

JTS, HUC, AND WOMEN RABBIS—REDUX

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It is worth noting that the widespread acceptance that women rabbis, cantors, and religious leaders enjoy today in many parts of the world was hardly a pervasive expectation in 1983 when I first wrote “JTS, HUC, and Women Rabbis.”¹ One who reads this short article today, more than thirty years after it was written, might understandably wonder what prompted me to compose it in the first place. The purpose of this reappraisal is to offer an answer to this query and, simultaneously, to reflect once again on how the determination by Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR) to begin ordaining women rabbis in 1972 compares with the decision taken by the Jewish Theological Seminary of America (JTS) to follow suit ten years later. These two schools are at the center of the story of how women entered the rabbinate. By resolving to ordain women rabbis, HUC-JIR and JTS contributed mightily to a revolutionary transformation in the world of Jewish religious leadership. The original version of this essay took note of this phenomenon as it was occurring.

When my article first appeared, Sally Priesand had been a rabbi for only twelve years, and Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, who completed her rabbinical studies at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College (RRC) in 1974, had just marked the tenth anniversary of her ordination. It is

important to bear in mind that less than two dozen women received rabbinical ordination from HUC-JIR between 1972 and 1980,² and many observers vigorously insisted that the vast majority of the Jewish people would *never* accept women as religious leaders on their pulpits. Throughout the Jewish world—even in the Reform Movement—critics of HUC-JIR’s decision to ordain women rabbis insisted that women in the rabbinate would ultimately be viewed as a schismatic phenomenon acceptable only among Judaism’s most radical religionists.³

Throughout the 1970s, there was plenty of second-guessing concerning HUC-JIR’s decision to begin ordaining women rabbis. Jakob J. Petuchowski (1925–1991), a much beloved and widely respected professor of theology and liturgy at HUC-JIR in Cincinnati, believed the decision to ordain women rabbis was nothing more than a passing fancy that was primarily motivated by Reform Judaism’s inclination to adopt popular social causes. “As for Reform Judaism,” he wrote in 1975, “it tries to be all things to all people, and must, therefore, take up every fad which comes along.”⁴

In 1976, the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) established a “Task Force on Women in the Rabbinate.” Initially, the task force focused most of its attention on the issue of “acceptance and integration of women into the Reform rabbinate.” The records of the task force testify to the fact that between the years 1972 and 1981, many Reform Jews were ambivalent about HUC-JIR’s decision to ordain women rabbis. The daunting struggles for acceptance that the first women in the rabbinate faced are unmistakably evident in the reports of the task force.⁵

The members of the task force strove intensely to address this ambivalence. In order to expose “colleagues and congregations...to women functioning as rabbis,” the task force endeavored “to establish a number of summer internships which would enable women rabbinical students to assist rabbis in various congregations throughout the country.” In 1978, Sally Priesand, the task force’s first chair, confessed in her official report to the CCAR that the overall response to the idea of summer internships for women rabbinical students was “minimal.”

The problems these pioneering women rabbis encountered were hardly fleeting. In his 1980 report to the CCAR, Neil Kominsky, chair of the task force, emphasized that many of the women colleagues in the CCAR had encountered “significant instances of bias on the part of particular senior rabbis and congregations”⁶ (see also Kominsky, p. 127, this volume).

These problems prompted the task force to convene a national conference of female rabbis and rabbinical students to share concerns and advocate for greater acceptance of women rabbis. This national meeting took place in New York on February 5–7, 1980, and led to the establishment of the Women’s Rabbinic Network.⁷ A series of proposals was adopted by those in attendance, which were subsequently presented to the Executive Board of the CCAR. These proposals brought the serious challenges that the first women rabbis encountered into bold relief. The conference attendees urged the CCAR to overhaul the process of rabbinical placement so as to “ensure the egalitarian treatment of women candidates for all positions now and in the future.” They also wanted the CCAR to provide women rabbis with the tangible support they needed in order to pursue a career while simultaneously raising a Jewish family. They called for the establishment of guidelines and rules so that rabbis—both male and female—could have access to resources that would make these aspirations viable: pregnancy leaves, job sharing, and part-time rabbinical positions. Above all, the conference proposals emphasized that despite the much appreciated support and encouragement they had received from many of their male colleagues in leadership positions, much more had to be done if women were to gain full acceptance as rabbis:

Many distinct responsibilities, challenges and, therefore, sometimes pressures face rabbis who are women. Male rabbis who do not serve in organizations or congregations with women colleagues often do not see these issues on a daily basis. Therefore, it can be difficult for male rabbis to understand that prejudice is directed at women colleagues and that additional expectations are placed upon women rabbis. Women rabbis are too often viewed as a new item,

a publicity curiosity, a spokeswoman for all women rabbis and/or for all feminists. Women face continual discrimination that is based on memory and upon sociological and psychological expectations. Lack of experience with women professionals, specifically women rabbis, often permits this to continue.⁸

The proposals promulgated by this national conference left no doubt that nearly a decade after Sally Priesand's ordination, women rabbis and rabbinical students were grappling with a considerable level of "prejudice against rabbis who are women." The CCAR and the Reform Movement as a whole would need to take meaningful and deliberative action if they truly aspired "to create a more humane and egalitarian rabbinate."⁹

The non-acceptance that women rabbis faced in the Reform Movement during the late 1970s was amplified by the out-of-hand rejection of women in the rabbinate within the traditional wings of Judaism. Practically no one in the Orthodox Jewish community—not even those who identified with the more centrist wing of Orthodoxy—were willing to suggest in a public forum that women could conceivably occupy an office akin to that of rabbinical leadership. In 1972, a young modern Orthodox rabbi named Haskel Lookstein (b. 1932)—a man who would later become a champion of lenient interpretations of halachah—told the *New York Times* that he was firmly opposed to the prospect of women entering the rabbinate.¹⁰ Even Blu Greenberg (b. 1936), the well-known Orthodox woman who would eventually be one of the first to state publicly that women should be permitted to enter the rabbinate, confessed that in the 1970s the very idea of a woman rabbi repulsed her:

In 1972, I read an article about the forthcoming ordination of Rabbi Sally Priesand at Hebrew Union College. I was, to put it mildly, horrified. Someone had crossed the line. "It is against halakhah," I argued. "Other things I can understand, but women rabbis—never! There goes Reform Judaism again."¹¹

In 1977, the Rabbinical Council of America, the largest Orthodox rabbinical association, hosted a panel discussion on the future role of

women in Judaism at its annual convention, held in Fallsburg, New York. Three distinguished rabbis shared their views on women and Judaism. The much respected rabbinical scholar Gedaliah D. Schwartz (b. 1925), then serving Young Israel of Brooklyn, provided his listeners with “an hour of Halachic explanation on why women could take no further role in worship.” A second panelist, Rabbi Reuven Bulka (b. 1944), from Ottawa, Canada, provoked at least one female member of the audience to walk out of the program when he opined that everyone knew that Jewish women were already superior to men, and therefore women did not need “all of the trappings of [religious] leadership that chauvinist men had invented for themselves.” Rabbi Shlomo Riskin (b. 1940), then of New York, expressed the most liberal views of those on the panel. He told the audience that he “allowed” women in his congregation to make their own prayer shawls and, also, “to hold worship services tailored to their religious needs and professional attainments.” Riskin’s admission prompted sharp criticism from his fellow panelists, who asserted that he had no authority to “alter the [Jewish worship] services.” Although many of the Orthodox women in the audience publicly expressed their bitter dissatisfaction over the vexing problem of recalcitrant husbands “who refused to cooperate with the Orthodox divorce ritual,” none in the room “questioned the Halachic rule against women rabbis.”¹²

In the early 1980s, however, the number of women rabbis began to burgeon. By June 1984, the combined number of women ordinees from both HUC-JIR *and* the RRC had reached ninety, and many more women rabbinical students would join their ranks by 1988. Since the CCAR’s total membership in the early 1980s was just shy of fourteen hundred, it became clear that by the end of the 1980s women would easily constitute more than 10 percent of the American Reform rabbinate. It was at this very time that those who had dedicated themselves to ensuring that the Reform Movement gave women rabbis equal footing in all aspects of rabbinical affairs began to sense that the tide was indeed turning in their favor. The CCAR Task Force on Women in the Rabbinate met twice in 1980 to review “its ongoing monitoring of the placement experience of female colleagues.” Neil Kominsky informed

the members of the CCAR that his committee had resolved to recommend that a three-month paid maternity leave be considered a “normative” guideline for all rabbinical contracts. In addition, he reported that the women rabbis in the CCAR now planned to initiate a mentoring program for women students at HUC-JIR. They were determined to put their experience to good use in helping to alleviate “questions and concerns” that were on the minds of their future colleagues. Most significantly, Kominsky informed the CCAR that the task force now sensed that a new, more positive spirit concerning women rabbis was taking hold in the Reform Movement:

From the point of view of the placement of women, the 1981 placement season represented a major breakthrough. During the coming year, seven women will be serving in full-time or nearly full-time pulpits of their own, two of them in B congregations and two of them in AB congregations. The UAHC [Union of American Hebrew Congregations] now has its first woman serving as director of a region as well. The task of “consciousness raising” is far from completed but, clearly, important progress has been made.¹³

It was at this very time—when the idea of women rabbis was shedding its experimental aura in the Reform Movement and when prominent Orthodox leaders were publicly insisting that in “Torah-true” Judaism women simply could not possibly become rabbis—that the Conservative Movement found itself being pulled in two diametrically opposed directions. There were Conservative Jews, among them prominent scholars, who wanted the Movement to endorse traditional halachic practice and refuse to confer the title of rabbi on women. At the same time, a growing number of Conservative Jews believed that the time had come for their movement to adopt a halachic rationale for ordaining women rabbis. Therefore, the vote of JTS’s faculty to admit women to its rabbinical school, rendered on October 24, 1983 (thirty-four in favor, eight opposed), not only affected the future direction of the Conservative Movement; it was a decision that appeared to affect all of Judaism’s American movements. To many observers, the

1983 vote of the JTS faculty represented a metaphoric Waterloo in the battle for equal religious rights for women in Judaism.¹⁴

In the aftermath of JTS's historic announcement, questions arose concerning how the advent of Conservative women rabbis would affect Jewish life. Modern Orthodox Jews, most of whom had simply ignored the frenzy of press notices relating to the ordination of Sally Priesand and Sandy Sasso in the 1970s, now spoke out against the trend that the JTS decision represented. The school's vote compelled some in the Orthodox Jewish community to consider the question "from a sober, somber distance." Since many Conservative Jews adhered closely to traditional Jewish practice and belief, JTS's validation of women in the rabbinate moved the issue "one step closer to home" among those who saw themselves as modern Orthodox.¹⁵

JTS's 1983 announcement sparked a great deal of interest among Reform Jews, too, and many questions began to circulate:

1. How did the decision-making process that culminated in JTS's historic announcement in October 1983 compare with the way HUC decided to ordain Sally Priesand in 1972?
2. Would JTS's decision to ordain women rabbis diminish the number of women seeking admission to HUC-JIR's rabbinical school? Would women applicants now prefer JTS over HUC-JIR?
3. How would the advent of Conservative women rabbis affect Reform Judaism and the Jewish people as a whole?

These were the very questions that "JTS, HUC, and Women Rabbis" attempted to address when it originally appeared in 1984.

Comparing the Two Decisions

The decision-making process that resulted in HUC's decision to ordain Sally Priesand in 1972 was, in many respects, the inverse of that which led the Conservative Movement to the same practice.

The issue of gender equality in Judaism was a concern of the pioneering Reform ideologues that rebelled against Jewish tradition in Europe. Reform Judaism's long-standing and principled commitment to gender equality and the elevation of women's status in the synagogue originally emanated from the Movement's intellectual elite. The case for egalitarianism came from the writings of the early Reformers and not from, to use terminology made famous by social historians, "the bottom up." For example, the Hungarian Reformer Rabbi Aaron Chorin (1766–1844) insisted that "women must not be excluded from the soul-satisfying experiences which come to us through a solemn worship service." The rabbinical Reformers who attended the Breslau Rabbinical Conference of 1846 unequivocally declared that Judaism must acknowledge that the female was rightfully entitled to "complete religious equality."¹⁶

In America, these liberal pronouncements on gender equality found a hospitable climate in which to flourish. From his earliest days on American soil, Isaac M. Wise (1819–1900), the prominent founder of Hebrew Union College, contributed—as he later put it—"to the demolition of the perverted notions rising from the erroneous prejudice concerning female inferiority." Wise repeatedly bragged about his track record as an advocate and activist for woman's suffrage in the synagogue. Like many of his American contemporaries, "Wise allied himself with the new priorities of the social and economic class he and his congregants had so recently joined." Promoting the religious equality of women was one of his personal causes.¹⁷

In light of Wise's views on women in the synagogue, it is not surprising that he would invite a twelve-year-old teenager, Julia Ettlinger (1863–1890), to study with the first students to enroll at HUC when the school opened its doors in 1875. Ettlinger did very well academically, but she studied at HUC for only one year. Still, throughout his career Wise continued to insist that if ever a "gifted lady" took interest in pursuing "the theological course," he stood ready "to assist the cause of emancipating women in the synagogue and congregation."¹⁸

In spite of Wise's rhetoric on the subject, the question of whether or not HUC was actually prepared to ordain a woman was not formally debated until the early 1920s.¹⁹ Martha Neumark (1904–1981), daughter of HUC professor David Neumark (1866–1924), a remarkably intelligent woman who had taken most of the program's course work, asked the school to permit her to complete the practice-based components of the program and receive ordination. HUC's faculty debated Neumark's request and voted to grant her request. The CCAR also voted in Neumark's favor. Yet it was the lay leaders—the members of HUC's Board of Governors—who blocked Neumark's request by voting to uphold the school's long-standing practice of ordaining only men.²⁰

Many years later, in the mid-1950s, the Reform Movement once again formally debated whether or not women should be permitted to become rabbis. In fact, it was the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods (NFTS) that forcefully championed the cause. Practically from its very inception, NFTS leaders advocated for the religious rights of women in the synagogue, and at least one of NFTS's founders, Carrie Obendorfer Simon (1872–1961), insisted that women were qualified to enter the rabbinate.²¹

From the time she served as the first president of NFTS and beyond, Simon unabashedly asserted that women were perfectly capable of ministering “to minds that are unhappy and to people that are seeking the comfort of God.” She probably raised many eyebrows when she informed the leadership of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations that “girls view the Jewish ministry as a legitimate field for the operation of their distinctive talents and abilities.” Simon never abandoned these convictions. In 1938, when NFTS commemorated the twenty-fifth anniversary of its founding, the organization's founding president unhesitatingly predicted “that before many decades, [women] will also be [in] the Ministry of Preaching!”²²

Other events encouraged NFTS to raise this topic in the mid-1950s. In the late 1940s, the Presbyterian Church began debating whether or not to ordain women ministers. The church's 1955 decision to ordain

women ministers attracted national attention. The controversy surrounding the case of Paula Ackerman (1893–1989) also helped to renew interest in this topic within the Reform Movement. Ackerman, the wife of Rabbi William Ackerman (1886–1950), was asked by her congregation to assume the congregation’s pulpit after her husband’s sudden death in 1950. These controversies, among others, encouraged some members of NFTS to wonder aloud why Reform Judaism’s deeds relating to gender equality seemed so discontinuous with its long-standing creed.²³

It was Jane Evans (1907–2004), the first woman to serve as full-time executive director of NFTS, who led the charge for the Sisterhood women. Speaking to more than one thousand delegates attending the Biennial General Assembly of the UAHC on April 29, 1957, Evans urged the congregational body to endorse the ordination of women as rabbis. Making what the *New York Times* described as a “strong plea,” Evans declared, “Women are uniquely suited by temperament, intuition, and spiritual sensitivity to be rabbis.”²⁴

For nearly fifty years, the constituent bodies of the Reform Movement professed theoretical support for the idea of women becoming rabbis. Finally, by the late 1960s, support for the idea of women entering the rabbinate was coming from all quarters in Reform Judaism: NFTS, the CCAR, HUC-JIR, and even the leadership of the UAHC. By the late 1960s, in contrast to the circumstances that prevailed in the 1920s when HUC’s lay leaders voted not to ordain women rabbis despite the favorable votes taken by HUC’s faculty and the CCAR, there seemed to be broad agreement throughout the Reform Jewish community that women could no longer be prohibited from entering the rabbinate. Since the nineteenth century, Reform’s ideologues persistently sloughed off the halachic obstacles barring women from entering the rabbinate. It was the early 1960s, however, when Betty Friedan published her famous volume *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), and subsequently founded the National Organization for Women (1966), that the salience of these issues during the 1960s prompted many Reform Jews to view the perpetuation of religious gender barriers as an outmoded, indefensible practice.

In contrast to the long-standing record of pronouncements favoring gender equality in Reform Jewish history, the notion that a woman might become a rabbi “scarcely entered the consciousness of those shaping Conservative Judaism.” Conservative Jews did not formally discuss this issue until the early 1970s, although there were some rare exceptions to this generalization. The aforementioned social and cultural barriers came down in the 1960s for Conservative Jews, just as they had for Reform Jews. Yet Conservative Judaism now had to resolve the perceived halachic obstacles to women entering the rabbinate, which Reform Jews had long ago set aside. As one scholar noted at the time, “There would be no way in which we could [justify the ordination of women rabbis] were it halakhically indefensible.”²⁵

Two years after HUC-JIR ordained its first woman rabbi, Rabbi Judah Nadich (1912–2007), in his 1974 presidential address to the Rabbinical Assembly (RA), asked his colleagues to urge JTS to reconsider its long-standing policy of ordaining only men. The RA adopted Nadich’s suggestion and appointed a commission to study the issue. Dr. Gerson D. Cohen (1924–1991), JTS’s chancellor, was nominated to serve as head of this commission. Earlier that same year, Cohen had expressed his belief that the Conservative Movement was unready for women rabbis. Perhaps the attitude of the Conservative constituency, properly assessed by Cohen, explains why it took the commission almost four years to complete its task. By 1978, the commission arrived at its recommendation “that qualified women could be ordained as rabbis in the Conservative Movement.”²⁶

On December 20, 1979, the JTS faculty considered the commission’s recommendations but decided not to depart from its standing policy. One factor contributing to the faculty’s decision to reject the commission’s report was the formidable halachic opposition promulgated by Rabbi Saul Lieberman (1898–1983), a highly venerated professor of Talmud and Rector at JTS. In 1979, at the same time the commission was preparing to issue its recommendations, Lieberman published a responsum dealing with the question of whether or not the halachah would permit the Movement to ordain women as rabbis. Lieberman’s erudite

responsum culminated in an unyielding conclusion: "A woman is not fit to judge [Jewish legal matters], and [because] she cannot become qualified for this [duty], she cannot be ordained [a rabbi]." ²⁷

In the four years that followed the faculty's rejection of the commission's recommendations, a number of intervening factors made it possible for the faculty to overcome Lieberman's halachic objections. First, Professor Lieberman's unexpected death in the spring of 1983 left those opposing the ordination of women on halachic grounds bereft of a towering and truly venerated rabbinic authority. Second, the faculty's decision in 1979 to reject the commission's recommendations was received unfavorably by many in the RA, where this discussion first began and where many were convinced that the ordination of women could indeed be halachically justified. ²⁸ Some members of the RA who disagreed with the JTS faculty's 1979 decision to continue prohibiting the ordination of women rabbis were prepared to bring women into the Conservative rabbinate through the ranks of the RA, the Movement's rabbinical organization. This prospect became a viable idea when Beverly Magidson (b. 1952), a woman who received rabbinical ordination from HUC in 1979, immediately applied for membership in the RA. Even if the faculty of JTS refused to admit women to its rabbinical program, it was entirely possible that the RA would accept Magidson as a member, thereby pulling the carpet out from under the seminary altogether. By threatening to admit Magidson to its ranks, the RA was forcing the faculty's hand. If JTS did not act, the RA would! There can be little doubt that Cohen and his colleagues at JTS spent a good deal of time and effort lobbying the leaders of the RA in hopes of dissuading them from bypassing the seminary. The RA's vote on Magidson's application was a cliff-hanger nevertheless. Had three more votes been cast in favor of her admission, Magidson would have become the first woman rabbi in the Conservative Movement. ²⁹ The RA's willingness to give JTS's faculty a chance to revisit its decision and retain its authoritative leadership role in the Movement was, presumably, what Chancellor Gerson Cohen meant when he praised the RA for its commitment:

to resist a variety of pressures and to continue its recognition of the Seminary as the fountainhead of Conservative Judaism. Whether women would or would not be admitted to membership in the Rabbinical Assembly would thus depend in the first instance on the plan for action adopted by the men and women who have traditionally been charged de facto with putting the stamp of authority we call ordination on the overwhelming majority of the members of the Rabbinical Assembly.³⁰

Finally, there was increasing recognition that the seminary was not meeting the needs of its congregational constituency. During the 1960s and early 1970s, the United Synagogue of America was the largest congregational association in North America. There were those who insisted that if JTS continued to ordain men only, it would not be able to fulfill the rabbinical needs of its congregational union. In 1977, Rabbi Kassel Abelson (b. 1924) of Minneapolis informed JTS Chancellor Cohen that there were “two very fine young ladies” in his community who wanted to become rabbis. The young women would have preferred to study at JTS, Abelson wrote, but on account of the school’s refusal to ordain women rabbis, these promising candidates would “probably apply to the Reconstructionist Seminary or to Hebrew Union College.” As far as Abelson was concerned, JTS’s refusal to ordain women rabbis constituted “a real loss in (WO)man power for our movement.” The commission’s report made similar mention of the same demographic reality.³¹

Clearly, then, the subtle interplay of these various factors contributed to Cohen’s announcement in the spring of 1983 that he would ask the JTS faculty that fall (1983) to reconsider its 1979 decision to bar women from the rabbinate.

JTS’s Decision and Its Effect on HUC-JIR’s Applicant Pool

In retrospect, it is clear that for both HUC-JIR and JTS the decision to ordain women rabbis successfully delayed a precipitous decline in the number of rabbinical applicants that was likely to set in during the

1990s. In large part, the expected decline in applications was based on the decrease in birth rate at the end of the post-World War II baby boom.³² By admitting women to their respective rabbinical schools, HUC-JIR and JTS were able to draw upon a previously untapped pool of prospective rabbinical students. This influx served to compensate, at least to some degree, for the unavoidable decrease (demographically speaking) in male applicants that would have been felt in the 1990s, had doors to the rabbinate remained closed to women.

Similarly, it is important to bear in mind that the United Synagogue of America was the largest congregational union in American Judaism until the beginning of the 1990s. According to the 1971 National Jewish Population Survey, Conservative Judaism was “the predominant ideological identification” for American Jewry, claiming 40.5% of the “heads of household” reporting. The Reform Movement garnered a 30% share in that same survey. Demographers and community planners who were studying these figures in the early 1970s had no inkling that only twenty years later the Reform Movement would become “the largest single [Jewish] denomination” in America, with 38% of the “entire adult core Jewish population” identifying as Reform and 30% as Conservative. Yet the collective dominance of these two large denominations remained virtually unchanged for the last four decades of the twentieth century, and it was manifestly apparent to observers that nearly 70% of American Jewry self-identified with either Reform or Conservative Judaism, and the seminaries serving these two large movements were charged with the responsibility of furnishing their respective communities with a sufficient number of well-educated rabbis.³³ JTS’s perceived obligation to supply Conservative Jewish congregations with the number of rabbis it needed was not lost on the school. As early as 1961, the *New York Times* reported that enrollments in the Jewish seminary appeared to be “faltering.” Taking note of synagogue efflorescence in post-World War II suburban America, the paper went on to say that the “student shortage” in rabbinical school appeared to be a “continuing fact.”³⁴ If JTS was unable to furnish its congregations with an adequate supply of rabbis, these synagogues would

undoubtedly turn elsewhere to fill the gap, and the aforementioned case of Beverly Magidson underscored this concern.

In contrast to JTS in the 1980s, HUC-JIR had its largest rabbinical classes in its entire history during the late 1960s, when Sally Priesand was a student. The end of the baby boom bubble was not yet on the horizon in the early 1970s. By the mid-1980s, however, HUC-JIR was also recognizing that its applicant pool was slowly diminishing. By the early 1990s, the presence of women in the rabbinate provided both JTS and HUC-JIR with an influx of students that would uphold these institutions, enabling them to meet the rabbinical needs of their respective movements.

JTS's 1983 decision caused some Reform observers to wonder whether some of the women who had been planning to apply to HUC might now abandon their plans and matriculate at JTS instead. The highly publicized case of Beverly Magidson suggested that there were women attending HUC-JIR *only* because JTS had barred them from enrolling. With the announcement that JTS would also begin ordaining women rabbis, there were those who predicted a decline in the number of women applying for admission to HUC-JIR's Rabbinical School.

No such flight from HUC-JIR occurred. It is clear today, three decades later, that JTS's 1983 decision had practically no impact on the number of women applicants seeking admission to HUC-JIR. The majority of the women who applied to JTS were, for the most part, Conservative Jews. They were raised in Conservative synagogues, attended Camp Ramah, and were active in United Synagogue Youth (USY). As Conservative Jews, these women saw JTS as the natural and logical place for them to obtain their rabbinic education. This was also the pattern in the Reform Movement. Those who matriculated at HUC were raised in Reform synagogues, attended one of the Reform Movement's camps, and were active in the North American Federation of Temple Youth (NFTY). Over the years there have certainly been many exceptions to this generalization, but all in all, it is clear that for nearly three decades JTS and HUC-JIR have both been admitting denominationally affiliated men and women.

Overall Impact on American Jewry

Only weeks prior to JTS's decision to admit women, Jacob Neusner (b. 1932), a JTS ordinand, predicted that if the Conservative Movement began to admit women, it would inherit, ipso facto, the mantle of American Jewish leadership: "The incipient organization of the Jewish community as we now know it; outreach to the unaffiliated Jews; the building of a whole system of Jewish education...belong (if not exclusively) to Conservative Judaism."³⁵

In retrospect, Neusner's contention proved to be much too narrowly conceived. Neither JTS nor HUC-JIR *alone* can claim to have earned the "mantle of American Jewish leadership" as a result of their respective decisions to ordain women as rabbis. Reflecting back over the past three decades, it is self-evident that women rabbis have brought renewed strength and vibrancy to both Conservative *and* Reform Judaism. Moreover, the ordination of women rabbis by JTS and HUC-JIR has arguably contributed to the revivification of modern Orthodoxy as well.

In her oft-cited 1993 essay "Is Now the Time for Orthodox Women Rabbis?" Blu Greenberg pointed out that "the growing reality of women rabbis in liberal denominations [was transforming] the expectations of Orthodox women into a powerful agent for change." There was no denying that the example set by liberal women rabbis stimulated new initiatives within the centrist Orthodox community in America. For more than fifteen hundred years, Greenberg accurately noted, women had been barred from Talmudic study. Yet merely two decades after HUC-JIR ordained Sally Priesand, revolutionary changes had already begun to occur in the world of modern Orthodoxy both in North America and Israel. In Greenberg's opinion, "The existence of women rabbis and the honorable ways they serve [spoke] more powerfully than a thousand debates on the subject."³⁶

By 1993, hundreds of Orthodox women were engaged in serious avenues of Talmudic study at dozens of educational institutions

established specifically for that purpose. This phenomenon was bolstered by the decision of some Orthodox women to obtain doctorates in Bible and Talmud. Some of the most accomplished Orthodox Jewish women began teaching sacred texts to a new generation of women who were eager to immerse themselves in this field of study.³⁷ “The ordination of Orthodox women is close at hand,” Greenberg prophesied. It was a moral imperative:

Orthodox women should be ordained because it would constitute a recognition of their intellectual accomplishments and spiritual attainments; because it would encourage great Torah study; because it offers wider female models of religious life; because women’s input into *p’sak* [interpretation of Jewish text], absent for 2,000 years, is sorely needed; because it will speed the process of re-evaluating traditional definitions that support hierarchy; because some Jews might find it easier to bring halachic questions concerning family and sexuality to a woman rabbi. And because of the justice of it all.³⁸

In the early twenty-first century, a small circle of modern Orthodox rabbis and communal leaders began to contemplate the possibility of women’s ordination, and a few breakthroughs began to occur. In 2000, Haviva Ner-David (b. 1969) an Orthodox student engaged in rabbinic study, published an autobiographical volume that documented her desire to become an Orthodox rabbi. Six years later, in 2006, Ner-David received a private rabbinical ordination in Israel.³⁹

In 2006, Kehilat Orach Eliezer, a centrist Orthodox congregation based in New York City, invited Dina Najman (b. 1968), a scholar of Jewish law and ancient Jewish texts, to serve as *rosh k’bilab*, “head of the congregation.” Najman was not the congregation’s rabbi. She did not lead regular worship services nor did she read from the Torah. Najman was, however, the “head of the congregation,” and this title gave her the authority to deliver sermons and answer questions on Jewish law.⁴⁰

In 2009, Sara Hurwitz (b. 1977), a South African-born graduate of Columbia University, completed five years of rabbinic training under Rabbi Avi Weiss (b. 1944), the founder of modern Orthodoxy’s

progressive rabbinical school Yeshivat Chovevei Torah (see Neiss, pp. 305–16). Initially, Weiss authorized Hurwitz to use the title “maharat,” a Hebrew acronym for a leader in Torah, spirituality, and Jewish law. Later, he changed her designation to “rabba,” the feminine form of “rabbi.” After several Orthodox organizations vigorously protested this step, Weiss agreed not to confer the title “rabba” on any other women.⁴¹

The firestorm of opposition that exploded in the aftermath of Weiss’s decision to confer the title “rabba” on Sara Hurwitz serves as a sobering reminder that there yet remains ardent Orthodox opposition to the idea of women in positions of religious leadership. The Rabbinical Council of America (RCA) recently issued a statement avowing that it “cannot accept either the ordination of women or the recognition of women as members of the Orthodox rabbinate, regardless of the title.” A number of RCA members have expressed their firm opposition to those who have advocated halachic “leniency” in regard to women’s role in religious leadership. The level of opposition in Israel is even more strident. In 2013, the chief rabbi of Ramat Gan bluntly informed his community that “there is no place for a woman to give a *d’var Torah* [a homily] during davening, even if she is dressed modestly.... This is a *chilul Hashem* [blasphemy].”⁴²

In spite of these ongoing skirmishes, one fact remains unmistakably apparent: there is a growing cadre of Orthodox Jewish women who not only want to engage in serious textual study, but who are concomitantly determined to assume leadership roles in the Jewish community regardless of how the debates concerning titles ultimately resolve themselves. This fact has recently been acknowledged by the RCA. Despite its firm opposition to the idea of Orthodox women rabbis, the RCA adopted a noteworthy resolution on “Women’s Communal Roles in Orthodox Jewish Life” in 2010:⁴³

In light of the opportunity created by advanced women’s learning, the Rabbinical Council of America encourages a diversity of

halakhically and communally appropriate professional opportunities for learned, committed women, in the service of our collective mission to preserve and transmit our heritage... Young Orthodox women are now being reared, educated, and inspired by mothers, teachers, and mentors who are themselves beneficiaries of advanced women's Torah education. As members of the new generation rise to positions of influence and stature, we pray that they will contribute to an ever-broadening and ever-deepening wellspring of *talmud Torah* (Torah study), *yir'at Shamayim* (fear of Heaven), and *dikduk b'mitzvot* (scrupulous observance of commandments).

This statement validates the opinion of a 26-year-old student at the Graduate Program for Women in Advanced Talmudic Studies at Yeshiva University (GPATS), who recently asserted, "Title or not, rabbi or not, that's not the real issue. The real issue is that Orthodox women are searching [for a meaningful place within the Jewish community] and we need to address that [concern]."⁴⁴

Conclusion

In spite of the fact that HUC-JIR and JTS arrived at their respective decisions to ordain women rabbis in ways that reflect each movement's distinctive character and history, and even though the introduction of women in the rabbinate has largely served the particular interests of each school and movement, it is also true that these two American Jewish institutions have, albeit unintentionally, been collaborative partners in changing the course of Jewish history.

HUC-JIR made history by ordaining the first woman rabbi in 1972, but JTS's decision to follow suit in 1983 was no less significant an event. After JTS announced it would ordain women rabbis, there could be no doubt that in the days ahead both men *and* women would share the mantle of religious leadership.⁴⁵ Taking note of the inexorability of this significant change as events were actually transpiring back in 1984 may ultimately prove to be "JTS, HUC, and Women Rabbis" most predictive conclusion:

The appearance of women rabbis in the Conservative Movement portends an inalterable reality: most American Jews will sometime in their lives be served by female spiritual leaders. This undeniable fact will change forever the face of Jewish life in America—and around the world. No amount of halachic maneuvering or protestation can prevent this from occurring.⁴⁶

NOTES

1. Gary Phillip Zola, "JTS, HUC, and Women Rabbis," *Journal of Reform Judaism* 31, no. 4 (Fall 1984): 39–45. In commemoration of the fortieth anniversary of women in the rabbinate and this special volume published by the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR), the author agreed to reassess this essay, which was written in the days following the Jewish Theological Seminary of America's announcement on October 29, 1983, that the school would soon begin ordaining women rabbis.

2. Between June 1972 and June 1980, HUC-JIR ordained twenty-one women rabbis: Sally J. Priesand (1972); Michal S. (Mendelsohn) Seserman (1975); Laura J. Geller (1976); Karen L. Fox, Rosalind A. Gold, Deborah P. Prinz, Myra Soifer (1978); Ellen Weinberg Dreyfus, Vicki L. Hollander, Jan Caryl Kaufman, Beverly M. Magidson, Janet Ross Marder, Sheila C. Russian, Bonnie Ann Steinberg (1979); Aliza S. Berk, Cathy Felix, Joan S. Friedman, Debra R. Hachen, Ellen Jay Lewis, Judith S. Lewis, Mindy Avra Portnoy (1980). Between 1974 and 1984, RRC ordained fourteen women rabbis: Sandy Eisenberg Sasso (1974); Rebecca Alpert (1976); Ilene Schneider (1976); Ruth Sandberg (1978); Linda Holtzman, Gail Shuster-Bouskila (1979); Susan Frank, Bonnie Koppell, Joy Levitt, Hava Pell (1981); Nancy Fuchs-Kreimer, Susan Schnur (1982); Devorah Bartnoff, Cynthia Kravitz (1983).

3. Rabbi Sally Priesand (b. 1946) was ordained on behalf of the faculty by Dr. Alfred Gottschalk, president of HUC, on June 3, 1972. On Priesand, see Pamela S. Nadell, "Sally Jane Priesand" (March 1, 2009), in "Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia," on the website of the Jewish Women's Archive, <http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/priesand-sally-jane>. Rabbi Sandy Eisenberg Sasso (b. 1947) was ordained on May 19, 1974, when Rabbi Ira Eisenstein (1906–2001) was president of RRC. On Sasso, see "Sandy Sasso Ordained as First Female Reconstructionist Rabbi," on the website of the Jewish Women's Archive, "This Week in Jewish History," <http://jwa.org/thisweek/may/19/1974/sandy-sasso>.

As all of the pioneering women rabbis correctly note, Regina Jonas (1902–1944) of Berlin was the first woman ever to be ordained as a rabbi. Jonas completed her rabbinic studies at the Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums in 1932. The instructor of Talmud, the ordaining authority of the Hochschule, refused to ordain Jonas, who was later ordained privately by a liberal rabbi in Offenbach, Dr.

Max Dienemann. On Jonas, see Toby Axelrod, "My Year with Regina Jonas," *Bridges: A Jewish Feminist Journal* 14, no. 2 (Autumn 2009): 27–31; Katharina von Kellenbach, "Preaching Hope: Denial and Defiance of Genocidal Reality in Rabbi Regina Jonas' Work," *Shofar* (1998); Katharina von Kellenbach, "God Does Not Oppress Any Human Being: The Life and Thought of Rabbi Regina Jonas," *Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook* 39 (1994): 213–25; Katharina von Kellenbach, "Denial and Defiance in the Work of Rabbiner Jonas," in *In God's Name: Genocide and Religion in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Omer Bartov and Phyllis Mack (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2001), 243–58; Elisa Klapheck, ed., *Fräulein Rabbiner Jonas—The Story of the First Woman Rabbi* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004); Stefanie Sinclair, "Regina Jonas: Forgetting and Remembering the First Female Rabbi," *Religion* 43, no. 4 (2013): 541–63.

4. Jakob J. Petuchowski to Susan Kittner, February 7, 1975, SC-16198, The Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, OH. The author wishes to express his sincere gratitude to Susan Kittner Huntting for donating this letter to the American Jewish Archives.

5. The papers of the Task Force on Women in the Rabbinate are preserved at The Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, OH. See <http://americanjewisharchives.org/collections/ms0677/>.

6. See *CCAR Yearbook*, 1978, 59–60; *CCAR Yearbook*, 1980, 110.

7. See Carole B. Balin, "From Periphery to Center: A History of the Women's Rabbinic Network," pp. 137–52, this volume.

8. *CCAR Yearbook*, 1980, 110–14. For quotation, see 114.

9. *Ibid.*, 114.

10. *New York Times*, June 12, 1972, 43. Today, thirty years later, this same highly regarded modern Orthodox rabbi permits young women attending his renowned Ramaz School in Manhattan to don *t'fillin*—a halachically liberal and controversial decision; see <http://www.jta.org/2014/01/22/news-opinion/united-states/a-second-orthodox-high-school-allows-girls-to-don-tefillin#ixzz32bAE88mk>. Haskel Lookstein's son, Rabbi Joshua Lookstein, a graduate of Yeshiva University, is a supporter of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah (YCT), a seminary founded by Rabbi Avi Weiss in 1999. YCT has declared itself to be open "to the possibility of expanded roles for women in ritual life"; see Avi Weiss, "Mesorah and Making Room: A Journey to Women's Spiritual Leadership," <http://www.yctorah.org/content/view/823/17/>.

11. Blu Greenberg, "Will There Be Orthodox Women Rabbis?," *Judaism* 33, no. 1 (Winter 1984): 24.

12. *New York Times*, June 27, 1977, 31.

13. See *CCAR Yearbook*, 1981, 75. The reference to "B" and "AB" congregations is a reference to congregational size, with "A" being a congregation with the smallest membership and "E" being the largest. According to the rules of the CCAR Placement Commission, rabbis must be ordained for a specified number of years before they become eligible to apply for larger congregational positions.

14. For a detailed reconstruction of JTS's debate over the ordination of women rabbis, see Beth S. Wenger, "The Politics of Women's Ordination: Jewish Law, Institutional Power, and the Debate Over Women in the Rabbinate," in *Tradition Renewed: A History of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America*, vol. 2, *Beyond the*

Academy, ed. Jack Wertheimer (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1997), 483–523.

15. Greenberg, “Will There Be Orthodox Women Rabbis?,” 23.

16. W. Gunther Plaut, *The Rise of Reform Judaism* (New York: World Union for Progressive Judaism, 1963), 252–54.

17. *American Israelite*, November 24, 1892, 4. For an excellent summary of Wise’s view on women and the synagogue, see Pamela S. Nadell, *Women Who Would Be Rabbis: A History of Women’s Ordination, 1889–1985* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), 19–22. For quotations, see 21–22.

18. *American Israelite*, November 24, 1892, 4.

19. Writing in 1892, Wise made this remarkable statement: “In the laws governing the Hebrew Union College the question of sex or race or confession is not touched upon at all.” See *American Israelite*, November 24, 1892, 4.

20. Minutes of HUC faculty meetings: December 21, 1921, January 30, 1922, and March 22, 1922; minutes of HUC Board of Governors meeting, January 31, 1922, and February 22, 1922 (American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, OH), MS-5, box D23.

21. On Carrie Simon and her ideas relating to women in the rabbinate, see Carole Balin, Dana Herman, Jonathan D. Sarna, and Gary Phillip Zola, eds., *Sisterhood: A Centennial History of Women of Reform Judaism* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 2013). See also Nadell, *Women Who Would Be Rabbis*, pp. 70, 121, 132.

22. Marc Lee Raphael, *Towards a “National Shrine”: A Centennial History of Washington Hebrew Congregation, 1855–1955* (Williamsburg, VA: William and Mary College, 2005), 46. For 1938 quotation, see “Four Presidents on the NFTS Silver Jubilee,” *Topics & Trends*, January–February 1938, 3.

23. For a copy of the Presbyterian Church’s 1955 “Report of the Special Committee on the Ordination of Women,” see <http://www.womenpriests.org/related/presbyt.asp>, accessed May 26, 2014. On Paula Ackerman, see Shuly Rubin Schwartz, “From Rebbetzin to Rabbi: The Journey of Paula Ackerman,” *American Jewish Archives Journal* 59, nos. 1–2 (2007): 99–106.

24. *New York Times*, April 30, 1957.

25. Nadell, *Women Who Would Be Rabbis*, 173. Anne Lapidus Lerner, “On the Rabbinic Ordination of Women,” <http://www.jtsa.edu/prebuilt/women/lerner.pdf>.

26. “Of Women and Halachah,” *Reconstructionist*, June 1974, 5; and Gerson D. Cohen, “On the Ordination of Women,” *Conservative Judaism* 32 (Summer 1979): 56–80.

27. Lieberman’s 1979 Hebrew responsum on the ordination of women rabbis was subsequently published and translated into English. See Saul Lieberman, “Ordaining Women as Rabbis,” in *Tomeikh Kehalakhah: Responsa of the Panel of Halakhic Inquiry*, trans. Wayne R. Allen (Mount Vernon, NY: Union for Traditional Conservative Judaism, 1986), 14–19.

28. A prime example of this hostile reaction to the 1979 JTS faculty decision on the matter of admitting women may be found in Arthur Waskow’s angry remarks set down in *Menorah Journal* 3 (February 1980): 1–2. See also Greenberg, “Will There Be Orthodox Women Rabbis?”

29. *New York Times*, April 13, 1983, A23.

30. Cohen, “On the Ordination of Women,” 56.

31. Ibid. For Abelson quotation, see Wenger, "Politics of Women's Ordination," 488.

32. Typically, 1963 or 1964 is considered the last year of the post-World War II baby boom. Although there have been what demographers call "mini baby boom years" after 1964, the sustained impact of the baby boom generation is no longer affecting the number of candidates seeking admission to HUC-JIR or JTS.

33. See "Jewish Identity: Facts for Planning," published in 1974 along with all of the results from the 1971 "National Jewish Population Study" conducted by the Council of Jewish Federations and Welfare Funds. Digitized copies of this study are now available on the Berman Jewish DataBank, a project of the Jewish Federations of North America. The figures cited for 1971 are from p. 1 of the report, found on <http://www.jewishdatabank.org/studies/downloadFile.cfm?FileID=1449>, November 30, 2015. Regarding the figures quoted from the 1990 survey, see Sidney Goldstein, "Profile of American Jewry: Insights from the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey," *American Jewish Year Book* 92 (1992): 129.

34. *New York Times*, April 16, 1961, 1.

35. Jacob Neusner, "Facing the Need for Women Rabbis," *Sb'ma* 13, no. 259 (October 14, 1983): 131.

36. Blu Greenberg, "Is Now the Time for Orthodox Women Rabbis?," *Moment Magazine* 18, no. 6 (December 1993): 50, 52.

37. Greenberg lists many Orthodox women who had established their bona fides as being "totally dedicated to Torah learning within the tradition." She also lists a roster of nearly two dozen seminaries in the United States and Israel where Orthodox women were studying Torah in 1993. See *ibid.*, 52–53.

38. *Ibid.*, 74.

39. See Haviva Ner-David, *Life on the Fringes: A Feminist Journey toward Traditional Rabbinic Ordination* (Needham, MA: JFL Books, 2000).

40. Michael Luo, "An Orthodox Jewish Woman, and Soon, a Spiritual Leader," *New York Times*, August 21, 2006.

41. For an overview of the details pertaining to Sara Hurwitz's ordination, see Batya Ungar-Sargon, "Orthodox Yeshiva Set to Ordain Three Women. Just Don't Call Them 'Rabbi,'" *Tablet Magazine* (June 10, 2013), <http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-life-and-religion/134369/orthodox-women-ordained>.

42. See statement of the Rabbinical Council of America on women rabbis, <http://www.rabbis.org/news/article.cfm?id=105753>. See also Aryeh A. Frimer, "The View of Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik zt"l on the Ordination of Women," in *Tradition's* online "Text and Texture" by Aryeh A. Frimer, <http://text.rcarabbis.org/the-view-of-rav-joseph-b-soloveitchik-zt%E2%80%9Dl-on-the-ordination-of-women-by-aryeh-a-frimer/>. See also Avrohom Gordimer, "Orthodox Women Rabbis: A Rejoinder to Rabbi Wolkenfeld," *Cross-Currents*, June 26, 2013, <http://www.cross-currents.com/archives/2013/06/26/orthodox-women-rabbis-a-rejoinder-to-rabbi-wolkenfeld/#ixzz33e2uUdTD>. See "Rabbi Yaakov Ariel Shlita Opposes Divrei Torah by Women in Shul," *Yeshivah World News*, <http://www.theyeshivaworld.com/news/headlines-breaking-stories/203021/rabbi-yaakov-ariel-shlita-opposes-divrei-torah-by-women-in-shul.html#sthash.hkcFAIIV.dpuf>.

43. For the text of the RCA's "Resolution on Women's Communal Roles in Orthodox Jewish Life," adopted on April 27, 2010, see the website of the Rabbinical Council of America, <http://www.rabbis.org/news/article.cfm?id=105554>, accessed on November 30, 2015.

44. Tamar Snyder, *Jewish Week*, March 24, 2010.

45. Readers should not misconstrue my omitting mention of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in this paragraph as either a slight or an oversight. RRC's decision to begin ordaining women rabbis in 1974 (only two years after HUC-JIR ordained Sally Priesand) did not spur commentators of the era to predict that a watershed transformation had begun. It was JTS's 1983 decision to ordain women that convinced many Jews to believe that women would have their rightful place in the rabbinate, the cantorate, the Jewish academy, and Jewish religious life in general.

46. Zola, "JTS, HUC, and Women Rabbis," 44–45. A number of noteworthy volumes on women rabbis have been published over the past few decades, including Monique S. Goldberg, Diana Villa, David Golinkin, and Israel Warman, eds., *Ask the Rabbi: Women Rabbis Respond to Modern Halakhic Questions* (Jerusalem: Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies, 2010); Tova Hartman, *Feminism Encounters Traditional Judaism: Resistance and Accommodation* (Waltham, MA: University Press of New England, 2007); Riv-Ellen Prell, *Women Remaking American Judaism* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2007); Blu Greenberg, *On Women and Judaism: A View from Tradition* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1998); Emily Taitz and Sondra Henry, *Remarkable Jewish Women: Rebels, Rabbis, and Other Women from Biblical Times to the Present* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996); Gary Phillip Zola, ed., *Women Rabbis: Exploration & Celebration: Papers Delivered at an Academic Conference Honoring Twenty Years of Women in the Rabbinate, 1972–1992* (Cincinnati: HUC-JIR Rabbinic Alumni Association Press, 1996).