

Words on Words

Women Rabbis: A Novel Idea¹

DAVID J. ZUCKER

WOMEN HAVE BEEN ORDAINED AS RABBIS IN THE United States since 1972. At first, women rabbis were considered a novel idea. Today, they are widely found in Jewish institutional life.² Through their congregational- and organizational-centered leadership, their scholarship, and their unique approach as women, they are influencing Judaism in significant ways.

Although at times their effect is noted in books and articles in the general and the Jewish press,³ little attention is paid to their portrayal in fiction. This article explores the extant examples of fictional “women-rabbi-centered” works.⁴ It considers the depiction of women rabbis and frames it in the context of an analysis of women rabbis developed by Rabbi Janet Marder, the first woman to serve as president of the Reform movement’s Central Conference of American Rabbis, from 2003-2005.⁵

Although women rabbis appeared earlier, Rabbi Lynda Klein broke through the fictional rabbinic glass ceiling in 1983 (Rhonda Shapiro-Rieser’s *A Place of Light*). In time, other women joined this select sisterhood. In 1987, Rabbi Sara Weintraub made her appearance (Alex J. Goldman’s *The Rabbi is a Lady*). That same year, Rabbi Myra Wahl debuted (Joseph Telushkin’s *The Unorthodox Murder of Rabbi Wahl*). In the 1990s, Rabbi Deborah Luria (Erich Segal, *Acts of Faith*, 1992) was followed by Rabbi Gabrielle Lewyn (Roger Herst, *Woman of the Cloth*, 1998).⁶ The 21st century introduced Rabbi Michelle Hertz (Anita Diamant, *Good Harbor*, 2001), Rabbi Ruth Gold (Athol Dickson, *They Shall See God*, 2002), Rabbi Deborah Green (Jonathan Rosen,

RABBI DAVID J. ZUCKER, *Ph.D.*, is chaplain/director of spiritual care at Shalom Park, a senior continuum of care center, Aurora, Colo. His latest book is *The Torah: An Introduction for Christians and Jews* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 2005).

Joy Comes in the Morning, 2004), and Rabbi Rebecca Nachman (Julius Lester, *The Autobiography of God*, 2004). In the 1990s, there also were a couple of short stories that featured women rabbis as important figures. The first was Rabbi Marion Bloomgarten (Eileen Pollack, "The Rabbi in the Attic," *The Rabbi in the Attic and Other Stories*, 1991), followed by Rabbi Sarah Pollack ("Here and Now," Glenn and Jeanne Gillette and David J. Zucker, 1996).⁷

* * *

"Women rabbis have changed the face of Judaism," explains Laura Geller, the senior rabbi at Temple Emanuel, Beverly Hills, Calif., through their presence and through their influence.⁸ Indeed, they have changed the rabbinate itself.⁹

As Jonathan Sarna, a historian at Brandeis University, notes, the "emergence of women rabbis in Conservative, Reconstructionist and Reform Judaism both symbolized and advanced feminism's impact on...American Jewish life." Women, he explains, "now led worship services and read from the Torah on a par with men." In addition, "gender-sensitive" prayer books were introduced in many synagogues, and life-cycle ceremonies were reformulated to accommodate egalitarian concerns. The "turning points of a woman's life...now became subjects for prayers and rituals; and so, likewise, did such traumas as rape, miscarriage, abortion and infertility..., stirring controversy but also bringing new excitement and involvement on the part of women to diverse aspects of Jewish religious life."¹⁰

The literature suggests that women bring a more natural, nurturing presence to the rabbinate, and they are credited with being more approachable than their male colleagues. Women rabbis also offer new definitions of success. Women and men approach the rabbinate with different aspirations and objectives, Marder says. High among the goals of many women rabbis is to achieve a sense of balance, intimacy and empowerment in their professional lives.¹¹

Balance, in this context, refers to greater equality between the demands of their professional lives and their personal ones. Intimacy refers to a greater ease in developing a sense of community and closer relationships with congregants. Empowerment refers to an emphasis on greater "shared responsibilities, privileges and power" among members of the congregation and a conscious desire to reject more traditional, hierarchical structures.

Balance

Synagogue life demands a significant time commitment, a point that fictional Rabbi Deborah Luria finds overwhelming. "Almost by definition, a rabbi's duties are performed at abnormal hours. This was doubly difficult for a young single mother like herself... Deborah was conscientious and compassionate. She was dedicated. And while these qualities were also necessary for the exercise of motherhood, she seemed invariably to fulfill the rabbi's duties, not the parent's."¹²

Similar to many real-life counterparts, male and female, who serve as full-time rabbis of medium and large congregations, fictional Rabbi Lynda Klein struggles unsuccessfully to establish a balance between her professional and personal lives. In the early days, she had found time to pray, even if it was late at night in the synagogue. Yet the demands of the rabbinate now interfere with her plans. As the novel relates, "there was no time. The congregation waited, a jealous lover. Hundreds of people wanted her to inspire them, to lead them to God, or prayer, or to their own souls."¹³

These struggles are echoed by fictional Rabbi Sara Weintraub. We see her at committee meetings, as a counselor, teacher, pastoral visitor, pulpit preacher and synagogue service leader. Technically, the novel spans only a year, but in that time she manages to face and comment on an impressive list of the major issues facing Jewish life in North America. These include abortion, AIDS, black-Jewish relations, cults, homosexuality, Jews-for-Jesus, nursing-home abuses, women's liberation, women's ordination and Zionism. Her activity, however, reflects the lack of balance in her life. "Sara's mind was...tumultuous....Woman or career?"¹⁴ Her teenage daughter says to her: "You're never home anymore. You go from one meeting to another. You're not like a mother anymore....You've cared more about everybody and everything else." She openly admits to her children, "I've let things run away with me."¹⁵

Rabbi Weintraub could learn from the experience of real-life Rabbi Susan Grossman in Columbia, Md., who tries to lead by example, explaining to her congregants at Beth Shalom that they would benefit from the rabbi setting boundaries. "When I set limits on what my congregants can reasonably ask of my time, I explain to them that if I can't do it [i.e. make time for my own family], how can I ask them as doctors, lawyers, executives, busy people to make time for their families as well."¹⁶

It is telling, however, that the issue of balance does not appear as a question posed to male rabbis.

Fictional rabbis Klein and Weintraub are married women. Their fictional sisters who are single face a different set of difficulties. For example, in Rabbi Gabrielle Lewyn's case, "[p]eople immediately jump to the conclusion she has a million dates when the reality is just the opposite. Single men don't know what to do with a female rabbi, so they take the course of least resistance and avoid asking her out. She wonders if God ever intended for his clergy to suffer such an injustice." At age 33, she would like to get married. It is not that Rabbi Lewyn is celibate, she just makes choices that will, in all likelihood, not lead to marriage.¹⁷

It is noticeable that in these fictional works, many of the women are not married, have never married and have no children. Fiction follows facts. Sylvia Barack Fishman, a Brandeis University professor of contemporary Jewish life, surveyed Jewish professionals four to 10 years after graduation. Among rabbis, "only 2 percent of male rabbis had never married, in contrast with 33 percent of female rabbis who had not yet married," her study showed. Further, only 8 percent of the male rabbis were childless, while 46 percent of the female rabbis had no children. The phenomenon is not limited to the rabbinate, for women who seek other post-baccalaureate degrees tend to have few or no children. Still, there is something upsetting about the suggestion that the rabbinate is not a "child-friendly" career.¹⁸

It should be noted that an undefined number of heterosexual rabbis have chosen to remain single; there also are an undefined number of homosexual rabbis who are not in permanent partnered relationships. Whether congregations, or other professions, consume the energy that a woman rabbi might devote to dating and mating is an important question that requires an analysis in its own right. This is not within the purview of the present study, however.

While the issue of struggling to maintain a balance between their rabbinic and personal lives is an issue in some novels, it is not a universal concern; at least it does not present itself specifically in all of the women-centered stories.

Intimacy

When it comes to role definition, women rabbis approach their positions in a very different way than their male colleagues. According to a 1995

study by Rita J. Simon and Pamela S. Nadell, women rabbis were asked, “As a rabbi who is also a woman, do you think you carry out your rabbinical role differently than a male rabbi who is the same age as you are and who was ordained from the [same] seminary?” The overwhelming response by these women was yes. These women understood themselves to be “less formal, more approachable, more egalitarian, more likely to reach out to touch and hug, less likely to intrude their egos, and less likely to seek center stage. They asserted that they perform rites of passage ceremonies differently.”¹⁹

Fictional rabbis Marion Bloomgarten and Michelle Hertz serve smaller congregations where—in theory, at least—it is easier to establish intimacy, a sense of community and closer relationships with congregants. Coincidentally, both are single women. Still, small congregations also have disadvantages. Rabbinic experiences are limited, and they preclude easy contact with other rabbis, especially if the community has a small Jewish population.

A disillusioned Rabbi Rebecca Nachman gives up the congregational rabbinate, and becomes a college mental health therapist. She is a popular and approachable presence on campus, both for students and fellow faculty. She has made a number of good friends.

Empowerment

Hierarchical structures are set in all congregations, particularly large ones. Fictional Rabbis Lynda Klein, Myra Wahl, Sarah Pollock, Gabrielle Lewyn, Ruth Gold and Deborah Green all serve as assistant or associate rabbis. Rabbi Sara Weintraub’s congregation is prosperous, with probably well over 700 families, clearly a substantial entity. Rabbi Deborah Luria serves as rabbi of a “relatively young and growing community” that has a sanctuary for 900 worshipers. By definition then, these rabbis are at medium-to-large congregations. With such numbers and responsibilities, it can be difficult to meet the ideal expressed by writer Julie Goss in her article, “Women in the Pulpit: Reworking the Rabbi’s Role.” There, she spoke about women rabbis who set aside the image of the “omnipotent patriarchal leader and humble follower....It’s no longer the distant holy man, but rather that of a hand-holder, an educator to inspire and teach....The idea is to empower the congregant to be a more active member of the Jewish community.”²⁰

To that point, fictional Rabbi Ruth Gold actively encourages her adult education students to take a leadership role in their learning. Likewise, in

several poignant passages, Rabbi Deborah Green goes out of her way to encourage and empower an elderly congregant in the hospital to speak the truths of her heart, and to share her hopes and her fears. She displays fine chaplaincy skills in hospital settings, where "Rabbi [Elliott] Zwieback, the senior rabbi, was only too happy to give her hospital detail." Indeed, half of Rabbi Green's salary is paid by a "grant that supported ministering to the sick."²¹ During those hospital visits, she leads people in what is termed "custom-made" or spontaneous prayers that invite God's intervention.²²

With thousands of congregants, there often is a palpable distance between rabbi and congregant, simply because of the sheer weight of the numbers involved. Although hierarchical structures exist in smaller congregations, it does seem easier for Rabbis Bloomgarten and Hertz to get to know their congregants on a more personal level and, therefore, to find individualized ways to empower them.

When she served as a pulpit rabbi, fictional Rebecca Nachman failed in her efforts to get her congregants more involved in Jewish life. They were largely indifferent to those efforts. In her role as a college-based counselor, she succeeds in empowering others and, without giving away the plot of the novel, she connects with and empowers not only the spirit of someone who has died, but she also does so with God, who is a speaking—and visible—character in this provocative work.

Conclusion

A fair question, of course, is what does it matter whether and how women rabbis are depicted in fiction.

First and foremost, rabbis are teachers. The objective of the rabbinate is to ensure the continuity of Jewish life by conveying the past messages of Judaism to the present generation so that this religious tradition will be followed in the future. As women have demonstrated in the last three and a half decades, they have significant contributions to make as rabbis that emerge from their own unique perspectives. Their portrayal in fiction can help all of us to better understand what those contributions are and yet can be, and what the perspectives are that inform them.

The rabbinate, of course, has changed significantly over the past 2,000 years as an institution. Whereas the earliest rabbis served primarily as interpreters and expounders of biblical and rabbinic teachings, today's rabbis lead religious services, preach and counsel, as well as teach. The rabbinate

today is a profession in its own right, while two millennia ago rabbis almost invariably had an occupation from which they derived their livelihood.

As Rabbi David Small, the creation of author Harry Kemelman (found in the series that began with the 1964 novel *Friday the Rabbi Slept Late*, and, arguably the best-known “fictional” rabbi) explains, in the past, basically the rabbi’s job was to guide and teach the community. That has not changed, he notes, but the community has. It “is less plastic, less docile, less interested, and even less inclined to be guided,” says Small. “It’s a much harder job than it used to be.... We say it’s hard to be a Jew, and it’s even harder to be a rabbi....”²³

While it is a difficult profession, as writer Murray Polner said in his book *Rabbi: The American Experience*, “the rabbi nonetheless continues to play a central, if reduced, role in American Jewish life. But I believe he is the most significant person in that life today and for the years ahead.”²⁴

Fictional women who are rabbis share similar visions in their focus of the joys and satisfactions, as well as the burdens and demands, of the rabbinate. They affirm that women rabbis serve the Jewish community effectively as spiritual leaders, teachers, chaplains, pastors, counselors and as voices of conscience.

These women serve in medium- and smaller-sized congregations, reflecting the fact that, as Ellen M. Umansky of Fairfield University noted in 1995, fewer than a half-dozen women occupy the position of senior rabbi at large American pulpits (defined as 1,000 member families and larger), a figure that moved up to about 10 rabbis a decade later. Many more women than men hold part-time positions in Reform congregations and affiliated organizations. Even then, a “part-time” job, particularly in a congregation, often means working 40 hours a week for 20 hours’ pay. Some rabbinical mothers limit their careers to part-time teaching or officiating at weddings and funerals.²⁵

In a 2004 study of Conservative rabbis, it was reported that “men lead larger congregations and women lead the smallest congregations,” and that no Conservative women serve as the lead rabbi in congregations of 500 families and above; in fact, most women rabbis serving in pulpits do so in congregations of 250 families or fewer.²⁶

A better question, perhaps, than what does it matter whether and how women rabbis are depicted in fiction, is why there have not been more examples of women-rabbi-centered fiction. It may be that, in the mind of

authors, the public is not yet ready to support the sub-genre of women-rabbi fiction. Roger Herst wrote a second novel featuring Rabbi Lewyn, but he believes that there is not sufficient interest in the subject to warrant the cost of publishing it.²⁷

Still, the years ahead might see a flowering of fictional examples that depict women rabbis. It may be that more time and shared history is necessary for more authors to “imagine” rabbis-as-women into story plots. When this comes about, if it reflects real life, we will see examples where women are employed as senior, associate or part-time rabbis; are portrayed in non-congregational rabbinic work; introduce new rituals; and at least question how successfully they deal with the issues of balance, intimacy and empowerment in their rabbinate.

Women rabbis have changed the real world; the real world now needs to catalogue that fact in fiction.

NOTES

¹ My deep appreciation to my friend and colleague, Rabbi Bonita E Taylor, for reading this in an earlier draft form and making valuable editorial suggestions.

² In 2005, there were about 800 women rabbis worldwide, the vast majority ordained in the United States. Presently, women constitute about 15 percent of American rabbis.

³ See chapter on women rabbis in David J. Zucker, *American Rabbis: Facts and Fiction* (Northvale, N.J.: Jason Aronson, 1998). Three recent articles on women rabbis include: Joe Berkofsky, “Women’s Work,” *Atlanta Jewish Times*, Dec. 10, 2004, 10 ff.; Deborah Fineblum Raub, “Women Rabbis...A Second Career,” *Hadassah Magazine*, Vol. 87, No. 7 (March 2006), 30-33; and Elicia Brown, “Look Up on the Bima, It’s Super-Mommy,” *New York Jewish Week*, Jan. 13, 2006, 86.

⁴ In reviewing the severely limited examples featuring women rabbis as central characters in American fiction, I cite Athol Dickson’s novel *They Shall See God*. Dickson is a Christian and writes with empathy about his subject. This article considers women rabbis in fictional settings; it does not purport to address the question of what constitutes Jewish fiction.

⁵ Janet Marder, “How Women Are Changing the Rabbinate.” *Reform Judaism* 19:4 (Summer 1991).

⁶ In the early 1990s, a series appeared on British television titled “Love Hurts.” Fictional Rabbi Diane Warburg, although not one of the lead characters, did play an important supporting role. A television series, of course, is neither a novel, nor a short story, broadly speaking it is part of the fictional enterprise. Laurence Marks and Maurice Gran. “Love Hurts,” London: Alomo Productions, SelecTV, 1992-1993. Recently, British author Carol Smith published a mystery novel, *Hidden Agenda* (London: Time Warner, 2004), which featured a woman rabbi, Deborah Hirsch. Rabbi Hirsch’s rabbinate, however, was not central to the plot.

⁷ A number of authors have an “insider’s” perspective. Rhonda Shapiro-Rieser was a rabbi’s wife and Jonathan Rosen is married to a rabbi. Alex Goldman, Roger E. Herst, Joseph Telushkin and David J. Zucker are rabbis.

⁸ Laura Geller, “From Equality to Transformation: The Challenge of Women’s Rabbinic Leadership,” in *Gender and Judaism: The Transformation of Tradition*, ed. T. M. Rudavsky (New York and London: New York University Press), 1995, 244.

⁹ “Women rabbis are creating the rabbinate anew...” Nina Beth Cardin, “The First Generation of the Women’s Rabbinate,” *Conservative Judaism* 48:1 (Fall 1995), 19. See the chapter “Women Rabbis” in Zucker, *American Rabbis*.

¹⁰ Jonathan Sarna, *American Judaism: A History* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), 343.

¹¹ Marder, 5.

¹² Erich Segal, *Acts of Faith* (New York: Bantam Books, 1992), 385-386.

¹³ Rhonda Shapiro-Rieser, *A Place of Light* (New York: Pocket Books, 1983), 242, 243.

¹⁴ Alex Goldman, *The Rabbi is a Lady* (New York: Hippocrene, 1987), 267.

¹⁵ Goldman, 272.

¹⁶ Susan Grossman, “The Dual Nature of Rabbinic Leadership,” *Conservative Judaism* 48:1 (Fall 1995), 46.

¹⁷ Roger Herst, *Woman of the Cloth* (Rockville, Md.: Schreiber, 1998), 3, 31, 11.

¹⁸ Emily H. Feigenson, “Female Rabbis and Delayed Childbearing,” *CCAR Journal* (Spring 1997), 74-76. She refers to the study by Sylvia Barack Fishman, *Expectations, Education and Experience of Jewish Professional Leaders: Training for Jewish Leadership and Service*, produced by the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, Brandeis University, 1995.

¹⁹ Rita J. Simon and Pamela S. Nadell, “In the Same Voice or is It Different? Gender and the Clergy,” *Sociology of Religion*, 56:1 (1995), 63, 68 f.

²⁰ Julie Goss, “Women In the Pulpit: Reworking the Rabbi’s Role,” *Lilith* 15:4 (Fall 1990), 16-17. See also Christine Stutz, “Natural Wonder: Gila Ruskin Redefines the Role of the Rabbi,” *Baltimore Jewish Times*, 227:8, Feb. 23, 1996, 52-56.

²¹ Jonathan Rosen, *Joy Comes in the Morning* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004), 137 ff., 203 ff., 7.

²² Rosen, 10, 131, 210-211. “Custom-made” prayer is discussed by Bonita E Taylor, “The Power of Custom-Made Prayers,” in ed. Dayle A. Friedman, *Jewish Pastoral Care*, 2nd Edition (Woodstock, Vt.: Jewish Lights, 2005), 150-160.

²³ Harry Kemelman, *Tuesday the Rabbi Saw Red* (New York: Arthur Fields Books, 1973), 258-259.

²⁴ Murray Polner, *Rabbi: The American Experience* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1977), xiii.

²⁵ Ellen M. Umansky, “Feminism and American Reform Judaism.” In *The Americanization of the Jews*, eds. Robert M. Seltzer and Norman J. Cohen (New York and London: New York University Press, 1995), 273. See also Geller, 247 ff., Ellen Jaffe-Gill, “Bias Hits Rabbis on Mommy Track” in *Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles*, Sept. 26, 2003.

²⁶ This changed in 2005, when Francine Rosten became rabbi of Congregation Beth El in South Orange, N.J., which has 550 families. “Gender Variation in the Careers of Conservative Rabbis,” conducted by Steven M. Cohen and Judith Schor (New York: The Rabbinical Assembly, 2004), 8, 32. This study suggested that “women themselves are uninterested in pursuing senior positions, due to quality-of-life considerations, social norms, family, and finances. The survey reported that [the vast number . . .] of the women surveyed said they did not want to be a senior rabbi at a large congregation.” Berkofsky, 10, 12.

²⁷ Personal communication, November 2003.

Copyright of Judaism is the property of American Jewish Congress and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.