

## **From generation to generation...**

Rabbi Mona Alfi

On Tuesday night I got a text from one of the mom's from my older son's B'nai Mitzvah class. She wrote "Had to share... we're going to a bar mitzvah at another synagogue this weekend and my daughter just said me, "I can't imagine going to a synagogue and not having a woman rabbi. Is that weird?"

Her text made me laugh. What a different world our children are growing up in than we did! Last October marked the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of my Bat Mitzvah. 40 years! Oy. At that time I thought my Bat Mitzvah would be the culmination of my Jewish studies. I literally could not have imagined that this is what was in store for me.

It's not that I didn't want more, I did, I really did. I'm sure it doesn't shock anyone when I say that I looooved leading the service, giving a drash, and directing people to stand and sit. It was fabulous!

No, I thought it was the end because the only thing I had ever seen an adult woman do on the bimah was light the Shabbat candles, or stand next to her husband when he blessed their child. That was it. It was basically welcome to Jewish womanhood, next stop is cooking for the oneg or raising money for Sisterhood or Haddassah. Not that those things aren't important, they are! It's just that I wanted something else, something that I didn't know how to put into words, something I could not yet envision.

But then, I received a gift for my Bat Mitzvah that changed everything for me. When I opened my gifts, there was one gift, a book, from my Hebrew teacher, Medi Aviv, that changed the trajectory of my life. The book was the newly published "Jewish Almanac." As I flipped through the Table of Contents something caught my attention. It said "Women Rabbis, A Short List"

Women rabbis? Whaaaaat?!? To put this in some context, it was 1981, and I was living in Orange County. The news that women could be rabbis had not yet reached us. At least I had never heard anyone say anything about it.

I quickly flipped to the right page in the book, and they weren't joking. It was a VERY short list. In a page and half they were able to list the names and give the bios of ALL the women who had already been ordained, the names and information about some of the women who had broken particular barriers as being the first women rabbis to have been hired as professors or chaplains, as well as a paragraph projecting what the future would hold. And there was also a photo.

It was the photo that got to me. It was a black and white picture of a young woman wearing clerical robes, like my rabbi did, she had on a tallit, a grown up looking tallit, not one in bubble gum pink, even in black and white you could tell it wasn't pink, and she was holding a Torah in one arm, a prayer book in her other hand, and she stood in front of an open ark.

This was my first image of a woman rabbi. And it BLEW MY MIND! A real adult woman who was a RABBI!!! All of a sudden I had a new understanding of what a rabbi could look like, and it didn't include a beard.

It hadn't occurred to me until that moment that being a Jewish woman could mean...well anything I wanted it to be.

Now fast forward thirteen years from that, I'm 26 years old, in my 2<sup>nd</sup> year of rabbinical school at the Hebrew Union College in Los Angeles, and I was applying for internships for the next school year. One of the openings was as the Rabbinic Intern at Temple Emanuel of Beverly Hills. The Senior Rabbi there was Laura Geller, the first woman to be the Senior Rabbi for a 1000+ family congregation. Rabbi Geller was the 3<sup>rd</sup> woman ordained at the Hebrew Union College. And she was the woman I had seen in the photo in the Jewish Almanac. Of course I applied for the internship, how could I not?

When the person who was the intern at the time heard that I had interviewed for the following year, he came to me to explain why I wasn't going to get the job. He didn't think they would hire a female student because they needed "balance" on the bimah, and balance of course meant they would want a male student.

I was very troubled by this conversation. I thought I had nailed the interview. And where had "balance on the bimah" been for the last few thousand years? So I went to the head of placement to talk with him about it, believing that he would allay my concerns. Boy was I wrong.

He not only agreed with the student, but he also explained to me that while there have been women rabbis since 1972, that 25 years is a blink of the eye where Jewish history is concerned and that I needed to be patient. That it would take time for two women on the bimah to be accepted. Keep in mind that at the synagogue I wanted to intern at, the Cantor, the Cantor Emeritus and Rabbi Emeritus were all men, and all on the bimah on a regular basis. That means one woman and three men were on their clergy team, and adding a female student would throw all of that out of "balance."

The next day I got a call from Rabbi Geller. The job was mine. That internship was perhaps one of the most important parts of my rabbinic education. Not because Rabbi Geller taught me how to be a female rabbi. But because she taught me how to be a rabbi.

And the Rabbi Emeritus, Rabbi Mike Heller, how did he respond? Like a mensch. He didn't treat me like a female rabbinical student. He treated me like a colleague. I couldn't have felt more welcomed there. After nearly 25 years in the rabbinate, I still draw upon what I learned from the two of them, not just how to be a rabbi, but how to live Jewish values, every day.

At the end of my internship at Temple Emanu-El, I gave a sermon about the impact Rabbi Geller's photo had on me as a Bat Mitzvah. After the service, an older woman came up to say something to me. She was a past president of their Sisterhood, and had been active on the National Board of Sisterhood as well. She told me that in the 1960s she had been part of a delegation from Sisterhood that had lobbied the Hebrew Union College to admit women as rabbinical students. She was proud to say that she had helped make the rabbinate possible for women like Rabbi Laura Geller. And for me.

As I stood in that room, I could literally see the chain of tradition that linked the actions of one generation to another. I was overwhelmed and moved, but most of all, I was grateful to all those

who had come before me, pushing for more, pushing for equality, dor l'dor, generation to generation.

This Shabbat, congregations across the country are celebrating the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first Bat Mitzvah, when on Shabbat Tzav, Judith Kaplan, the 12 year old daughter of Rabbi Mordechai Kaplan, engaged in the radical act of being called to the Torah. And in many of those pulpits celebrating this momentous anniversary, the rabbis and cantors who are leading those services are women, and many of the presidents of the congregations who will be giving announcements also women. These are all people who one hundred years ago would more likely than not, would have been in the kitchen preparing the oneg, rather than on the bimah in front of a microphone.

When Judith Kaplan, of blessed memory, was called to the Torah 100 years ago, she did more than bless a scroll. She became a blessing to all of us.

She became a catalyst for us to see our community with new eyes. 14 years after her Bat Mitzvah, in 1936, in Berlin, Regina Jonas became the first woman in history to be ordained as a Rabbi. However because this was in pre-war Germany, and Rabbi Jonas was murdered in Auschwitz, her story was largely unknown until recently. But in 1972, 50 years after Judith Kaplan became a Bat Mitzvah, Rabbi Sally Priesand was ordained by the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion.

It took 50 years to go from the first Bat Mitzvah to the first recognized woman rabbi. As my professor once said, in terms of Jewish history, that is but a blink of an eye.

But Judith Kaplan's Bat Mitzvah and Rabbi Priesand's ordination didn't only change the Jewish landscape for women. They made Judaism more accessible for everyone. Their very presence made it possible for us ask new questions. Questions about how we speak to or about God. Questions about what other moments of our lives needed rituals beyond B'nai Mitzvah. Questions about who gets to ask the questions, and who gets to answer them.

But it is also important to remember that Judith Kaplan didn't hijack the bimah and demand a Bat Mitzvah. Her father, Rabbi Mordechai Kaplan was the one who made it possible. It was his congregation, and he gave his daughter the choice. A choice that must have been daunting to a 12 year old girl.

According to Rabb Sandy Sasso, the 1<sup>st</sup> woman ordained as a Reconstructionist rabbi, Rabbi Kaplan "always said, there are four reasons why I wanted to have bat mitzvahs and those are my four daughters."

It's important to remember, when we exclude someone from public life, or lifecycle events, we are not only affecting that person, but their family, and loved ones as well. It's not just that Rabbi Kaplan wanted his daughters to be able to celebrate their coming of age in the Jewish community, he also wanted to be able to celebrate these moment with them, and with his community.

When speaking about her Bat Mitzvah, Judith Kaplan recalled that the moment itself was fairly uneventful: “No thunder sounded. No lightning struck.” Yet, it was one of those moments that changed who we are as a people.

If you’re wondering if her Bat Mitzvah was the culmination of Judith Kaplan’s Jewish accomplishments...not even close. She was an author, theologian, musicologist and composer of Jewish music. And at the age of 82, Judith Kaplan celebrated a second Bat Mitzvah. Amongst the celebrants at the service were Betty Friedan, Letty Cottin Pogrebin, Ruth W. Messinger, and Elizabeth Holtzman. Jewish women who each in their own way opened, or kicked down, doors for those who came after them.

In this week’s Torah portion, Parashat Tzav, the portion that Judith Kaplan read at her Bat Mitzvah, it is written that we are commanded that “a perpetual fire shall be kept burning on the altar, not to go out” [Leviticus 6:6].

Thank you Judith Kaplan and Rabbi Kaplan for lighting that fire that resides within so many of us, a burning desire for inclusion, for recognition, and the simple ability to participate.

And thank you to all those who in each and every generation, in their own ways, have kept that fire burning, lighting a path to a better tomorrow. And oh how I wish I could see where that path will take us 100 years from now.