My Life As a Rabbi in Israel*
Rabbi Claudia Kreiman

When I was six years old, in Chile, I dressed up as a rabbi for a Purim party. My father, a Conservative rabbi himself, had helped choose my costume of a long black skirt and glasses. I wore a tallit and painted a beard on my face. I was a wonderful rabbi, dressed like a 40-year-old man. I won the competition, and for a long time was very happy.

As a teenager, I knew that I wanted to learn more about Judaism, but I was afraid to admit even to myself that I wanted to become a rabbi. I had never actually seen a woman rabbi and could only conceptualize the rabbi of my youth. I didn’t resemble him at all.

Fast forward to last summer, to Camp Ramah NOAM, the camp of the youth movement of the Masorti (Conservative) Movement in Israel, as we were planning to stage a Jewish wedding with a group of ninth graders. When one of the counselors asked me to dress as a Masorti rabbi, I smiled and answered, “I am dressed as a Masorti rabbi.” (I was wearing blue pants, pink shirt and pink sandals.) We all laughed but I realized how different I was from the kind of rabbi I had imagined 24 years earlier.

When I was struggling with the decision to go to rabbinical school, I already knew some women rabbis and rabbinical students and I had been influenced by feminist writings, but I was not convinced. I knew that I didn’t want to be like a man. I wanted to learn Torah, teach, daven, do everything that rabbis do, but not to lose my identity as a woman. I thought it might be better to study Jewish education. Teachers do similar work while staying within the bounds of the “female” role.
So I studied for a master’s degree at Machon Schechter in Jerusalem. From the first classes, I knew that my reading of the texts was different from that of my male classmates. I decided that if I was going to read texts that were only written by men, I wanted to read them with other women and discuss them from a woman’s perspective. My friend and hevrutah (study partner), rabbinical student Sharon Brous, and I spent hours learning and struggling with the place of women in halakhah. We often became angry, both with the rabbis of the texts and with some of our classmates. This was when I realized I could do it; I could be a rabbi and a woman at the same time. I could approach Judaism from my female perspective and be a spiritual leader.

It is not a coincidence that I decided to become a rabbi and make aliya simultaneously. I couldn’t choose a more challenging place in which to alter my childhood picture of a rabbi than the one where I am right now.

Most people in Israel expect rabbis to be Orthodox men. The stories are endless. Because of my accent, when I say that I am a rabbi (rav in Hebrew), people assume I am making a grammatical error. “No,” they tell me. “You are a rabbanit” (the wife of a rabbi). I gently correct them, “I am a rabbi.” Time after time, they say there is no such thing. Female rabbis can change many of these accepted conventions in Israeli society.

As the rabbi of NOAM, I am the role model for hundreds of boys and girls. I offer the girls the ability to see themselves as leaders. Even though they are used to seeing women in political power, the combination of leadership, religion and spirituality challenges many of the basic beliefs that these girls hold. As they grow up, they can look at themselves and trust that they, too, can be Jewish leaders, if they choose.
For the boys, the model of a woman rabbi is very crucial. As they return home after a month at camp, they may stop automatically separating between what is for men and what is for women. I believe that strong female role models can help change the way that boys treat their mothers, sisters and, eventually, wives.

For adults, as well, women rabbis can change the thinking about Judaism in Israel. Judaism is for everyone; Judaism is about family; religion is relevant. Having a woman rabbi encourages religion and spirituality to be part of everyday life. This is especially crucial in Israel where the separation between daily life and “religious stuff” is very marked.

One of the first problems many kids have is the fact that I put on t’fillin. It shocks them, but when I invite them to learn more about it, they have no interest. The issue is not even about halakhah. It is very clear in this society that there are things that are for men and there are things that are for women, and that the status quo should stay as it is.

Some of the kids in NOAM call me ima ruchanit (spiritual mother). At first I laughed, but I realize this is an expression of my dual roles. I engage the community from my unique perspectives. My conversations with teenagers combine my rabbinical skills, educational talents and “female intuition.” I offer them an intimacy in which to talk, whether it is about theological or ritual questions or personal matters. My campers tell me about their struggles with parents, boyfriends or girlfriends, and with the conflicts of growing up. We talk about terrorism and death, army service, the peace process, and war—the reality for these Israelis who will soon be turning 18.
I am not the rabbi I imagined as a six-year-old. However, the rabbi I have become is a far more fulfilling role than that little girl in South America could have ever dreamed possible.

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