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THE FIRST THIRTY YEARS IN ISRAEL AVNEI DERECH

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Women have been functioning as rabbis in the State of Israel since 1983. We have not only had an impact on religious life in the country, but our influence has spread beyond the liberal religious movements into the very fabric of Israeli society.

- Women rabbis have sensitized Israelis not only to a more egalitarian approach in prayer settings, but to more inclusive language in liturgy.
- We have brought greater attentiveness to the general gender-based Hebrew language, finding innovative ways of changing the way we communicate our values through language.
- We have raised awareness among adolescent girls to the option of marking their entrance to adulthood through a bat mitzvah ceremony, which is quite foreign to the Israeli mind-set.
- We have brought to the forefront new models of religious leadership.
- We have created new ceremonies for marking life-cycle and pivotal events in women's lives.

- We have influenced educational changes in teaching curriculum toward equality between women and men.
- We have stirred consciousness among women and men in all the various streams of religious and secular life to a more egalitarian society.

As the first woman rabbi of a congregation in the State of Israel, I had to overcome the prejudices of congregants who believed a woman was incapable of community religious leadership, combined with battling what I coined as "the monkey in the cage syndrome," meaning "Let's go see what kinds of tricks that woman rabbi can perform!" Pioneering colleagues paved the way to end both of those responses. Over the years, it has become clear to congregants that women are capable of rabbinic leadership. When the novelty wore off, women were judged by their merits and no longer drew crowds due to their uniqueness. Woman rabbis have also provided opportunities for women to develop themselves spiritually in new ways. We have opened the door to many Israeli women to choose a career in the rabbinate. One of my favorite stories is when I was asked by one of the numerous reporters who interviewed me as the first woman rabbi, "What is your litmus test for success?" I answered, "When the first native-born, Israeli-educated woman is ordained in the State of Israel, I will know that I have succeeded." Rabbi Maya Leibovich was watching the daily news show *Erev Chadash* one late afternoon and saw an interview with me. She was fascinated and said to herself, "I too would like to study to become a rabbi." A decade after I answered the interviewer's question, Maya became the first native-born, Israeli-educated rabbi to be ordained in the State of Israel. Today, the Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR) rabbinic program in Jerusalem is blessed with numerous indigenous Israeli women studying toward rabbinic ordination.

In the early years, when I was the only woman rabbi in the country, I was interviewed by every form of media available at the time. The first palpable impact of my rabbinate on the greater Israeli scene was when I was interviewed on a popular television talk show in the

country that was watched by 80 percent of the Israeli secular public. At the time of the interview, I was pregnant with our second child, and when the interviewer asked me what my "*baal*" (the Hebrew word for "husband") does for a living, I responded, "He is not my *baal*" (which literally means "owner" in Hebrew). There was a collective gasp in the audience (understanding from my remarks that I may not be married), and then I continued: "He is not my *owner*; I am not his property; he is my *ben zug* [my partner]. There is no ownership in our relationship but rather a partnership." There was enormous spontaneous applause by the audience before the interviewer could continue. Even more than my exposure as the first functioning woman rabbi in the country, the impact of my comment about the use of *baal* resonated in the Israeli discourse and permeated the conversation on the street.

Most Israelis use the word *baal* without ever pausing to understand its implications. Language is a conduit of our values; by using sexist expressions that reflect a woman's status as chattel, we maintain that derogatory attitude and pass it down to future generations. In our capacity as rabbis and community leaders, we have the responsibility to sensitize a new generation of young people to egalitarian language that will give us the capacity to relate to women on the same level as men. Most of our colleagues, women and men alike, understand this profound impact on Israeli society.

I moved to Israel just after the weekday and Shabbat siddur *HaAvodah Shebalev* was published. The same year I joined MARAM (the Israeli Council of Progressive Rabbis), in 1983, and became the first woman to become a member of a rabbinic association in the State of Israel, a committee was formed to prepare a new *machzor* for the Israel Movement for Progressive Judaism. My voice on the editorial committee added a new perspective to the issues that were raised regarding the *machzor* by my Israeli male colleagues. After the decision was made to add *Eloheinu Shebashamayim* (*nusach sepharadi*) alongside the *Avinu Malkeinu* prayer, I suggested that we think of a way of relating to God with feminine metaphors as well. I initially suggested that a possible parallel to *Avinu Malkeinu* (Our Father, our King) could be

Imeinu M'kor Chayeinu (Our Mother, Source of our lives). I liked the poetic balance between mother and father, and I particularly was enamored of the rhyme between the words: *imeinu* and *chayeinu*. The other members of the committee felt that my suggestion was too radical for the members of the Movement at the time, and we compromised on the *nusach*: *Shechinah M'kor Chayeinu*. The goal was to open the eyes of our congregants to additional liturgy that would enable them to start speaking about God in female terms. Some of the more senior colleagues objected to the suggestion, for fear of bringing dualism into our liturgy when relating to God. The majority voted on the *Shechinah* language as more suited to the Israeli Hebrew-speaking population, who were familiar with the term and its roots in classical Hebrew literature. The importance of adding a prayer that spoke about God in female language outweighed my original suggestion. Two melodies were composed for the text, and they are chanted alongside of *Avinu Malkeinu* in our congregations across the country. There are generations of Israeli Jews who sing the *Shechinah M'kor Chayeinu* liturgy as naturally and as easily as *Avinu Malkeinu* and *Eloheinu Shebashamayim*.

Hebrew is a gender-based language. Every noun, verb, and adjective is either feminine or masculine; therefore, in order to achieve some form of gender balance in the way we relate to God, we need to be creative. As more and more women rabbis add their outlook and influence to the way we utilize the Hebrew language to be more gender-inclusive in our prayers, we sensitize our male colleagues, as well as both the male and female members of our communities. We have moved well beyond adding the names of the *Imahot* (Matriarchs) alongside the *Avot* (Patriarchs) in the *Amidah* prayer. Congregations have added expressions such as *Ein HaChayim* (Spring of Life) and *Yifat Olam* (Splendor of the World) as feminine descriptions of God into their blessings and prayers. The voices of native Hebrew speakers searching for authentic ways to utilize the poetry of the Hebrew language to bring the feminine aspects of God to the forefront in our liturgy is one of the keys to opening a new era in the growth of spiritual literature of the Jewish people.

All of the Reform congregations in Israel offer bat mitzvah ceremonies for their members and encourage young women from all the outlying areas of their communities to celebrate their passage from childhood into adulthood with a bat mitzvah ceremony. And yet, the vast majority of our congregations still have only a small percentage of young women choosing to become bat mitzvah in our synagogues, compared to the number of young men who embrace the option of marking their entry to adulthood in our congregations.

The average Israeli young woman is not afforded this important ritual. In truth, Israeli culture discourages young adolescent women from exploring this option. The accepted way to celebrate becoming a bat mitzvah in Israel is to throw a big party for the young woman, similar to the sweet sixteen parties that take place in the United States. Young women who choose to celebrate this milestone in their lives with a ceremony at the synagogue are stigmatized by their families and friends regarding their desire to read from the Torah. It makes no difference whether they are from traditional Sephardi or Ashkenazi families, or from secular families who maintain antiquated views of religion. They are told that menstruating women are prohibited from approaching the Torah. They are often mocked by their peers for trying to imitate boys. They need to be very committed and confident to stand up to the various derogatory remarks that are directed at them. As a result, we need programs that will either strengthen their desire to mark their adolescence by going up to the Torah or at least awaken in them the option.

Many of the congregations in the Israel Movement for Progressive Judaism have offered a Mothers and Daughters Bat Mitzvah Experience program, which reaches out to girls and their mothers to remedy this reality. The concept or understanding that girls have the right and obligation to undergo this milestone is often foreign to the girls and their families. Through the Mothers and Daughters Bat Mitzvah Experience, daughters and mothers realize their potential and responsibility as future leaders.

Throughout Israel, girls are intrinsically taught that their coming of age is less important than the coming of age for boys. Until

Israeli society recognizes the obligation and right of an adolescent girl to regard her becoming a bat mitzvah in a manner as important and special as boys, differences will continue to exist. Through the Mothers and Daughters Bat Mitzvah Experience, we strive to change this perception and work against systemic discrimination. The results of the program have been encouraging. The mothers and daughters who participate in the program have a joint Shabbat *b'not mitzvah* ceremony in our congregations as the high point of the program. Initially, the young women feel more secure going up to the Torah in a group setting. Once they have experienced going up to the Torah in this safe environment, they are emboldened to take the next step and opt for celebrating an independent bat mitzvah ceremony for their family and friends as the young men do. The results of this program have been heartwarming. The mothers and daughters cherish this private time together. They learn about each other in a protective environment and are empowered by the experience. Women rabbis are instrumental in leading these workshops; they would not have the same effect if they were run by our male colleagues. One of the positive outgrowths of this program is the desire of some of our male colleagues to create Father and Son Bar Mitzvah Experience programs, allowing the young men to explore issues of adolescent development and changes in their bodies and finding private time for them to study together in a safe setting as the young women have done. Parallel programs for mothers and daughters and fathers and sons augment the general bar and bat mitzvah courses that we offer.

Another important result of women filling the role of rabbi in Israel is the legitimacy they provide for women in general (and not just *b'not mitzvah*–age women) to go up to the Torah and recite the blessings. I cannot begin to count the numerous women who go up to the Torah for the first time in their lives with tears of joy and excitement brimming in their eyes as they recite the blessings. It is an extraordinary event that takes place weekly in our Israeli Reform congregations. Some of the older women tell me that they would not have dared to go up to the Torah if they had not first seen me chanting from the Torah.

My rabbinic title allowed them to trust the authenticity of a woman in that role and gave them the legitimacy to try it themselves.

Women in the rabbinate often convey different models of leadership to their communities, and as a result of those models, Israelis are exposed to new approaches of rabbinic leadership. I built our synagogue community on the principles of empowering others, enabling, involving, and sharing. Success is all the sweeter when shared by others. It is a model that allows for partnerships between lay leaders and the various members of the staff. It is less of a hierarchical model and more of a communal model of leadership. This type of leadership is less familiar and often goes unnoticed by the members of our communities, but it is a very effective form of leadership. Showing concern for the common good and sharing responsibility for decisions engage community members to take active roles and allow everyone to flourish. When women leaders are at the forefront of Jewish communal life, we allow for more women's voices to be heard equally. This is especially important in Israeli society, where the population is less attuned to women's voices in the public sector.

We also become role models for other women and men. The fact that I was a communal leader throughout the entire period we were raising our four children allowed the families of our community to witness and, hopefully, imitate a model of parenting that is still very foreign to Israeli society. My partner, Baruch, was the main caregiver to our children, and our congregants were witness to what they perceived as a role reversal. In reality, it was simply an egalitarian model of raising our children. Of course the ideal is that each family be able to make choices regarding how they choose to raise their children and not just rely on the accepted model of the woman being the main caretaker. When there are options, we enrich the lives of our families and communities.

I am still tickled by the various stories my congregants have shared with me over the years about when their children come in contact with a male rabbi for the first time and their response is that they did not know that men could become rabbis. This is particularly heartwarming in Israel! Just today, I was approached by one of the teachers in

our school. Her young daughter explained to her that Rav Nir (my associate, Rabbi Nir Barkin) is confused because only women, like Rav Kinneret, can be rabbis.

Even the Academy of Hebrew Language in Israel has been influenced by women rabbis. When I first arrived in the country, I wrote to the Academy to officially inquire about the proper title for an ordained female rabbi. They wrote that the proper word for female rabbi in Hebrew is *rabbanit*. The problem with *rabbanit* is that it is used as the term for the wife of a rabbi; the equivalent in Yiddish is *rebbetzin*. At first I believed I could re-educate Israelis and teach them that the proper use of the term *rabbanit* is for an ordained female rabbi. I failed in my efforts. I was constantly explaining that I was not married to a rabbi and that *I* was the ordained rabbi. As a result I adopted the title of *rav* in the same way that my male colleagues are addressed. In 2010, the Academy finally added the word *rabbah* to the Hebrew lexicon as the formal title for a woman ordained as a rabbi.

Women rabbis in Israel have also created innovative ceremonies and rituals for women to mark various transitions in their lives. We have helped women cope with the loss of a fetus by creating rituals to carry them through their sorrow. We have fashioned *b'rit labat* ceremonies to welcome newborn girls into the covenant of Israel, in contrast to the *b'ritah* parties devoid of meaning that most Israeli families throw for newborn girls. We have created ceremonies for Rosh Chodesh, for menopausal women, and for widows and have developed coming-out rituals. One of the recent products of some of these innovations is a book published in 2011 by four of our colleagues, Alona Lisitsa, Dalia Marx, Maya Leibovich, and Tamar Duvdevani, called *Parashat Hamayim: Immersion in Water as an Opportunity for Renewal and Spiritual Growth*.

One of my favorite rituals is the *hafrashat challah* (separating the challah) ceremony that I have adopted for marking the entrance of young women soldiers into the army. They invite their closest women friends and family to an evening of baking challot. After my introduction to the evening, explaining the historical and social meaning of *hafrashat challah*, the group decides to which organization they will

make a contribution in honor of the soldier. While the challot are baking in the oven, I spread open a tallit and invite four women to hold it like a chuppah, as the soldier stands underneath it while encircled by her family and friends. Each woman is asked to bless the soldier as she begins this new stage in her life. After the personal blessings have been bestowed, we recite the traditional blessing for separating out the portion of the challah. We then toss it to the birds, bless the bread, and partake in eating the freshly baked challah together.

By marking these life passages, we have afforded opportunities for many secular Jews to create sacred time and space. The creative process of bringing these ceremonies into the community has also influenced many of our traditional ceremonies by teaching us to add readings, songs, and original blessings. For example, before our *b'nei* and *b'not mitzvah* put on their tallitot and recite the traditional blessing, we add a poem by Yehudah Amichai that lovingly relates to the experience of wrapping yourself in a tallit. Such innovations enrich Jewish life for all of us.

I am proud to be part of the change that is taking place in Israeli society today. In our educational frameworks, an entire generation of schoolchildren is being taught a different, egalitarian Jewish set of values. Jewish curriculum is being created in the State of Israel today that not only reflects equal opportunities for boys and girls, but is also changing the imbalance of how we study our history. Over the past twenty-five years, I have been developing and teaching a program in our preschools called *Gibburot v'Gibburim Ba-im LaGan* (Heroes and Heroines Come to the Preschool). It is a program about our heroes, both female and male, and about the values they transferred over the years. My emphasis on female heroes such as Sarah, Miriam, Deborah, Judith, Beruriah, Sarah Aaronsohn, and Chana Senesh help to counterbalance the male-dominated stories that have been passed down through the generations. This curriculum helps to raise generations of boys and girls with positive role models from both gender pools.

Women rabbis have been a positive force in bringing about change beyond the liberal religious Jewish frameworks. Witness the Orthodox

women's prayer groups across the country, public *m'gilah* readings for Orthodox women, numerous Rosh Chodesh groups, both Orthodox and secular, and most recently on the front pages of the newspapers with the Women of the Wall. All of these trends and changes are a direct result of women rabbis being part of the Israeli reality.

Sheryl Sandberg writes in *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead*, "Many studies of diversity tell us that if we tapped the entire pool of human resources and talent, our collective performance would improve."[1] Jewish life is a kaleidoscope of color and sound. By tapping women rabbi's tones, hues, and unique voices, we have enriched the variety of options in the entire Jewish world, enhanced the spectrum of Jewish interpretation, and enlivened the commitment to Jewish living today. In brief, our collective performance has improved.

Women rabbis are the vanguard of innovation of Jewish life in Israel today. Our impact is felt in the religious spectrum and beyond, spreading into the very fabric of Israeli society. Today there are many more paths open to women rabbis in Israel than ever before, which afford greater influence on the future of Israel. It has been a challenging and fulfilling journey thus far, and I have been privileged to have paved one of the paths. May we grow from strength to strength.

NOTE

1. Sheryl Sandberg, *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead* (New York: Random House, 2013), 7.