

O PIONEERS

Reflections from Five Women Rabbis
of the First Generation

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“None of us has the rabbinate we think we’re going to have.”

These are the words of Ellen Lewis, who was ordained in 1980. She was one of five pioneering rabbis I interviewed who were ordained between 1978 and 1981. The others are Karen Fox (1978), Rosalind Gold (1978), Deborah Prinz (1978), and Helene Ferris (1981). Each one of these women is exceptional: in their courage to enter a seminary that was not ready for them, in their audacity to imagine a career in a world that had could not conceive of linking the images of “rabbi” and “woman,” in their perseverance to make their way through five years of school where they were taught by too many unsympathetic and sometimes hostile professors, in their willingness to sit in classrooms with male classmates who, too often, could not figure out how to be allies and supporters.

Speaking with these pioneers underscored that we are now engaged in the process of compiling “The Chapters of the Mothers.” As heirs of a tradition that has studied and taught and cherished *Pirkei Avot*, “The Chapters of the Fathers,” we have the challenge in the twenty-first century to continue to explore and compile the Chapters of the Mothers. These five representatives of the first generation of women

rabbis have much to teach us. They entered a profession that was in the process of change even as they came into their first positions. That transformation has accelerated in the past decade. In many ways, these pioneers' career trajectories and personal choices anticipated some of the challenges that are defining and redefining Jewish communities and Jewish communal careers as we make our way through the second decade of this twenty-first century. These women are pioneers not only because they were the first women to enter Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion, but because each of them has crafted and shaped a rabbinate that enables her to bring together her passion for service to the Jewish people with her unique gifts and abilities.

Four of these women graduated from college in the 1970s; one of them, the first “second-career” rabbi to enter HUC-JIR, graduated in 1959. Let’s take a quick look back at that time. In 1970, the percentage of women in the labor force was 11.2 percent.¹ *Ms.* magazine’s inaugural issue was published in 1972, the same year that Sally Priesand was ordained by HUC-JIR. It took another four years for women to be admitted to U.S. military academies. Women were not able to apply for credit in their own names until the Equal Credit Opportunity Act was passed in 1974. Until the Pregnancy Discrimination Act in 1978, women could be fired from their workplace for being pregnant. In 1980, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission issued the first guidelines to prohibit sexual harassment in the workplace, and the next year, Sandra Day O’Connor was named the first woman justice of the Supreme Court.² These were the years before the advent of programs and departments of women’s studies, gender studies, or Jewish studies. When each of these women embarked on her rabbinic career—although women had always been in the workplace, although women had always worked in the home—women were just becoming visible, to ourselves and to others.

Ms. magazine was one tangible symbol of that visibility. *Ms.* welcomed thousands of women across the English-speaking world into what today we recognize as a virtual community. The publication invited women to “hear one another into speech,” the theologian Nelle

Morton's beloved phrase. In 1987, Mary Thom collected and published *Letters to Ms. 1972-1987*, sharing selections from the thousands of letters to the editors received over the first fifteen years of the magazine's existence. Here is one example to remind us of the workplace that our colleagues faced:

I resigned from my job yesterday as a matter of principle. I was given a letter to type by a senior secretary to the auditing firm that had recently been in our books. A woman headed up the team of accountants at our company for several weeks.

The letter was opened to "Gentlemen." I changed it to "Greetings." I was told that the letter must be redone because it was the policy of the company to use the salutation "Gentlemen." I was told that management determined company policy, not uppity secretaries who didn't know their place. I decided to resign and didn't redo the letter.

I'm looking for another job, but I did raise quite a few eyebrows and, hopefully, someone's consciousness.

Name Withheld
September 12, 1982³

These pioneers entered the workplace when women were beginning to recognize that such experiences were "click" moments, described as "that tangible sensation of the tumblers falling into place in our heads, the 'Click' that signals a permanent recognition that the women's movement is...me."⁴ Ellen Lewis entered the job market "with a baby on my resume. I encountered enormous sexism." Her first job was as a rabbi educator in a large congregation. Roz Gold entered the job market as a single woman, which seemed to be a disability when considered by a congregation populated by families with young children. She traveled to one congregation for an interview and was told when she arrived that "the job had changed." Rabbi Ferris was forty-four when she was ordained, yet that maturity was not considered an advantage.

Rabbis Gold, Prinz, and Ferris began their careers as assistant rabbis in large synagogues. Not only were they, as well as Ellen Lewis, the first women to serve as clergy in each of these institutions, but they were working with male colleagues who were disadvantaged

by attending school only with men. Debbie Prinz said, "As the first women, we felt an additional burden: be the best rabbi you possibly can be because if you fail, you're going to ruin it for everyone else." So these women turned to one another. They created what became the Women's Rabbinic Network (WRN), and the connections between them, personal and political, social and spiritual, were essential to their very survival for those first challenging years.⁵

And they turned to others, as well. Both Debbie Prinz and Helene Ferris were mentored by Jerome Malino, a past president of the CCAR. Helene said, "I would have quit my first job without him." While in school, Ellen Lewis met and was befriended by Dr. Millie (Mira) Brichto, a dynamic and accomplished teacher with two doctorates whose husband, Chanan (Herb) Brichto, was an HUC-JIR professor. Millie's children's books, *The God Around Us*, volumes 1 and 2, became important resources for Ellen as a parent and teacher. Ellen was also mentored by Dr. Sophia Ralson, a clinical psychologist who worked with HUC-JIR students to integrate mental health concepts into their rabbinates. "Dr. Ralson once famously looked at us and said, 'The problem with you rabbinic students is you think when someone asks you for a book, they really want a book!'" Ellen was later mentored by Dr. Estelle Borowitz, an esteemed psychoanalyst, the longtime partner of Rabbi Eugene B. Borowitz, HUC-JIR professor. Karen Fox named Harvey Fields, the longtime and beloved rabbi of Wilshire Boulevard Temple, as her mentor.

Their connection with one another was a source of continuing support, both through and beyond the WRN. Roz Gold told me, "For me, a primary challenge was understanding how to claim, use, and manage power and authority." Together and one by one, these pioneers came to own their power. The 1979 convention of the CCAR was held in Phoenix, Arizona. However, Arizona had not passed the Equal Rights Amendment. Newly ordained Karen Fox and Debbie Prinz, along with a small but determined group of rabbinical students and rabbis, challenged holding the CCAR's convention in Arizona. The rabbis reached a compromise: the convention went ahead and included a day

of lobbying the members of the Arizona legislature⁶ (see Balin, chapter 11 for more on this).

Rabbi Karen Fox was the first woman rabbi to work for the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC; later Union for Reform Judaism). Early in her tenure, she invited three colleagues to join her, together with Rabbi Sally Priesand and Rabbi Deborah Prinz, for lunch. These colleagues were Rabbi Joe Glaser, who headed the CCAR; Ted Broido, who oversaw the UAHC's finances and what would become the Department of Synagogue Management; and Rabbi Alexander Schindler, the president of the UAHC. They met at a posh Upper East Side restaurant. The men were stunned when they learned that the bill had been paid; Karen had picked up the check. Karen was what we would today call "leaning in" and owning her power.

Sometime later, Karen, a planner, had repeatedly attempted to arrange an appointment with Alex Schindler to discuss maternity leave. (Debbie Prinz described herself as a planner as well; clearly this is a trait of many pioneers). However, Karen was not able to secure a meeting until the issue of maternity leave was no longer theoretical. In the early weeks of her first pregnancy ("My pants were getting too tight!"), Karen finally sat down with Alex. Rabbi Schindler's response: "None of our other rabbis have ever asked for this." They worked out a plan and he said, "Don't tell anyone about this. This is not a Union policy." Karen immediately copied it and sent it out to her female colleagues. Word spread: women deserve maternity leave. And it must begin at what may be considered to be "the top."

Karen Fox subsequently returned to her native Los Angeles and became the director of Camp Hess Kramer, one of the Wilshire Boulevard Temple camps, joining the rabbinic staff of the temple. Each of the pioneers who had begun their careers at large synagogues eventually moved on to solo pulpits. As Roz Gold said, "In a solo, you can make your own rabbinate." Helene Ferris spoke about the increased ability to connect with congregants in a smaller pulpit: "You can preach in front of more, but you can't touch more."

Over the years, these women asked for and won maternity coverage, for themselves and for all the women who followed them. In the synagogues they served, these rabbis established nursery schools where none had existed, started homeless shelters, raised awareness about the need for women's shelters, and created and extended programs for women in the congregation to connect to one another and to Judaism. They created support groups and opportunities to explore the spiritual aspects of bereavement, miscarriage and pregnancy loss, menopause, and divorce. They developed and trained *bikkur cholim* groups that transformed congregations. They shared their passion for Judaism and for justice, initiating programs that others were too timid to present; Helene Ferris was the moving force behind the first synagogue-sponsored gathering of gay and lesbian Jews and their families in the country, in 1986. Others began programs for addicts and their families. A prominent feminist once told Helene, "You hide your light." How often have women felt that we burn too brightly, take up too much space, speak too loudly, or draw unnecessary attention to ourselves? Leaders shine: they take risks, speak out, and place themselves in the public eye to bring attention to the issues and the people they serve. The first generation of women rabbis were profoundly challenged to serve as leaders in a cultural context that saw them as women, not as leaders. Too often, the gifts and achievements of these pioneers were neither noticed nor celebrated, and sometimes, others took the credit.

These rabbis also served the communities in which they lived, the Movement, the rabbinate, and the Jewish people. Several of them served as WRN president; others have held or hold significant positions in local and regional clergy organizations. Karen Fox is the immediate past president of the Pacific Association of Reform Rabbis, and Roz Gold served with distinction as the chair of the CCAR Ethics Committee. Helene Ferris was one of the organizers of the 1988 *Shacharit* service at the Kotel that launched Women of the Wall. All of these rabbis have published essays, sermons, and a range of articles; Karen Fox has written *Seasons for Celebration* (Putnam, 1992), and Debbie Prinz is the author of *On the Chocolate Trail: A Delicious Adventure*

Connecting Jews, Religions, History, Travel, Rituals and Recipes to the Magic of Cacao (Jewish Lights, 2012).

In addition to serving their congregations, all of these rabbis continue to study, locally, in national programs, and in Israel. Three of them pursued graduate studies toward additional degrees: in psychotherapy and psychoanalysis, in marriage and family counseling, and a doctorate in ministry degree. Two have developed and pursue private practices in psychotherapy. One called this additional training “extremely nurturing; I loved the opportunity to study with really smart people, and to translate this learning into my Jewish world.” Several of them took one course at a time, on days off from congregational responsibilities.

At this writing, four of the five have retired from full-time positions; Roz Gold is rabbi emerita of the Northern Virginia Hebrew Congregation she served for twenty-three years, and Helene Ferris is rabbi emerita of Temple Israel of Northern Westchester. Both of them are engaged in a wide range of activities, including active participation in a Jewish chorus, a regimen of daily walks and regular tennis, service to the community as a prison chaplain and as rabbi in a senior center, and for Roz Gold, coordination of the Brickner Rabbinic Studies Program at the Religious Action Center.

As Debbie Prinz approached her twentieth anniversary as the rabbi of Temple Adat Shalom in Poway, California, she decided to retire. She was about to leave for a congregational trip to Egypt, with a personal add-on to Israel and Spain, when she saw a listing for a two-year interim position at the CCAR which she then applied for and was hired. Debbie’s work as Director of Program and Member Services dramatically increased the reach and the depth of the CCAR’s service to colleagues engaged in many streams of rabbinic work. She brought a clear and strong feminist voice to and from the CCAR, reminding us that “much remains to be done to diminish the incongruities among expectations, values, and realities. The disconnect between articulated Reform positions related to pay equity, fairness in hiring practices, and granting of family leave policies in our congregations and organizations

remains.⁷ Prinz left the CCAR in 2014 and now serves as a Senior Fellow at the HUC-JIR Center for the Study of Ethics and Contemporary Moral Problems.”

Karen Fox served Wilshire Boulevard Temple in Los Angeles for twenty-three years. At the time of her retirement, her very full rabbinic portfolio included pastoral counseling and program development, as well as supervision of the educational directors of the congregation’s nursery school, elementary day school, religious school, and summer camp. Fox’s retirement includes teaching at HUC-JIR as an Adjunct faculty in Pastoral Counseling and a private counseling practice for clergy of all faiths. Ellen Lewis, now rabbi emerita of Jewish Center of Northwest Jersey, is a therapist in private practice. She works with a wide range of individuals, couples, families, and groups and has developed models of clinical supervision for rabbis, cantors, and other members of the clergy. She teaches psychoanalysis and provides clinical supervision to students in analytic training. Her greatest love is working with rabbis, who she says, suffer needlessly. “When they talk with others about their rabbinate, they reclaim the passion that led them to this work. It is possible,” she says, “to have a joyous rabbinate.”

Each of these five women, in her own way, has created a unique and joyous rabbinate. Each of these women is a committed Jew and a hardworking rabbi. Each of these pioneers serves as a model for all who wish to live a rich and full Jewish life, a life of integrity, study, and service. In 2012, in celebration of forty years of women in the rabbinate, four women who had served Stephen Wise Free Synagogue in New York gathered for a historic presentation in the synagogue sanctuary.⁸ Helene Ferris concluded her presentation with these words:

I have a dream: that the next generation of women rabbis will be judged not by the color of their attire, but by the strength of their character. Not by the length of their hair, but by the length and breadth of their wisdom. Not by their speaking voice, but by the voice of their soul. Not by their age, but by their knowledge of our ageless teachings. Not by their physical appearance, but by their spiritual power.

Rabbi Ferris's words were greeted with a standing ovation. May the light of these pioneers illumine the path of all who are privileged to follow them.

NOTES

1. Mark Brenner and Stephanie Luce, "Women and Class: What Has Happened in Forty Years," *Monthly Review* 58, no. 3 (July–August 2006), <http://monthlyreview.org/2006/07/01/women-and-class-what-has-happened-in-forty-years>.

2. Natasha Turner, "10 Things That American Women Could Not Do before the 1970s," *Ms. Magazine Blog*, May 28, 2013, <http://msmagazine.com/blog/2013/05/28/10-things-that-american-women-could-not-do-before-the-1970s/>.

3. Maria Popova, "Letters to Ms.: How Mary Thom Built 'Social Media' for Women's Rights in the 1970s," *Brain Pickings*, <http://www.brainpickings.org/index.php/2013/05/07/letters-to-ms-mary-thom/>.

4. Jane O'Reilly, quoted by Debra Ornstein in *Lifecycles: Jewish Women on Life Passages and Personal Milestones* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 1994), 377. Debra was the first to collect what she called Jewish feminist "click stories."

5. Carole B. Balin's essay on the history of the WRN provides essential background: "From Periphery to Center: History of the Women's Rabbinic Network," pp. 137–52 of this volume.

6. It is hard to believe that the ERA is still not the law of the land and that the CCAR has, since 2000, held conventions in at least two states, Louisiana and Illinois, that have not yet ratified the ERA.

7. *CCAR Newsletter*, July/August 2013.

8. "4 Decades of Women Rabbis in the Rabbinate and SWF," Stephen Wise Free Synagogue, <http://www.swfs.org/4-decades-women-rabbis/>.