PERSONAL REFLECTION

A First Rabbi, from a Long Line of Rabbis

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I was raised to marry a rabbi; that's what women in my family did. Both grandmothers, my mother, and many of my aunts married rabbis. On my father's side—that is, the Chasidic and Orthodox side—we go back more than ten generations. My mother, meanwhile, was born to a prominent Reform rabbi. In short, this was the family business—if you were a man, that is.

In 1968, just two years before the first feminists marched down Fifth Avenue and ignited a revolution, my father, Conservative rabbi Wolfe Kelman, designed my bat mitzvah ceremony. Though I had never attended one myself, synagogue attendance was not strange to me. So I went ahead and learned the haftarah and bought a pretty dress to wear when I chanted it on a Friday night. One prominent rabbi congratulated me but sternly informed me that this would be the first and last time I would be chanting haftarah in my life.

What a ride it has been since then. When I was ordained in 1992 as the first woman to become a rabbi in the State of Israel, I was not aiming to be the first. It was a triumph, however, after years of feeling that I was not entitled to the title. No longer was I preparing the podium or bimah for someone else to speak, preach, daven, read Torah; now, the bimah was welcoming me.

How fortunate I have been to have a father who understood the tidal wave of Jewish feminism coming his direction in the 1970s. Long before, as head of the Rabbinical Assembly, he was the "rabbi's rabbi." As "union chief," he helped rabbis in their placement and advancement, often smoothing their transitions. He was one of the Conservative Movement leaders who helped to shepherd the fantastic growth of Conservative Judaism. He marched in Selma with Abraham Joshua Heschel and Martin Luther King Jr. and was involved with the first steps of interfaith dialogue. The rise of Jewish feminism was the next "natural" step for him. He regarded feminism as a new source for energizing Judaism.

My father's "congregation" was our home, our Shabbat table, and there I had both a front seat and the typical dutiful daughter's seat. I helped my mother in the kitchen but was privy to incredible conversations on every aspect of Jewish life, the Jewish people, Jewish history and current events, communal institutions, and new ideas. There was one rule: no one was to gossip or speak ill of rabbis. My father's life mission was to protect and promote rabbis, even ones he didn't like. To his last day, he never shared names or identifiable stories; just moral tales. "This is how rabbis should conduct themselves," he observed, "this is how synagogue presidents should behave." And it was always with warmth and humor and incredible clarity regarding the rabbinic mission. Simply put, the rabbi's mission is to love the Jewish people and serve God—in that order—with Torah study, acts of *chesed* for all humans, joyful worship, and building the State of Israel as the means. Always looking for and cultivating the sparks of renewal and rebirth, my father intuitively understood that in the last quarter of the twentieth century, women held one of the most important keys to Judaism's revival and renewal. My father praised the characteristics of the rabbis he admired from all denominations, and he agonized over certain behaviors he could not tolerate. He did not mythologize rabbis either. Rabbis were imperfect humans, yet their sacred mission needed protection and guidance.

One might say that from the earliest age, I was being "trained" to follow in his rabbinic footsteps. For my brother, it was totally explicit:

you will not break the rabbinic chain. He did not, of course, nor did nearly any of my male first cousins. Our generation of women took the implied road or, to quote Gloria Steinem, became "the man you were destined to marry!" My brother founded a thriving Reform synagogue in Jerusalem over twenty-five years ago and remains my rabbi and my rabbinic *chevruta*, every day, while our sister became a lawyer who represents clergy.

We never knew our Chasidic grandfather, and my Reform grandfather died when I was eight years old, but they both have loomed large in our rabbinic DNA. Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kelman was a Chasidic *rav* whose learning and kindness were revered. He demanded the strictest observance of himself, but not of others. He modeled; he did not preach. He loved every Jew who came his way. His three sons and two sons-in-law became outstanding rabbis representing different branches of Judaism.

Rabbi Felix Levy was, in his day, the new paradigm of American Reform. Ordained in 1907, born and bred in New York, he served just one congregation for fifty years and was president of the CCAR when he needed to break the tie to vote for acceptance of the Columbus Platform in 1937. He was an early Zionist, a Bible and Near East scholar, and classically Reform in his ritual and worship practices. In 1925, he traveled to Palestine to attend the inauguration of Hebrew University, an institution I would attend years later.

Their wives were no less remarkable and in many ways served as shadow "rabbis" for them. My widowed grandmother maintained her home with great piety and generosity, taking in refugees and strangers, while demanding of her children total loyalty to their father's traditions. My Chicago grandmother gave up her law career to support my grandfather as an unpaid "assistant," working with youth, organizing the Sisterhood, and serving as a great public speaker.

When I arrived in Israel in 1976, words like "feminism," "Reform," "Conservative," and "woman rabbi" had no Hebrew equivalent. I was a foreign implant in my "native" land. It would be another ten years until I found the courage to embark on my rabbinic studies and be completely embraced by HUC's Israeli Rabbinical Program.

There were no women rabbinic models for me, only great male rabbinic models. And still, rabbis like Kinneret Shiryon, who got here first, held up a beacon. My classmate Maya Leibovic and I tried to stumble our way forward together in our first years as students. Luckily for me, I was able to spend two formative years in New York at HUC-JIR, where faculty, classmates, and my students were supportive and inspiring. Rabbi Rachel Cowan held my hand and guided and mentored me in matters of the soul then and now. So too do two other remarkable rabbis, Shira Milgrom and Joy Levitt, who have transformed synagogue and community centers in revolutionary ways. These are just three examples of women who have transformed Judaism in the twentieth century.

From my position as dean of HUC's Jerusalem campus, I now oversee the training of rabbis in two programs: the Year-in-Israel and the Israeli Rabbinical Programs. My family background, walking the footsteps of *chalutzim* in Israel, and the blessings of my biography shape and inspire my rabbinate. Thankfully, I now have over thirty Israeli women colleagues, and we challenge and stretch ourselves toward the next generation. And my daughter has begun her steps to the rabbinate. Like my father, I look for the sparks of holiness and vitality everywhere; my grandfathers bequeathed me their respective Torah: tradition and Reform. Luckily, my husband and children keep me laughing at myself and remind me that feminists must have a sense of humor.