

## Emerging Leadership Roles for Women in the Orthodox Community: Triumphs and Challenges

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These are heady times for Orthodox women. Within the past five years, we have witnessed unprecedented opportunities for women who wish to devote their professional lives to *avodat hakodesh*, religious service to the Jewish community. As access to an advanced education in Talmud and Rabbinics continues to increase, Orthodox women are entering the halakhic discourse as *yoatzot* (singular: *yoetzet*), halakhic consultants in the laws of *niddah*, and teachers of Talmud. Women are no longer automatically discounted for leadership positions in Orthodox synagogues; young women have trained as congregational interns in a number of New York area synagogues, and one of these shuls has hired a woman to a full-time position on its religious staff as *madrakha rukhanit* (literally: spiritual guide). A number of synagogues have installed women as president of the board.

While one could argue that there is little chance that Orthodox women will cross the line from religious paraprofessionals to full professional status as rabbis anytime soon, the advent of positions of *yoetzet halakha* and female Talmud teacher are deeply significant. Within the Orthodox community, knowledge of rabbinic literature is power. As educational opportunities and expectations for young women continue to grow, power structures are being reexamined and reshaped.

Equally significant is the greater visibility of women in the synagogue and in other communal institutions. As women emerge from behind the *melitza* and stand on the *bima* in Orthodox synagogues to deliver lectures, sermons, and, yes, even to make the announcements, each member is challenged to broaden her or his vision of the community to include women as equal participants.

And yet, a sense of deep frustration grips many of these future Jewish leaders. Qualified women are not asked to utilize their knowledge and expertise in positions of substantial authority in the community's schools and synagogues. There are only a handful of Orthodox high schools nationwide, including high schools for girls, that have hired women for their Talmud faculties. Women with halakhic knowledge are excluded from most Orthodox synagogue ritual com-

mittees, and their voices are still not heard in public discussions of Jewish law. Capable women are not given the opportunity to serve in the positions for which they have trained. In fact, female halakhic consultants, congregational interns, and Talmud teachers serve a tiny fraction of the Orthodox community.

The problem is compounded further by the growing gap between the community's stated goals and the implementation of these goals. In segments of the modern Orthodox community, it has become commonplace to include advancement of women as a defining aspect of their ideology, although this is not reflected in the hiring decisions of community institutions.

As some barriers begin to fall, old justifications for unequal treatment of men and women no longer carry the legitimacy they once did. Chana Henkin, Dean of Nishmat and Founder of the Keren Ariel training program for the *yoatzot*, has argued that the availability of women as consultants on the laws of *niddah* — often involving detailed discussions of the woman's menstrual cycle, fertility problems, and sexual life — would strengthen women's commitments to these commandments. Similarly, introducing female teachers of Talmud to teenage students would encourage young women to see themselves as students of Torah and demonstrate vividly to young men that Jewish women are equal heirs to Jewish tradition.

There is an irony at work here. As the Orthodox community offers more public positions to women, expectations grow, and there is less tolerance for excluding women. As leadership opportunities open to women, the reality of all that is still closed to them becomes more glaringly apparent. While it is understood that change, of necessity, proceeds slowly in the Orthodox community, Orthodox women who are prepared to dedicate their professional lives to serving community deserve the power and recognition necessary to do their absolute best.

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