

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE TASK FORCE ON WOMEN IN THE RABBINATE

RABBI NEIL KOMINSKY

The Task Force on Women in the Rabbinat was established by a 1976 vote of the Executive Board of the Central Conference of American Rabbis. This vote followed by one year the 1975 Resolution on Women in Reform Judaism adopted by the CCAR Convention, which, in addition to urging egalitarian inclusion of women in temple worship and leadership as well as in educational materials produced by the Reform Movement, resolved

that we express once again our total support of the ordination of women. We call upon the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion to continue to seek qualified female candidates for the rabbinat and cantorate, and we urge our congregations and all others who employ rabbis and cantors to choose their spiritual leadership not on the basis of sex but in terms of individual ability and competence.¹

Both the resolution and the creation of the task force reflected a growing awareness that a proactive approach was the best way to smooth the path for a coming generation of women who would serve as rabbis.

The task force, convened for the first time on March 9, 1977, was chaired by Rabbi Sally Priesand, whose landmark ordination almost five years before had moved the question of women as rabbis from the theoretical realm to the practical one. There had been few women in the HUC-JIR "pipeline" when Priesand was ordained. By 1977, there were only three ordained women, but already enrolled rabbinical students promised thirty-four more in the following four years.

The initial meeting included Rabbi Joseph Glaser representing CCAR leadership, Rabbi Malcolm Stern as director of the Joint Placement Commission, Al Vorspan on behalf of the UAHC (as it was then named), Rosalind Gold and Steven Mason as rabbinical student representatives, and, as appointed members of the task force, Rabbi Edward Klein and me. This set the pattern for future meetings, involving representation of CCAR staff and elected leadership, placement directors, UAHC liaisons, and regular task force members. Although he was not present at the initial meeting, Dr. Eugene Mihaly was a frequent presence as liaison from HUC-JIR.

Members of the task force understood from the onset that it was much easier for people to harbor objections to women as rabbis in theory than to do so in the presence of an actual rabbi who happened to be a woman. Thus, a primary goal of the task force over its first few years was to encourage positive publicity about women in the rabbinate and to expose as broad a population of Reform Jews as possible to firsthand contact with women who were rabbis or rabbinical students. Special attention was paid to providing Reform rabbis with the opportunity to interact with female colleagues and colleagues-in-training; many rabbis, as well as laypeople, needed to become accustomed to the new reality. Arrangements were made, when possible, for women who served student pulpits and other HUC-JIR women nearing ordination to attend and participate in regional CCAR *Kallot*, which offered numerous informal opportunities for rabbis to become acquainted with the coming generation of female colleagues. Opportunities were also sought for women rabbis to appear in public roles at UAHC events in order to accustom lay leaders as well to their presence. I was one

of a number of Reform rabbis who shared responsibility for a Sunday morning religious program on Hartford television, and I used my slot early in this period to host a discussion with two women who were nearing the end of their studies at the New York school. The task force also hoped to arrange summer internships for female rabbinical students in congregations around the country as a way of increasing visibility, but such opportunities proved difficult to fund.

As it became clear that public advocacy of the cause of women in the rabbinate would be a prime responsibility of the chair of the task force, Sally Priesand became convinced that such advocacy would be more effectively delivered in a male voice and stepped down as chair in the fall of 1978, although she remained an active and important member of the task force. I succeeded her and served as chair until 1984, when David Hachen took over. By 1986, the situation of women in the rabbinate had become normalized enough that it was felt that a female colleague could successfully lead the work of the task force, and Rosalind Gold became chair. All subsequent chairs of the task force were women.

Advocacy for women in the rabbinate also entailed, on a few occasions, writing rejoinders to published pieces that inaccurately portrayed the situation and prospects of female Reform rabbis. Two memorable instances occurred in 1979. In March, Rabbi Pinchas Stolper, executive vice president of the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations, published an article in *Sb'ma* entitled "Women Rabbis as a Death Sign."²

While primarily intended as an attack on the Jewish Theological Seminary's decision to begin ordaining women to the Conservative rabbinate, Stolper's article also took aim at the experience of women as Reform rabbis, describing it as unsuccessful and producing dissatisfied rabbis who could not fulfill the role to which they had been ordained. A letter to the editor was promptly dispatched to correct the disparaging misinformation.

Not all opposition, though, came from outside the Reform Movement. In the fall of 1979, Rabbi Norman M. Goldberg, a retired Reform rabbi, wrote in the *National Jewish Post & Opinion* that the

Reform Movement should discontinue the ordination of women, as they “should not expect to function as rabbis.” In response, I pointed out that with eight Reform women serving in congregational positions and four in Hillel, besides two in England and three ordained by the Reconstructionist Movement, women were, in fact, already functioning very successfully as Reform rabbis. I granted that some additional “consciousness-raising” would be in order as women matured in their careers and became eligible for larger pulpits of their own, but I pointed out that being quite young in their careers, most of our women were in fully appropriate positions, in which they were succeeding admirably.

By 1981, with seven women established in full-time pulpits of their own, I was able to write an article for *Reform Judaism* highlighting the experiences of these colleagues and the positive responses of lay leaders in their congregations. Both rabbis and congregational leaders made it clear that once the rabbi had entered into her position, she was perceived primarily as a rabbi, not as a “woman rabbi.” A number of the rabbis noted specifically that while the wider community called on them for reflections on being a female rabbi, their role in the congregation was teaching Judaism.

The task force’s next major challenge was maternity leave. While none of our rabbis had had a baby when the topic was taken up for the first time in 1979, it was self-evident that this was only a matter of time. Reaching a consensus on an appropriate approach to maternity leave was a complex task. Among CCAR and Placement Commission leadership, there were concerns that a formal maternity leave policy would impede the placement of women and should not yet be pursued. Congregations being served by women, it was argued, would deal with the question when it arose in practical terms and would, in all likelihood, be more forthcoming in the specific instance of their own rabbi, with whom they already had a relationship, than they would when negotiating a contract. This was a good-faith argument, and the task force considered it seriously. What we found, however, was that the women who had been or were shortly about to be ordained almost universally believed that a concrete guideline for maternity leave was

desirable, even allowing for the possible repercussions in placement. This was the goal we chose to pursue.

There was also a strong feeling on the task force that the desirable language would be “parenting leave,” acknowledging the need of fathers as well as mothers to free up time to be with the newborn. Here, we reluctantly made a practical judgment that maternity leave was a concept that would make sense to the Placement Commission and its constituent groups, while parenting leave would be less widely accepted and had the potential to sink the whole proposal. We went with the incremental approach.

In 1981, the task force formally recommended to the Joint Placement Commission that a policy of three months’ maternity leave be added to the *Guidelines for Rabbinical-Congregational Relationships*, which, depending on the edition, was popularly known as the Blue Book or the Gold Book. Discussions continued over the following years and, in 1983, the task force agreed to a proposal of two months’ maternity leave plus the right of the rabbi to append the coming year’s one-month vacation to the leave. This policy was added to the *Guidelines* in 1984. A 1987 survey of twelve women who had given birth while serving as rabbis reported that the congregations and organizations for which they worked had been helpful and generous in their handling of maternity leave.

As the number of women in the Reform rabbinate increased year by year, there was a growing sense that rabbis in this historically unprecedented position needed better opportunities to communicate with each other as well as share wisdom and experience.³ In the fall of 1979, the CCAR Executive Board authorized and funded a meeting of all ordained women within the CCAR as well as female junior and senior rabbinical students. The meeting was called under the auspices of the task force, which requested Rabbi Laura Geller to act as convener on its behalf. The meeting took place in New York on February 5–7, 1980, and was felt by participants to be a great success. Indeed, the sense that such support and communication ought to continue regularly led to the creation of the Women’s Rabbinic Network (WRN)

during the meeting. The WRN, at its inception, was anticipated to be an autonomous organization rather than a formal constituent of the CCAR, as was the task force. At the same time, the agendas and membership of the task force and the WRN were inherently intertwined, and the task force enthusiastically welcomed the WRN as a partner in serving a common interest.

There was some concern among CCAR leadership that an autonomous "women's caucus" might be unnecessary and potentially problematic. It fell to me, as chair of the task force, to serve as a diplomatic liaison, assuring CCAR leadership of the important role that the WRN had to play and of the task force's close communication with and support of the WRN. Ultimately, in the interests of clarity, I drafted a paper in 1981 on "The Roles and Interrelationship of the CCAR Taskforce on Women in the Rabbinate and the Women's Rabbinic Network."⁴ The role of the task force was defined as "the oversight and facilitation of the complete professional and collegial integration of women as rabbis." Implicit in the term "taskforce," I pointed out, was the idea that the work could be completed, and if so, the role of the task force would be ended. The WRN, I suggested, grew out of "the legitimate need of women serving in the rabbinate for the kind of support, [and] sharing of experience and concerns that only those in their unique position are able to offer each other." It provided not only mutual support, but also an opportunity for the women in the Reform rabbinate to reach and voice consensus as to their needs and concerns. The paper concluded that close cooperation and communication between the task force and the WRN, as was already the case, best served the goals of both groups. The paper was adopted as a policy statement by both the task force and the WRN, and in my experience, conflicts between the two groups were nonexistent.

A major responsibility of the task force was monitoring women's experience of the rabbinic placement process. Each year, the director of placement (Rabbi A. Stanley Dreyfus, z"l, during most of this period) reported to us on the placement status of our female colleagues, and additionally, the task force members were in touch with recently

ordained women to obtain their view of their placement experience. As women matured in the rabbinate and became eligible for second placements, concerns began to arise. In general, women and men did equally well in seeking immediate post-ordination positions as assistant rabbis, although there were reports of some inappropriate questions during interviews, and a few senior colleagues were clearly unwilling to have women as assistants. Getting fair consideration of women for positions as sole rabbi of a congregation, however, was proving more difficult. When Sally Priesand shared with the task force her experience seeking a pulpit in 1979, when she left her position as associate rabbi at the Stephen Wise Free Synagogue in New York, she noted that nine of the twelve congregations in which she had expressed an interest declined even to interview her, a number of them explicitly indicating that this was due to the fact that she was a woman.⁵ Ultimately, Priesand was offered only a part-time pulpit in Elizabeth, New Jersey, where she served for three years before moving on to a full-time position at the Monmouth Reform Temple in Tinton Falls, New Jersey, the congregation to which she devoted the rest of her career in the active rabbinate.

It seemed clear that many congregations regarded a female rabbi as a controversial choice that it was prudent to avoid. The task force responded by requesting that the Placement Commission build a non-discrimination pledge into its congregational application form, which was done in 1980, and establish Placement Assistance Teams—lay/rabbinic teams that would meet with each congregation seeking a rabbi and help them to understand the process, including the fact that female candidates for their pulpits were to be evaluated on an equal footing with their male colleagues. As the process developed, UAHC regional directors took on much of this responsibility, and the message started to spread. As I noted above, in 1982 seven women began serving in full-time congregational positions of their own.

Beginning in the mid-1980s, Rabbi Mark Winer conducted a national survey of rabbinic salaries, broken out by congregation size, on behalf of the CCAR. Winer's findings were of great interest to the

task force, and he met with us regularly to explore the meaning of his survey for gender equality. As with placement, Winer found that financial arrangements for men and women were essentially equal in assistantships and small congregations. As women began to move into larger congregations, however, women's compensation tended to cluster toward the lower end for each size category. Whether this was a problem of congregations believing that women were worth less, or of women being less effective than men in negotiating on their own behalf, or some combination of these was impossible to determine from the data. It did, though, flag the problem for the task force as something to be addressed. Pay equity became a permanent part of the task force's portfolio.

Another concern arising around 1984 was the ability of women rabbis to serve as chaplains in the United States Armed Forces. The problem was not with the Pentagon, which was open to the idea, but with the fact that Jewish chaplains needed to be certified by the Commission on Jewish Chaplaincy of the Jewish Welfare Board. The commission included representation from Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox rabbis, and the Orthodox members could in no way agree to endorse rabbis who were women. CCAR representatives, at the same time, were committed to opening opportunities for those women who wished to serve in chaplaincy. With the assistance of the CCAR commission members, the task force monitored the situation as it developed toward a successful conclusion. In 1986, the process was reorganized so that each Jewish denomination independently certified its own candidates to the Department of Defense. While the Jewish Welfare Board continued to supervise and support the work of Jewish chaplains, Reform rabbis, male and female, could now enter the service without requiring the approval of Orthodox rabbis.

The Task Force on Women in the Rabbinate continued to meet annually, usually at CCAR conventions through 1991, monitoring concerns about pay equity and placement opportunities for women.

In 1992, there was no report from the task force in the *CCAR Yearbook*, and the task force was no longer listed among CCAR committees.

In 1993, the Committee for Women in the Rabbinate became a standing committee of the CCAR and became responsible for areas previously overseen by the task force.

In the fourteen years of its existence, the Task Force on Women in the Rabbinate saw the female population of the Reform rabbinate increase from 3 to over 150, serving in congregations of increasing size and geographic diversity and in a wide variety of organizational positions. By 1991, women were serving on the Executive Board of the CCAR and would soon after be officers. All problems on the task force agenda had not been resolved, but clear and measurable progress had been achieved in multiple areas, and women were visible and valued colleagues among their male counterparts. In these terms, I believe one can justly conclude that the Task Force on Women in the Rabbinate succeeded in its mission.⁶

NOTES

1. *Yearbook of the Central Conference of American Rabbis*, vol. 86 (Cincinnati: CCAR, 1975), 78.

2. Pinchas Stolper, "Women Rabbis as a Death Sign" *Sh'ma* 9, no. 170 (1979): 73.

3. Looking back from the age of social media, one must work hard to remember how much more cumbersome and expensive long-distance contact was in 1980!

4. Task Force on Women in the Rabbinate Collection, MS-677, Box 1, Folder 3, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio.

5. Minutes of Meeting of the CCAR Task Force on Women in the Rabbinate, October 17 and 18, 1979, Task Force on Women in the Rabbinate Collection, MS-677, Box 1, Folder 1, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio.

6. The author wants to express his gratitude to Dr. Gary Zola, director of the American Jewish Archives, and Dr. Kevin Proffitt, senior archivist for Research and Collections, for their generous assistance in accessing minutes and papers contained in the Women in the Rabbinate Collection, which were no longer in my possession.