and brothers.

### **Immigration: Adaptation and Activism by Jewish Women**

Jews from Germany, Eastern Europe, and Russia emigrated to America starting in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. From 1820-1880, the first significant wave of Jewish immigration brought between 100,000 - 200,000 Jews to America, mostly from Germany. The next waves of immigration, from 1880-1920 brought a much larger influx of Jews, most of them poor, fleeing from religious persecution in Eastern Europe and Russia. By 1927, there were 4.2 million Jews in the United States.

From their start in America, Jewish women became active as volunteers, workers and activists. Some Jewish women became prominent in social and political movements. Many more pursued volunteerism in the women's auxiliaries of Jewish religious and communal organizations.

### *Jewish Women's Volunteer Activism*

As the earliest generations of Jewish women entered the American middle class, they became involved in volunteer social work. Rebecca Gratz, whose father had emigrated from Germany established the first Female Hebrew Benevolent Society in 1819 to take care of sick, impoverished and dying women in Philadelphia. Gratz also founded the Sunday School movement in 1838, to teach American Jewish children, most of whom attended public school, the basics of their own religion. The organizational activism of Philadelphia's Jewish women became a model for Jewish women in many other American cities.

As Karla Goldman writes in *Beyond the Synagogue Gallery: Finding a Place for Women in American Judaism* (2001), Jewish women in Reform congregations, departing from traditional practice, moved from the gallery to family pews. Because worship was positioned as the single purpose for Reform synagogues, women's volunteerism was minimized until later in the nineteenth century, when the growing needs of struggling Jewish immigrants offered Jewish women of greater means an important and imperative avenue of service. The informal social work system of the emergent American Jewish

community engaged both men and women but especially influenced women by giving them greater access to public life through volunteerism.

Within Reform synagogues, women founded their own organizations, known as sisterhoods. In 1913, the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods was formed, conferring a new level of status on women's groups within Reform congregations. The Women's League of Conservative Judaism, founded in 1918, offered a similar network for women's groups in Conservative synagogues. These women's organizations, focused upon the needs of local synagogues, did much to expand and redefine the social and ritual life of American Judaism.

#### *Activists, Unionists, and Radicals*

Jewish women figured prominently in American social movements of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, including suffrage and workers' rights. In 1848, Ernestine Rose, a Polish Hasidic rabbi's daughter and a leading abolitionist and suffragist, made a stirring speech at the Seneca Falls Convention for women's emancipation. Emma Goldman, an immigrant from Kovno, Lithuania spent her life as an activist, championing such causes as anarchism, pacifism, and birth control.

In 1900, The International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union was founded by eleven Jewish men. Yet it was a Jewish woman, Clara Lemlich, who galvanized, "The Uprising of the 20,000" in 1909, one of the earliest strikes built upon the interests and activism of women. The infamous and horrific Triangle Shirtwaist Fire of 1914, which killed 146 Jewish and Italian young women, broke the barriers for participation of women as central



activists in the union. However, women rarely were to be invited into the union's senior leadership.

Many of these Jewish women had come to America to escape poverty and anti-Semitism in Eastern Europe. Some female radicals had been educated in Europe and had been active in socialist groups before emigrating. Unlike the more well-to-do German Jewish women who had emigrated earlier, many of these immigrant women became factory workers in the booming industrial economy and joined the labor movement. Others, as wives and mothers, helped to support their families by taking in boarders, doing piecework, and managing the household resources.

#### *Jewish Women Start Independent Women-Only Organizations*

Jewish women also established new, women-only Jewish organizations. The National Council of Jewish Women (NCJW) was founded in 1893 at the Parliament of Religions in Chicago when women, prevented from participating in the Jewish program, hosted their own Congress; this was the first gathering of Jewish women from across the country. At first, the NCJW provided Jewish education to their members and supported their social and philanthropic work; the organization later focused on national social policy and legislation related to women's issues. Hadassah, founded by Henrietta Szold in 1912, was dedicated to supporting Jewish settlement in Palestine, and eventually to building the state of Israel. Hadassah's unprecedented success in organizing and fundraising amplified the American voice for Zionism, the movement rooted in the commitment to establishing and a national homeland for Jews in Palestine .

The NCJW and Hadassah became influential institutions, engaging Jewish women nationwide in volunteerism and advocacy. Women demonstrated their leadership by mobilizing their peers in large numbers through local, chapter-based organizations. They gained practical skills in fundraising, public speaking and political action.

By the mid-twentieth century, the American Jewish community had created many national organizations devoted to politics, Zionism, community relations, public policy, Jewish religion, and combating anti-Semitism, in addition to the nationwide federation system. On the local level, Jews created community centers, social service agencies, and cultural groups, in addition to synagogues.

Many of these organizations, recognizing the impact of the National Council of Jewish Women, Hadassah and the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods, created women's auxiliaries to harness women's volunteer energy. The establishment of these auxiliaries offered more opportunity for women's visibility and public voice. However, the Jewish male leadership invited women into their organizations as supportive volunteers, not as decision makers.

## **Turning the Gender Lens on Jewish Leadership**

### **Jewish Feminism**

During the 1960's and 1970's, the American Jewish community was influenced by the larger American context, particularly by President Kennedy's spirit of civic engagement, the civil rights movement, and the women's movement.

The second wave of American feminism asserted that the “personal is political.” Women joined consciousness-raising groups to examine the structure of the family and the workplace, and demanded equal pay for equal work, and equal opportunity for professional advancement.

Many Jewish women were inspired by secular feminists who were Jewish, including *The Feminine Mystique* author Betty Friedan, and political essayist and music critic Ellen Willis. The Jewish feminist movement also attracted the daughters and granddaughters of women union activists and volunteer leaders. Younger Jewish women came from the Jewish counterculture, the student movement, and the independent *chavurah* community (participatory prayer fellowships, an alternative to synagogues). A small group of women were volunteers with national or local Jewish organizations.

Starting in the 1970’s and continuing through the next several decades, the Jewish feminist movement became a considerable force for social change. In 1973, the North American Jewish Students Network convened the first National Conference of Jewish Women, in New York City, bringing together four hundred Jewish women, secular and religious, of all ages and political affiliations. Conference participants discussed and debated such issues as liturgy and ritual, equal pay, professional advancement, and childcare. Judith Plaskow’s paper (1973) “The Jewish Feminist: Conflict in Identities,” first presented at the conference, explored the contradictions that many women felt between Judaism and feminism and later became the basis of her seminal book, *Standing Again at Sinai* (1990). The writings of Rachel Adler, who later wrote, *Engendering Judaism* (1998), were also highly influential. Adler positioned feminism as part of

“Judaism’s commitment to justice [which] obligates it to understand and redress gender inequity.” (Adler)

Jewish feminists advocated for full participation in every sphere of Jewish life – as religious leaders, educators, scholars, board members and professional executives in communal organizations. Receptivity to these demands varied depending on the Jewish denomination, with the Reform Movement more open to equal access and the Conservative Movement more restrictive. In the Orthodox community, there was little hope that women would lead as rabbis.

As noted by Riv-Ellen Prell in *Women Remaking American Judaism (2007)*, Jewish feminism was fueled by individuals and self-organizing groups who launched conferences and campaigns and started new publications and organizations. *Lilith*, founded by Susan Weidman Schneider in 1976, was the first periodical to give voice to the ideas of Jewish feminism. The Jewish Feminist Organization, founded in 1974, documented the history of Jewish feminism and later evolved into the Jewish Women’s Resource Center. The Drisha Institute, founded in 1979 by Rabbi David Silber, offered religious study to Orthodox women that was comparable to the yeshiva training of their male counterparts.

During this period, Jewish feminists began to advocate for acceptance of gay and lesbian Jews, despite considerable homophobia. This later led to the acceptance of gays and lesbians for rabbinical training, with ordination in the Reform movement (1990) and the Conservative movement (2008), as well as the establishment of gay synagogues. As a result of feminism in the United States and the Jewish community, Jewish women rose in

public stature and visibility in the religious and communal arenas. Many of the changes made possible by Jewish feminism are now experienced as norms in Jewish life.

### **Jewish Women Leaders in Religious Life Today**

In Jewish organizational life, women dissatisfied by their treatment as professionals or volunteers could pursue their aspirations in the secular arena. However, for Jewish women deeply committed to their religious denomination, participation in religious life was not discretionary. During the 1970's, feminist activists in the more liberal denominations advocated for rabbinic ordination and for an egalitarian approach to ritual. (Nadell,)

The American Reform movement ordained its first woman rabbi in 1972. The Reconstructionist seminary ordained women from the outset, with the first woman rabbi, Sandy Eisenberg Sasso graduating from its seminary in 1974. The Conservative movement later followed, ordaining Amy Eilberg in 1983. Modern Orthodox women, despite strict adherence to Jewish law, which prohibited rabbinic ordination (as of 2009), developed parallel leadership as educators, administrators, and scholars. For Jewish women in every denomination, the issue is no longer whether women have access to religious leadership. Instead, women rabbis, cantors, and educators are asking whether their leadership will be normalized or marginalized.

## **Women as Spiritual Leaders**

### *The Reform Movement*

The Reform movement was the first to ordain women as rabbis and cantors. Advocacy for women's ordination began in 1922, when the Central Conference of American Rabbis issued an official statement in favor of ordaining women. Despite its egalitarian philosophy, the Reform movement stopped short of actually ordaining women, refusing to confer the title of Rabbi on two women who petitioned the movement, Martha Neumark in 1923 and Hadassah Leventhal in 1939.

After decades of internal debate, and influenced by the social changes of the 1960's, the Reform movement ordained its first female rabbi, Sally Preisand, in 1972, followed soon after by Barbara Ostfeld, the first female cantor. Since that time, the movement's seminary, the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, based in Los Angeles, Cincinnati, New York, and Jerusalem, has seen a steady increase of female rabbinical students and cantors. As of 2009, women make up more than half of the rabbinical school cohort.

Female clergy make up roughly one-third of the Reform rabbinate and work in synagogues, schools, universities, and hospitals. More than a dozen women now serve as senior rabbis of large Reform congregations (500 families or more), according to Rabbi Jacqueline Koch Ellenson, Director of the Women's Rabbinic Network. Women in the Reform movement also have distinguished themselves in academia and lay leadership. After a long period in which few women served on its faculty, HUC-JIR started, in the

early 2000's, to hire women scholars at equal levels to men. HUC-JIR is also the first Jewish seminary with a female Board chair, Barbara Friedman.

### *The Reconstructionist Movement*

The Reconstructionist Movement is the newest of the Jewish denominations, founded in 1968, along with its rabbinical seminary, the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College.

Women have participated in its rabbinic leadership since the movement's founding).

Sandy Eisenberg Sasso was ordained as the first female Reconstructionist Rabbi in 1974.

Women comprise a large majority of RRC's current enrollment, and more than half of the school's faculty and a large percentage of its administration and lay leadership are female.

### *The Conservative Movement*

For many years, the Conservative movement resisted ordaining women. In 1971, a group of women formed Ezrat Nashim (meaning "women's section" or "help to women") to advocate for women's rabbinic ordination and ritual equality. For more than a decade, scholars, students, and lay people debated the issue of women's ordination.

In 1980, the Jewish Theological Seminary of America (JTS) postponed a decision to ordain women, fearing a split in the Conservative movement. In 1983, responding to activism from within the movement, ordination for women was approved. Amy Eilberg became the first Conservative woman rabbi to be ordained in 1983, followed in 1987 by Cantors Erica Lippitz and Marla Barugel.

Like Reform and Reconstructionist rabbis, Conservative female rabbis and cantors serve in the pulpit and as teachers and chaplains. Some have pursued the traditional career trajectory from assistant to senior rabbi in large congregations while others prefer small or mid-sized congregations because of the relationships that can be nurtured over many years. While making strides professionally, women lag behind their male colleagues in salary and status. In 2004, The Rabbinical Assembly, the professional organization of Conservative rabbis, commissioned social scientists Judith Schor and Steven M. Cohen to study the progress of female rabbis. The study concluded that Conservative female rabbis serve smaller congregations, are paid less, and express lower levels of job satisfaction than their male colleagues. The Rabbinical Assembly responded by expanding professional development for women. In 2009, Rabbi Julie Schonfeld became first female rabbi to assume professional leadership of the Rabbinical Assembly.

Some Conservative female rabbis have started new synagogues and spiritual communities, rather than contend with gender discrimination in the existing system of synagogues. Rabbi Sharon Brous, the spiritual leader of IKAR in Los Angeles, and Naomi Levy, best-selling author and founder of the Los-Angeles-based prayer community Nashuva, are among the female rabbis who are pioneering new pathways in the Conservative movement.

Regardless of setting or size, women rabbis in the Reform, Reconstructionist and Conservative movements have introduced new approaches to a profession historically steeped in hierarchical models of religious authority. Many women rabbis are speaking and writing about the importance of collaborative thinking and personal narrative for



bringing Jewish ritual and tradition to their congregations and communities. Women rabbis are also contributing new interpretations of traditional texts in compilations such as the *Women's Torah Commentaries (2000)*, edited by Rabbi Elyse Goldstein.

### *The Orthodox Movement*

Orthodox Judaism is the only movement that does not ordain women as rabbis or cantors. Because of strict adherence to Jewish law and conservative social norms, Orthodox women face significant challenges in attaining leadership roles in religious and communal life.

The Chareidi (fervently Orthodox) community has responded to greater egalitarianism in Judaism and the secular world by increasing the marginalization of women. However, in the Modern Orthodox world, women can pursue higher religious education comparable to men through such institutions as the Drisha Institute, Midreshet Lindenbaum and Matan. While the graduates of these programs cannot be ordained as rabbis, they are applying their credentials to new careers as congregational interns, scholars-in-residence and as *madrikhot ruchanit* (spiritual leaders). They also serve as *poskot* (legal advisors) for women on laws related to the *mikveh* (ritual bath), hair covering, and the *get* (Jewish divorce). The Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance, founded by Blu Greenberg in 1996 and Kolech, founded by Chana Kehat in 1998, support the advancement of women in Orthodox communal life.

Some Modern Orthodox rabbis and communal leaders have called for women to be ordained as rabbis although no institution within Orthodoxy has responded to this call.

Haviva Ner-David, an Orthodox woman living in Israel, made headlines in 2006 when she became the first woman ordained as an Orthodox rabbi, not by a yeshiva or seminary but by an individual Orthodox rabbi. In March, 2009, Sara Hurwitz, who served as a congregational intern at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale (NY) was ordained by her teacher, Rabbi Avraham Weiss as a Maharat, a Hebrew acronym that stands for *Manhiga Hilchatit, Ruchanit, Toranit* – a leader in Jewish law, spiritual and pastoral counseling and teaching Torah

### **Women as Innovators of Ritual and Prayer**

Prayer has figured as a significant arena for women's evolving religious leadership. Traditional Jewish liturgy is male-focused; for centuries, public ritual was led by men for men. In recent decades, women have transformed the context and content of Jewish prayer. Feminist liturgists have updated the *siddur* (prayer book) to include gender-neutral and feminine names for the Divine and have added prayers written by and for women. The Reform Siddur *Mishkan T'filah* (2007), by Rabbi Elyse Frishman, is among the new prayer books that seek to be more inviting to women and men at all levels of Jewish literacy. *A Jewish Women's Prayer Book* (2008), edited by Aliza Lavie, has been a best-seller in Israel and among American Jews. Feminist Seders, and accompanying haggadot (prayer books used for the seder ritual), have become commonplace in North American synagogues and Jewish Community Centers.

Change has entered the sanctuary as well. In the Conservative, Reconstructionist, and Reform movements, women now participate as equals in public ritual and outnumber men in many synagogues as prayer leaders, Torah readers, and leaders of study groups.

Among Orthodox women, there is growing interest in women's prayer services, and in "partnership *minyanim*," services where women are permitted to read Torah and lead parts of the communal prayer.

Lifecycle ritual has undergone a similar transformation. For many centuries, lifecycle events such as *Brit Milah* and *Bar Mitzvah* were restricted to males. Even the wedding ritual was framed by a male perspective. Jewish women have reclaimed these rituals to reflect women's voices. *Bat Mitzvah* and *Simchat Bat* (babynaming ceremony for girls) have become norms, even in the Orthodox world. Rituals for marriage, divorce, and mourning have been revised to reflect egalitarian values.

More recently, women have created rituals for life-cycle events previously ignored by Judaism, including menstruation, coming out as gay or lesbian, recovery from illness, and aging. *Rosh Chodesh* (beginning of each Hebrew month), a female ritual of the ancient world, has been adapted by contemporary women as a way to come together around food, ritual and Jewish learning. At Passover, women's seders are now commonplace in many Jewish communities. Organizations such as Mayan: The Jewish Women's Project, Kolot, and Moving Traditions, all founded in the 1990's and early 21<sup>st</sup> century, have been at the forefront of creating and sharing these new forms of ritual.

### **Women as Leaders in Religious Scholarship**

Just as Jewish women have changed the image of "what a rabbi looks like," many women have transformed the traditional assumptions surrounding Jewish scholarship. When the Association for Jewish Studies (AJS) was established in 1969 as the professional

organization for Judaic studies scholars, no women were among its founders. Female scholars faced a double barrier to their inclusion in the academy: traditional Jewish study had excluded women for centuries, and the secular university system in America systematically limited women from the academic trajectory. Beginning in the 1970's, three trends converged: the Jewish feminist movement, the ordination of women as rabbis, and the expansion of Judaic studies as an academic discipline. Women entered Jewish scholarship in larger numbers; by 1994, nearly half of the AJS membership was female. While many women are working in the areas of Jewish literature, and the social sciences, there has been an increase of female scholarship in traditionally "male" subject matter such as the Bible, Talmud, Ancient Judaism, and Medieval History.

### **Women's Leadership in Jewish Organizational Life**

Communal organizations continue to exert tremendous influence in the American Jewish community. As of 2009, the Jewish community includes approximately fifty national organizations devoted to the denominations, community relations, politics, and Israel advocacy. The national system of 156 local Jewish federations employs thousands of professionals and enlists large cadres of volunteers and donors to raise and disburse sums totaling (in 2008) about one billion dollars annually. The communal arena also hosts local social service agencies, education bureaus, Jewish community centers, day schools, cultural groups, social justice organizations, innovative start-ups and women's organizations.

Throughout the history of the American Jewish community, women have contributed their volunteer and professional talents to these organizations. Their rise to formal

leadership has been complicated by obstacles that are particular to Jewish culture while also mirroring the gender gap in secular American society.

### **Crossing the Millennium**

Following the social ferment of the 1960's and Jewish feminism in the 1970's, the organized Jewish community became more insular and parochial. The leaders were focused primarily on the external challenges of combating anti-Semitism and defending Israel, and the internal challenge of Jewish continuity, in response to assimilation and increasing rates of intermarriage.

These trends had an adverse effect on women's leadership in the Jewish community. While increasing numbers of Jewish women attained prominence advocating for women's rights in the secular world, such as Nadine Strossen at the ACLU, and Judith Lichtman of the Women's Legal Defense Fund, women working within the Jewish community found that gender equity was treated as a distraction from the more critical threats to the Jewish community. Men continued to direct nearly all the major organizations as chief executives and board presidents. The women's organizations – Hadassah, the National Council of Jewish Women, and others – continued to operate on a parallel track, with few of their leaders invited into the national coalitions or policy meetings. In the Jewish public square, men prevailed as philanthropists, rabbis, conference speakers, and public intellectuals. It was a groundbreaking moment in 1990 when Shoshana Cardin became the first woman to head the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish organizations. (Bronznick)

### *Glass Ceiling Breakthroughs and Groundbreaking Research*

In 1994, twenty-one years after the first National Conference of Jewish Women, Barbara Dobkin and Eve Landau created Ma'yan: the Jewish Women's Project of the Manhattan JCC. One of its first initiatives was to commission three prominent social scientists, Bethamie Horowitz, Charles Kadushin and Pearl Beck, to study forty-eight major Jewish organizations. Among the study's findings was that women made up only 25% of the governing boards, and that only five organizations had a female board president or co-president. At more than half of these organizations, no women professionals served in the five highest salaried positions.

The Ma'yan study was followed by other research studies over the next decade that documented the persistence of gender disparities in the Jewish communal world, including the Jewish federation system, Jewish community centers, and the Conservative rabbinate. Patterns around salary and compensation were similar; women professionals earned less than their male counterparts, sometimes on the order of tens of thousands of dollars. In every type of organization, women were under-represented at the top levels of professional and volunteer leadership.

### *Comparative View: The Jewish Community and the Secular Sphere*

In many ways, the gender disparities in the Jewish communal arena mirrored other professional and community environments. Research studies in the medical field, legal profession, judicial system and academia confirmed that, on average, women needed to perform two-and-a-half times better than men, to be rated equally. Other studies showed

that women would need to achieve at least one-third membership in any leadership group, to be seen as members in equal standing rather than tokens. These biases are reflected in Jewish communal institutions which, though staffed 75% by women, are still characterized by predominantly male leadership.

Efforts to advance gender equity and women's leadership in the Jewish community are adapting strategies and tactics from the corporate world. Catalyst, the preeminent organization for advancing women in business, has published studies (2004) demonstrating that Fortune 500 companies with the highest representation of women in management perform better financially than companies with the lowest women's representation. More corporations, recognizing this link between gender and the bottom line, have created programs to improve recruitment and retention of high-potential women. Jewish organizations, while taking longer to recognize the inequities in their ranks, have also started to address these issues through coaching and mentoring programs, and support for negotiation around salary and other compensation.

### **Jewish Cultural Constraints to Women's Leadership**

#### *Challenges of a Communal Environment*

The characteristics that constrain women's leadership in the Jewish community resemble those of other close-knit cultural environments. Because many professionals and volunteers choose communal organizations as their vehicle to pursue Jewish identity, the workplace becomes highly personalized. Shared affection for Jewish values, education and spirituality can result in a family-type atmosphere that allows gender stereotypes to

flourish. Younger women predominate at the entry levels and middle ranks. Older men congregate at the top. In this environment, the collaborative skills of “good mothers” and “loving daughters” are expected but not valued.

These characteristics reflect research findings, reported by Shifra Bronznick and others, about the perception of women professionals in work environments led by men.

(Bronznick, Linsky, Goldenhar) Professional success was found to depend upon the women’s capacity to develop the “connective tissue” required for effective teamwork. However, these skills were neither recognized nor rewarded. In fact, “motherly” behaviors that were invisible when practiced by women, were seen as “post-heroic” collaborative leadership when practiced by men.

Qualitative research in Jewish organizations has documented similar contradictions.

Resistance to women’s leadership has long been attributed to doubts about whether they have the “toughness” to direct major institutions and succeed as fundraisers.

Assertiveness has been considered a critical attribute for communal leadership. However, within the Jewish communal world, assertive women are perceived as too abrasive for cultivating the personal relationships that are central to Jewish communal life.

### *Challenges in a Mission-Driven Faith Community*

In the corporate world and the professions, women’s compensation and leadership has been accelerated by internal advocacy or by litigation in the most egregious cases of salary inequity or career advancement. By contrast, women in the Jewish community have avoided litigation or public advocacy for equal pay and access to leadership. Such



behavior is seen as displaying the community's "dirty laundry" and as a distraction from the primary mission of caring for vulnerable Jewish populations, fighting anti-Semitism, supporting Israel and ensuring Jewish continuity.

### *Fear of Feminization*

Research findings by Sylvia Barack Fishman (2008) have documented the "fear of feminization" in the American Jewish community. As women now outnumber men in most organizations throughout the non-Orthodox Jewish community, the concern is that men will exit these institutions, thus draining American Judaism of its prestige and status. The greater fear is that men may lose interest in Jewish institutions altogether and move outside the community to marry and raise families. However, as Barack Fishman (2008), notes, the only areas that are not feminized in Jewish life are the top-level positions of synagogues and communal institutions. (2008) The fear of feminization has complicated efforts to create equity for women in leadership. Promising male professionals often are cultivated with special interest and moved quickly into positions of senior management, leaving their female colleagues behind.

### *The Work- Life Challenge: Contradictory Messages*

The job of the Jewish communal leader is said to combine visionary, ambassador, strategist, fundraiser and manager. Many interviews describe the Jewish leadership work ethic as "24/7" dedication (or 24/6, for observing the Sabbath). In multiple research studies, Jewish organizational leaders and managers have voiced skepticism about high-

level career prospects for women professionals, citing their family responsibilities. As in the secular world, many women professionals in the Jewish community have requested flexible work arrangements, to manage the complexity of career aspiration and caregiving. As of 2009 in the Jewish community, there is greater interest in exploring work structures that cohere with Jewish values around family, community and spirituality while helping to retain talented women professionals.

### **A New Era for Women's Leadership in the Jewish Community**

#### *New Leaders on the Margins and in the Mainstream*

In the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, the “next generation” of Jews has expressed less interest than their forbears in affiliating with the mainstream American Jewish community. Younger women and men have generated many cultural groups, social justice organizations and spiritual communities. As of 2009, more than 300 new organizations have been established, many of them by women.

Idit Klein founded Keshet for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Jews. Rabbi Melissa Weintraub launched Encounter to create opportunity for face-to-face meetings between Jews and Palestinians. Rochelle Shoretz developed Sharsheret, a national network of support groups for Jewish women with breast cancer.

Filmmakers such as Judith Helfand, Anat Zuria, and Faye Lederman are creating documentaries and alternative narratives that explore issues of significance to Jewish women's identity, history, and religious life. Jewish Women Watching, an anonymous group, stages campaigns to draw attention to sexism and other forms of discrimination

within the Jewish community.

Ma'yan: The Jewish Women's Project has been joined by other organizations that promote women and gender equity in the Jewish community. The Jewish Women's Archive, founded by Gail Reimer, celebrates the legacy of accomplished Jewish women. The author founded Advancing Women Professionals and the Jewish Community (AWP) in 2001 to close the gender gap through research, advocacy, and pilot projects around work-life flexibility, professional advancement, and the executive search process.

These innovative enterprises and others have been made possible by women philanthropists who use their wealth to institutionalize Jewish feminist ideas. Barbara Dobkin, Sally Gottesman, and Terry Meyerhoff Rubenstein are among the women leaders in philanthropy, a province which was once the sole province of Jewish men. Together with foundation professionals like Nancy Schwartz Sternoff, they have infused leadership and decision making in the Jewish community with an awareness of the influence played by gender. STET

As a result of sustained advocacy by Ma'yan, AWP, the Jewish feminist magazine Lilith magazine and others, women have risen to the top ranks of volunteer leadership at major Jewish organizations. By 2009, seven veteran organizations had elected their first woman President, including the Anti-Defamation League, AIPAC (the Israel lobby), the Jewish Agency for Israel, the Jewish Museum, the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, Hebrew Union College–JIR, the Central Conference of American Rabbis, and the Jewish Theological Seminary of America.

In the professional realm, more women have reached the ranks of senior management and occupy the chief executive position at the Rabbinical Assembly, the American Jewish World Service, the Foundation for Jewish Culture and several large foundations. Many more women lead Jewish community centers and local social service agencies.

Intellectual scholarship in Jewish women's history has emerged as a legitimate field of study. With the establishment of the Hadassah-Brandeis Research Institute at Brandeis University by Shulamit Reinharz and Sylvia Barack Fishman, women can pursue scholarship about their history and accomplishments in the American Jewish community. *The Encyclopedia of Jewish Women in America* (1997), by Paula Hyman and Deborah Dash Moore, is considered a cornerstone resource. *Nashim: a Journal of Jewish Women and Gender Studies* (founded in 1998), Kolot and the Barbara Dobkin Award of the Jewish Book Council are highlighting women's intellectual contributions to Jewish life.

### **Future Directions**

Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Jewish women have found diverse ways of reconciling their Jewish identity, American norms and gender roles. Dedication to the greater Jewish good often constrained women from seeking leadership comparable to men. More recently, women in the Jewish community have become more determined to have their talents recognized and their issues addressed.

Contemporary Jewish women have choices about where and how they decide to lead. While many Jewish women aspire to leadership in the secular public and private sectors, others will continue to seek influence in Jewish religious and communal life. Some

Jewish women will start their own organizations. Others will prefer to work within the existing communal organizations, local agencies, synagogues and Jewish schools, as rising women professionals and volunteer leaders.

The concept of women's leadership in the Jewish community is being revised, from the venerable organizations to the rabbinate. This new receptivity results from cumulative work over many years by women activists, spiritual leaders, public intellectuals and philanthropists, and by organizations dedicated to women's advancement. The confluence between the advocacy for women's equity, and the inclusivity expected by next generation, suggests that shared leadership may become accepted as a norm in the American Jewish community of the near future.

Policies that affect women's advancement disproportionately, including parental leave and flexible work arrangements, are now under closer scrutiny. As changes evolve, women's advancement will accelerate. In the coming years, the challenge will be for women and men to work in partnership as leaders – to advance important ideas, include new voices, and support the lives and spirit of the Jewish community.

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