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"FUNNY, YOU DON'T LOOK LIKE A RABBI"

Transference and the Female Rabbi

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Looking back over the last forty years, it is not hard to see how the decade of the seventies provided fertile ground for the ordination of the first American woman rabbi. The late sixties had been a time of turmoil. Political upheaval and social rebellion had filled the air and spilled over into the streets. How unlikely it would have been, had the American Jewish community remained exempt from this revolutionary zeal and promise, particularly given the Jewish commitment to justice as a core value. Given how political radicalism spawned modern secular feminism, the rise of Jewish feminism appears now as having been inevitable. Initially, Jewish women strove for inclusion in ritual and professional arenas—to be counted in a minyan, to recite *Kaddish*, to have an *aliyah*, to read Torah, to become president of the congregation, and to become rabbis. The goal was not to make radical changes but to participate fully in the existing institutions of American Jewish life.

If you had walked the halls of Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR) academe in the mid- to late 1970s, you would likely have heard some of the following statements:

- "People won't want female rabbis to officiate at sad events, only happy occasions."
- "Sisterhood women are going to be your worst enemies."
- "Female rabbis don't talk loudly enough."
- "Female rabbis don't know how to carry the Torah."
- "We can't promise you anyone will hire you once you are ordained."

The speakers of these words included male faculty, administrators, staff, and rabbis, none of whom intended conscious ill will. Because fewer than a handful of women had been ordained at the time, however, these statements could not have reflected the actual situation of women in the rabbinate. Rather, these comments reflected the fantasies of faculty and staff about how they and others might respond to women in the rabbinate. Fantasies, by definition, come from the unconscious area of the brain.[1] The very lack of conscious awareness leads people to believe that their deepest longings represent fact rather than feeling. That is why people behave as if their fantasies represent reality, and these faculty members and administrators were no exception.

As it happens, none of these particular fantasies came true. Laypeople adapted much more quickly than predicted and accepted women rabbis in all areas of Jewish life. The National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods (now Women of Reform Judaism) was among the earliest and staunchest supporters of women in the rabbinate, offering scholarships to female rabbinical students and inviting female rabbis to speak at their regional and national conventions. The women ordained early on were not always hired as quickly as their male classmates, but with minimal difficulty, most women who wanted an entry level rabbinic position found one. And no one seemed to complain about how the women carried the Torah.

While the predicted problems did not come to be, however, other more subtle challenges presented themselves. People said things to female rabbis they did not dream of saying to male rabbis, but that was seen as a time-limited state. Once there was a critical mass of women ordained, the thinking went, those comments would stop. In those first years of women in the rabbinate, most women thought that once the novelty wore off, people would relate similarly to male and female rabbis. It has turned out that they do and yet they don't. Among all the fantasies entertained about female rabbis, no one foresaw the enduring power of unconscious psychological attitudes toward female rabbis. Even after forty years of women in the rabbinate, female rabbis continue to evoke gender-specific responses.

Of course, it isn't just female rabbis who elicit unconscious responses in those with whom they interact. Both male and female rabbis spark an intrapsychic reaction in which people transfer[2] onto the rabbi their deepest and most archaic feelings. The rabbi becomes the object of the fantasies and feelings of each and every congregant, client, patient, or other constituent. For some, the rabbi is the parent they never had; for others, the rabbi is the parent with whom they still struggle for resolution. As people unknowingly play out their old personal patterns, they alternately idealize and vilify the rabbi. These transferences might or might not lead to pathological behaviors. While the phenomenon of transference is merely human and operates all of the time (between spouses, with colleagues, toward authority figures, between parent and child), it frequently appears in response to religious leaders. The very role of rabbi provokes strong transferences.

While transference impacts all rabbis, unconscious fantasies about women have particular import for the female rabbi. In the unconscious primitive mind, the Mother Rabbi is enshrined as the source of unconditional love in a way that the Father Rabbi is not. The Father Rabbi may elicit a desire to feel protected and guided, but when you cry—and sometimes before you cry—it is the Mother Rabbi you turn to for comfort and sustenance. The only problem is that no one ever has the perfect mother. Some are lucky and have a mother who is "good enough" (the idea that the mother only needs to be "good enough" to raise a healthy child is a concept offered by the British pediatrician and psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott[3]). Real mothers come too late or too early and offer too much or not enough. So real children necessarily feel deprived, and by extension, so do adult congregants who unknowingly respond to those emotional triggers. Running into the Father Rabbi in the supermarket might make you feel safe and cared for, while encountering the Mother Rabbi on the soccer field sparks your old feelings of deprivation as you imagine her putting her family's needs ahead of yours. While all rabbis trigger unconscious responses in their parishioners, women rabbis evoke particular responses associated with their gender.

Now that the Reform Movement has ordained women for over forty years, there is no need to speculate about what might be the reaction to ordaining women. The sheer numbers of women ordained have created a track record. Women rabbis have not only entered the sanctum; they have transformed it. Seeing a woman draped in a tallit on the bimah is no longer a surprise. Female rabbis have created new rituals that give voice not just to the missing female experience but also to the deep human need to acknowledge previously neglected life-cycle moments. The language of the newest prayer books reflects a feminist sensibility. Yet people's responses to female rabbis are not necessarily any more grounded in reality now than before women were ordained. Psychological transference remains a complex powerful phenomenon, as evidenced by what people have said and continue to say to female rabbis over these forty years.

Some remarks reflect a positive transference. There is the teen who shyly confesses to her female rabbi, "Rabbi, when I was little, I thought you were God." There is the hopeful groom whose feminist girlfriend objects to the patriarchal nature of Judaism and so refuses to get married: "I think if a female rabbi would marry us, she might change her mind and agree to marry me." There is the bat mitzvah girl whose identification with her female rabbi leads to the spontaneous plea, "For my bat mitzvah, do you think we could wear matching dresses?" These expressions reveal a positive identification with the female rabbi, an experience of being accepted and welcomed, and even a transcendent connection with the Divine. For some people, the presence of women rabbis unlocks a feeling that resolves an unconscious conflict. People who have felt marginalized in the Jewish world—because they were women of a certain generation, because they were gay or lesbian or transgender, because they were single parents, because they were divorced, because they were not married, because they were otherwise not considered part of mainstream Jewish life—experience the possibility of being included in a new way. The subtext of their words reflects the deeper meaning: "If there is room for you, a woman, to be a rabbi, maybe there is room for me after all."

Some comments reveal a more negative transference. People for whom it would be ego-dystonic (i.e., not in accordance with their usual sense of self) to say something socially inappropriate do not hesitate to utter words that would offend in a different social context. "Wow, I never saw a rabbi dance like that before." "Those shoes you wear on the pulpit are so ugly." "Do you not wear makeup as a feminist statement?" "Our other rabbi was so warm; why are you so cold?" "I know where you can go for a good haircut." The responses are one-sided and unconcerned with the rabbi's feelings, as if only the speaker is participating in the conversation. Often the rabbi wonders if she is even there. In these puzzling comments, one can find traces of the individual's early emotional development. Just as the crying infant only cares about relieving its discomfort and satisfying its hunger, so the "crying" adult is aware only of his or her needs in that moment. The infant that continues to live in the adult psyche experiences a reawakening in the presence of the female rabbi. Even the most mature-seeming people are capable of reverting to narcissistic infancy. "I sat outside your office and watched people go in and out. Why do you have time for everyone but me?" "Why do you talk to everyone else at the *oneg* but me?" "I sent you an e-mail last night; why didn't you e-mail me back?" Infants at times feel merged with their mothers in that early bliss of unconditional love and do not know—or want to know—that there is anyone else in mother's world. Traces of those old preverbal fears of abandonment, engulfment, envy, impulsivity, anxiety, and separation live on in varying degrees in every adult brain. They remain alive in the fantasy world of the adult.

Such old fears help to explain the observer's awareness of and at times discomfort with the rabbi's sexuality. "I can't believe my rabbi can wear a dress like that; you must work out." "I can hire a female rabbi, but I can't hire a female rabbi who doesn't wear a robe." "I've never kissed such a pretty rabbi before." Sometimes the trigger is auditory, particularly when it comes to female cantors, not all of whom are sopranos: "I can't sing with female cantors." Appearance and voice call up amorphous sexual feelings. Two male rabbis or cantors on the bimah look normal; two women clergy on the bimah create a sense of discordance and unease. It is still not unusual in a congregation with a female rabbi for a ritual committee to debate whether hiring a female cantor would make the bimah look "too female." The rabbi's pregnancy might seem to make her femaleness hard to hide, but there are those people whose emotional relationship to the rabbi prevents them from noticing her burgeoning belly. Pregnancy itself stimulates all kinds of transferential responses, from identification and love to jealousy and hatred. The rabbi's pregnancy might make one person want to have a baby and another want to be the (rabbi's) baby. One young woman who became pregnant immediately after her wedding said only somewhat jokingly, "See what happens when you get married by a pregnant rabbi?"

One early and enduring question asks how a female rabbi should be addressed. The first generation of female rabbis all nod in recognition at the question "What do you call a female rabbi?" In Hebrew, a language that distinguishes gender, that question indicated a functional problem. There was no obvious word for a woman rabbi in Hebrew unless people reclaimed the word *rabbanit* from its present-day title of the rabbi's wife. Israeli-ordained women have since chosen the title *rabba*. In English, a language that knows no gender, calling a female rabbi by the title "rabbi" would seem to be the obvious answer. And yet native English speakers did not find that answer obvious. In their unconscious minds, rabbis were men, even when an actual female rabbi stood before them. When Rabbi Sally Priesand was ordained, the newspapers dubbed her "Rabbi Sally." Perhaps saying Rabbi Priesand felt too formal and not sufficiently intimate for addressing a woman. Even after forty years of ordaining women as *rav b'Yisrael* (rabbi in Israel), there are congregants and constituents who have difficulty calling a female rabbi by her last name and choose to compromise by using the title "rabbi" along with her first name. Some female rabbis, as if sensing the discomfort, resolve the conflict before it occurs by introducing themselves as "Rabbi First Name," especially if they are young when they are ordained.

Some attitudes toward women rabbis reflect the long tradition of male rabbis and have become embedded in people's psyches. "You don't look like a rabbi" is a common refrain from people whose rabbis never were old men with beards but who have internalized that archetype. While the age of the rabbi plays a role here, one has to assume that this reaction has more to do with gender than with age. After all, these mythic old rabbis with beards presumably were young once. And what is the subliminal message of a Reform congregation's decorating its walls with paintings of dancing Chasidic men? What people see right in front of them cannot always overcome the images enshrined in their unconscious, particularly when those images continue to be reinforced. At the bat mitzvah of the young girl who asked to wear matching dresses with the rabbi, two women were overheard talking afterward in the women's bathroom: "It was a lovely bat mitzvah," they said, "but who was that other girl up on the pulpit?"

There are other influences at play when it comes to how people relate to women rabbis. As people get to know an individual female rabbi, for example, they might adjust their transference in response to her personality and style. They no longer say, "I've never kissed such a pretty rabbi before," when they are talking about the rabbi they know and love. If the rabbi is particularly nurturing, people will respond in whatever way they usually respond to a nurturing personality. Congregational personality also frames people's attitudes. A congregation that is emotionally secure and stable might rejoice in the pregnancy of its female rabbi; a congregation that has a more depriving character might express more resentment.

Culture and history also have bearing on how people relate to women rabbis. Some congregations in those early days hired women rabbis to run schools on the cultural assumption, often mistaken, that all women know something about education. A culture in which many women are teachers may be more likely to accept a woman rabbi in the role of teacher. A culture in which women are paid seventy cents on the dollar will likely pay its female rabbi less than a male rabbi. While this can be a deliberate action (years ago, one male senior rabbi was heard to ask a colleague, "How much do you pay your female rabbi?"), it is usually a more complicated mix of cultural assumptions and unconscious fantasy (e.g., does paying a female rabbi feel like paying your mother to love you?). Women rabbis, in turn, who have been raised within that same culture, fear that being a tough negotiator might have negative impact on their relationship with the congregation. They just might not be wrong.

So much has changed since 1972 when the first woman was ordained. The Reform Movement has since ordained over six hundred women. Women have led both large and small congregations and have broadened the base and definition of rabbinic work. Women participate fully in the CCAR and have achieved its presidency. Women teach on the faculty of HUC-JIR. The presence of women rabbis has led to the creation of new prayer books, innovative rituals, and expanded theologies. And yet these deeper responses to the woman rabbi persist. Unconscious attitudes do not change in a generation or even two. The question "What do you call a woman rabbi?" has been answered. The question of whether people will ever relate the same way to a woman rabbi as to a male rabbi remains one for the ages.

NOTES

1. Sigmund Freud, "The Unconscious," in *Standard Edition* (London: Hogarth Press, 1915), 14:175. The idea of the unconscious was not original with Freud, although he expanded the concept. It has become part of accepted social parlance. The

unconscious mind contains thoughts, feelings, motivations, memories, and ideas that are not available to the conscious mind.

2. "In [Freud's] metaphor, transferences are 'new editions or facsimiles' of old emotional experiences, and 'they replace some earlier person by the person of the physician'" (S. Freud, "Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria," in *Standard Edition* [London: Hogarth Press, 1905], 7:3–122, quoted in Benjamin Margolis, "Narcissistic Transference: The Product of Overlapping Self and Object Fields," *Modern Psychoanalysis* 4, no. 2 [1983], p. 131–140). Also, "the experience of feelings to a person which do not befit that person and which actually apply to another. Essentially, a person in the present is reacted to as though he were a person in the past" (R. Greenson, *The Technique of Practice of Psychoanalysis* [New York: International Universities Press, 1967], p. 131, quoted in Margolis, "Narcissistic Transference").

3. D. W. Winnicott, "Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena: A Study of the First Not-Me," *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 34 (1953): 89–97. "The good enough 'mother' (not necessarily the infant's own mother) is one who makes active adaptation to the infant's needs, an active adaptation that gradually lessens, according to the infant's growing ability to account for failure of adaptation and to tolerate the results of frustration…in fact, success in infant-care depends on the fact of devotion, not on cleverness or intellectual enlightenment. The good enough mother, as I have stated, starts off with an almost complete adaptation to her infant's needs, and as time proceeds she adapts less and less completely, gradually, according to the infant's growing ability to deal with her failure."