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THE PUBLIC IMAGE OF THE WOMAN RABBI

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Mark Twain famously said, "Clothes make the man; naked people have little or no influence on society." Although Twain lived in the nineteenth century, his assertion could not be more true for rabbis in the twenty-first century, especially female rabbis. The appearance of community leaders has been of interest throughout history, as described in literature and depicted in artistic work. In traditional Jewish texts, this is most evident in the biblical books of Exodus and Esther. As leaders of the Jewish community as well as "symbolic exemplars" of God's presence, what the rabbi wears makes a statement about the rabbi's role as well as being a reflection of individual personal style. The rabbi's attire has been cause for even more intense debate and speculation since women were first ordained as rabbis in 1972. During much of the twentieth century, rabbis, like their Christian counterparts, dressed the part, typically by wearing a pulpit robe. There was a certain amount of respect accorded to the rabbi because of that unique look. As there has been a shift away from particularistic and formal rabbinic clothing and a preference for more casual clothing in general, this has had an effect on the public perception of the rabbi and the rabbinate. Historically, the rabbi was perceived as the expert authority on Judaism and even a

representative of God. *Kavod harav*—respect and honor for the rabbi—in private, professional, and spiritual matters is connected to the rabbi's personal presentation. Once the formal attire, such as the pulpit robe, was removed, rabbis were perceived less formally as well—as parent, nurturer, companion, and comforter. The medium is the message; the rabbi herself represents God and Judaism.

The role of the rabbi parallels the role of the biblical priest. From biblical times to the present, it is widely believed both consciously and subconsciously that rabbis are representatives of God in the world, whether or not this perception by Jews is comfortable for the individual rabbi. While it can be argued that the biblical priests weren't necessarily God's representatives—that role fell to Moses—their involvement in the rituals of the Tabernacle greatly influenced the people's experience of these rituals and God's presence among them. So important was the priests' clothing in the biblical period that the entirety of chapter 28 of Exodus, as well as most of chapter 39, is devoted to its description. In Exodus 28:2, God instructs Moses to make sacred vestments for the priests to convey dignity and adornment. Priests were attired differently from laypeople in order to highlight their role and its importance to the community, specifically when they were involved in the Tabernacle rituals. Exodus 28 and 39 can serve as a detailed style guide for dressing for the rabbinic role. In studying the Exodus passages for advice in redeveloping the image of the female rabbi, it becomes clear that color, fabrication, design, and jewelry contribute to the sacred persona. The description of the priestly vestments is quite detailed: pants, turbans, fringed tunics, headdresses, robes, sashes, shoulder pieces, all made of a fine twisted linen in a figured pattern. They were gorgeous to see, colored crimson, blue, and purple, finely embroidered, decorated with sculpted pomegranates and golden bells that chimed whenever the priest moved. There was also a finely wrought golden breastplate, bejeweled in a rainbow of colored stones. Seeing such a majestically attired person contributed to the perception that the priest was a holy personage rather than an ordinary Israelite.

This attention to personal detail is also depicted in the Book of Esther. In a "Women in the Bible" teleconference sponsored by the Women's Rabbinic Network on October 21, 2013, Rabbi Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, PhD, taught that Esther "puts on her queenship" (Esther 2:17) in addition to Ahasuerus putting the crown on her head. As Esther prepared for her queenship, cosmetics are mentioned three different times in chapter 2, certainly a sign of their importance (2:3, 2:9, 2:12). Just as Esther went through a transformation, so too does an individual undergo an internal change at the moment of *s'michah* (ordination), transforming her personal identity as well as being publicly identified by the community as one of its religious and educational leaders. In the Bible, for both the Aaronide priests and Queen Esther, the garments and the cosmetics supported their roles. So, too, rabbinic clothing today supports the rabbinic role, but exactly how one's clothes should look in supporting that role has become unclear. For that matter, it seems that rabbis question that they should dress for their role in the first place, especially with the nearly universal abandonment of the pulpit robe in the late 1990s.

Rabbis, like the biblical priests, are engaged in sacred theater. The Tabernacle ritual was a grand spectacle that engaged all the senses. There was the singing and talking of the crowd among the lowing and bleating of animals awaiting sacrifice. People touched the textured hides of the animals they led to the altar. The Tabernacle was adorned with gold furnishings and burnished wood, just as the priests were grandly arrayed. The burning altars and roasting meats filled nostrils with fragrance, while the flavorfully cooked meats apportioned after the sacrifices satisfied both palate and stomach. In American synagogues today, sacred theater is still performed, with the rabbis as the primary actors. The bimah is often decorated with tapestries and stained glass, furnished with candelabras, flags, and the ark in which the Torah scrolls are kept—a stage set for a grand drama. Candles, the Torah scrolls dressed in velvet mantles and silver, and a variety of musical instruments are the props. With everything arrayed, it is appropriate for rabbis

to be costumed beautifully for the important role of facilitator of God's presence in the sanctuary among the people.

Even when stepping away from the bimah and out of the synagogue, a rabbi should still adorn herself in keeping with the dignity and spirituality of her role as symbolic exemplar. Rabbi and psychologist Jack Bloom, PhD, coined the phrase "symbolic exemplar" to indicate the role that rabbis play in modern Judaism and the general community. In his book *The Rabbi as Symbolic Exemplar: By the Power Vested in Me*, he proposes that rabbis are walking, talking, living examples of the very best qualities of humanity. This is the feature of the rabbinate that underlies rabbinic authority and authenticity. It spills over into the rabbi's personal life from the professional life. Whether on the pulpit or during her leisure time, the rabbi is *always* the representative of God, Judaism, and right behavior. Rabbi Bloom notes that no matter how hard rabbis try to dissociate themselves from this responsibility, it clings to them like a second skin.

Rabbis are the public face of Judaism, but most are woefully unprepared for this public aspect. It has caused heartache and burnout in numerous rabbinic careers, as well as providing some of the most meaningful moments. As Bloom indicates, a rabbi's role as symbolic exemplar is subject as much to the perceptions of others as it is to the rabbi. While a rabbi may look in the mirror and see herself as she was before she became a rabbi—as a friend, daughter, parent, spouse, woman—most others see "rabbi" first, before the other descriptors. This image is clear in a wedding announcement in the *New York Times* on February 17, 2013: a man marrying a rabbi said that when he met his bride he thought, "She's adorable. I had to 'unrabbi' her. I think of [rabbis as] standing on a stage looking down at people below. They're this holy figure, but [my] bride-to-be is [also] a human being."

It is tremendously challenging for the rabbi to always be concerned about other people's expectations for her behavior and appearance, but in many respects she has little choice in this matter. The reverence accorded to her, *kavod harav*, comes primarily from being a symbolic exemplar. Jews assume that the rabbi can make God a part of each

congregant's personal reality by embodying sacred qualities of compassion, kindness, mindfulness, and wisdom. The rabbi represents Jewish learning and values, by standing up for what is right and making the world a better place in the public sphere and private home. Rabbis embody the metaphor that God is in the world. They must, therefore, take this challenge seriously and act and dress accordingly to the best of their abilities.

It is rare for anyone to comment on what a man wears unless he is particularly flamboyant or neglected. This is not to say that men don't care about their appearance. In his 1975 book *Dress for Success*, John T. Molloy showed men that their choice of suit, accessories, and hairstyle in the workplace could affect their career possibilities and advancement. Dressing well was correlated with career success. While the issues discussed in that volume apply to male rabbis, they are particularly crucial for female rabbis. Women's appearance and clothing seem to be fair game for discussion privately, publicly, and in the media. Both men and women are invested in how women look; there are just as many, if not more, male fashion designers of women's clothing as female designers. Molloy followed up on the popularity of his 1975 book with one for women in 1978. "Power dressing," the phrase he coined, is a timeless concept. Power dressing guided men to wear conservative, dark suits with lighter-colored neutral shirts if they wanted to become influential power brokers. A pop of color could be added with a tie or pocket square. Hair should be cut to a medium length, and nails cut short. Professional women were guided to dress similarly in dark suits, lighter blouses, and a loose, fluffy bow at the neck in place of a man's tie. Minimal makeup and conservative nail polish were encouraged, along with low-heeled pumps for a woman to achieve the career success she desired. Power dressing was adopted by both male and female rabbis during the 1970s.

When women entered the rabbinate in 1972, the image of what a rabbi looked like drastically changed. Many of the early conventions of the Women's Rabbinic Network from the 1980s onward included discussions of what look female rabbis should strive to achieve, since

power dressing seemed to be too restrictive for the variety of roles the women were expected to fulfill beyond being the scholar or CEO of the synagogue. Congregants routinely made comments about their female rabbis' hairstyles, makeup (or lack thereof), nail polish, shoes, accessories, and overall clothing choices. It was, and continues to be, common for female rabbis to receive unsolicited style advice from congregants and male colleagues, often due to a perceived lack of a "proper" style in the opinion of the person offering the advice. The protective boundary that had previously shielded male rabbis from this type of advice and criticism became permeable as women became rabbis. There was a principled response to this among female rabbis: it shouldn't matter what a rabbi wears; it should only matter the message that a rabbi speaks. Sadly, this is not the reality. For example, in a Facebook discussion from October 24, 2013, involving rabbis and other professional women, one rabbi shared that a congregant criticized her lipstick color by saying it was too dark and would have been more appropriate in the 1940s rather than in 2013. The smallest aspect of the female rabbi's appearance is scrutinized. It is, therefore, extremely important for female rabbis to show extreme care and concern in their appearance.

With the new informality of our times, including the more casual style of attire that is currently in vogue, there is an overfamiliarity that people feel with their clergy that allows them to confront female rabbis in ways they would not consider approaching male rabbis. For the first twenty years or so of women in the rabbinate, there was a dress code for worship and life-cycle officiation: the rabbi wore a pulpit robe. The approachability, or rather inapproachability, of a rabbi may have had something to do with the image this "uniform" created. A uniform accords the wearer a certain amount of respect and recognition, defining and declaring professional roles. The pulpit robe is not unlike the formal black robe worn by judges on the bench; a defendant wouldn't really consider hugging a judge, even if the court case came out in her favor. The neutral robe serves as a separation or barrier between the rabbi and the congregant, much as the white lab coat separates the doctor from the patient or the judicial robe separates the face of the

law from the rest of the court. Judges' robes and doctors' lab coats denote the office of the professional and add gravitas to the person wearing them.

In the absence of the pulpit robe, many rabbis (and many liberal Christian clergy) seem to be at a loss as to how to present themselves through their clothing and grooming. Since there is currently no particular advice offered to rabbis on this topic at the seminary nor at professional conventions, it has fallen to the blogosphere to fill this vacuum. Reverend Victoria Weinstein, a Unitarian-Universalist minister, writes a daily blog pointing out the fashion faux pas and successes of fellow clergy. The header of her blog "Beauty Tips for Ministers" reads: "Because you're in the public eye, and God knows you need to look good." Reverend Weinstein gives advice on garments, hair styles, makeup choices, and beard grooming. She is very specific on what works and what doesn't. While some may see this as a frivolous ministry, it is vitally necessary to protect and define what it means to be a member of the clergy in concrete, physical ways.

While female rabbis may have similar struggles with their appearance and attire as do many female professionals, they have the added responsibility of being symbolic exemplars. The more rabbis dress the part, the more respect is accorded to them. In the Facebook discussion previously referenced, nearly one hundred professional women and rabbis discussed their use or nonuse of cosmetics on a daily basis. Most of the participants felt that wearing makeup helped a woman look and feel more polished and professional; it enhanced their self-esteem in addition to their appearance. Some women don't use any cosmetics because they are allergic to them or don't like the way they feel. But by far, the most frequent reason given for not wearing makeup was the lack of knowledge on how to use it. An October 13, 2011, article in the *New York Times* titled "Up the Career Ladder, Lipstick in Hand" affirmed that women who use makeup tend to be paid at a higher rate because they are seen as more competent and trustworthy than those who don't. Makeup should enhance a woman's natural beauty but not look overdone or like a costume. Both women themselves and men and

women who observe them confirmed that cosmetics boost a woman's attractiveness. There were women quoted in the article who objected to the amount of time spent applying cosmetics, and as women rabbis have said, the quality of women's job performance should not be based on competence with cosmetics. However, like the women in the Facebook discussion, women in the article's study felt more confident wearing makeup. Their confidence translated into their ability to project an aura of capability, reliability, and amiability. Cosmetics can be strategically chosen, depending on the situation; as boardroom attire differs from entertaining attire, so can makeup go from professional to glamorous as necessary to project the appropriate impression. Also, there has been a cultural shift in American society in women using adornment and cosmetics to please themselves, rather than being concerned about pleasing men. Cosmetics and clothing are tools that are completely within women's control in enhancing (or choosing not to enhance) their appearance. Appearance plays a major part in how a woman feels, and thus how she is able to present the truth of herself to the world. Certainly it would be a fairer world if beauty were not rewarded any more than those who are more ordinary in appearance, but that is not yet a world that currently exists.

As Mark Twain said, how we dress creates an impression. Dressing too casually invites congregants and clients to behave in an overly familiar way with the rabbi. Even without the pulpit robe, there was a type of uniform for the first wave of female rabbis, including suits and dress shoes—much like the male rabbis. The first and second generations of female rabbis generally preferred short haircuts and minimal use of cosmetics, again seemingly in imitation of male attire and grooming. As more women have entered the rabbinate, more diversity in dress and grooming styles has emerged. If, as Reverend Weinstein suggests, rabbis are representatives of God, they need to present themselves as serious and as polished as possible, while reflecting their personalities and the spirituality of their vocational calling.

For the female rabbi, developing and maintaining a rabbinic style is a synthesis of her professional and private roles, between the sacred

and the ordinary. With no outside guidelines, it falls to each individual rabbi to define her personal rabbinic style. This requires an examination of her inner self, since how she perceives herself should be reflected in what she wears. She needs to define what type of rabbi she is off the bimah: a still and reflective scholar; an exuberant and creative teacher full of new ideas; an enthusiastic marketer of Jewish ways of doing and being; a nurturing comforter at the bedsides of the sick and dying. Each rabbi must find her true inner self and present that self in what she wears, as well as in how she lives her life and practices her rabbinate. This is in addition to her performance attire during worship and at life-cycle ceremonies. Especially in this age of constant social media access, the ways in which a rabbi presents herself at any time necessitates her energies and attention. The ubiquity of the mobile phone camera makes it likely that a rabbi could be photographed and that photo published at any time. Social media also is relatively eternal, in that once an image is publicly available, it will most always remain available.

Christian ministers often own a variety of seasonal vestments that they wear for leading worship, in colors that complement the minister and the event. Perhaps rabbis might attire themselves with a pulpit robe or other garment acting as the canvas for color and accessories. Pulpit robes now come in both festive and somber colors, as well as the popular (but often funereal) black. The pulpit robe, though, is not nearly decorative enough on its own. Just as the biblical priests wore a fine array of vestments, so too might rabbis consider an array of colorfully designed tallitot and *kippot* or other head coverings. Modern *kippot*, already available in a variety of colors and materials, are becoming more like jeweled adornments. Female rabbis could easily add substantial jewelry to this combination, reminiscent of the priestly breastplate. And like Esther putting on her queenhood, female rabbis can enhance their image with cosmetics as needed. This all takes practice, especially for rabbis accustomed to dressing more casually without many accessories or cosmetics, but it is worth the time and effort to perfect. There is the added benefit of building the rabbi's

self-confidence as she presents her most beautiful self in reflecting on the outside the true beauty that can hide on the inside.

If a rabbi wants her rabbinate to be perceived with gravitas and respect, she must dress the part. Thinking about the image she wants to project should inform what she wears, since communicating her role visually is as important as her auditory communication. What she looks like has an impact before she even opens her mouth. She should spend time and consideration creating her outfits and complementary accessories, just as she devotes thought and effort to writing a sermon. Far from being frivolous, this is holy work, part of creating and maintaining a sense of the sacred, of celebrating God's presence in her own life and being as well as in the lives of the Jewish people she serves.