In October 2007, Rabbi Avi Weiss and I convened a group of Modern Orthodox rabbis for a conference in West Palm Beach. That meeting led to the formation of the International Rabbinic Fellowship (IRF), an association of Modern Orthodox rabbis who seek to promote the classic values of Modern Orthodoxy: intellectual integrity, love of Israel, communal activism, responsible halakhic decision-making, inclusiveness etc. Our group has grown to about 150 rabbis.

One of the issues that has engaged the IRF is the role of women in Orthodox Jewish life. An increasing number of women are receiving advanced religious education—in Talmud, halakhic literature, rabbinic lore. A number of Orthodox women serve as scholars, teachers and leaders in Orthodox congregations. This is a positive development with long-term ramifications for the nature of religious leadership in the Orthodox world.

The members of the IRF had serious discussions on whether to admit women as full members of our rabbinic group. On the one hand, since there is no current vehicle for women to receive rabbinic ordination in the Orthodox world—women should not be precluded from membership in the IRF simply because they are women. On the other hand, since the IRF is a rabbinic organization, it would change and dilute the nature of the IRF if it admitted non-rabbis as members.

I think there is a consensus in the IRF that if a woman were to complete the same course of study and training as a male rabbinic student, then she should qualify for membership even if she lacks the official title "rabbi". In fact, she would have the exact same qualifications for membership as a male rabbi—and the only reason she would be excluded would be because of gender.

The IRF recently took a vote on women's membership, with two basic choices regarding the admission of women as full members. One option was to include all women working in positions of religious leadership within Orthodox congregations (whether or not they have attained equivalent rabbinic education and training). Since this would entail admitting non-rabbis into the IRF, the IRF would then need to change its name (and some of its agenda) to a more inclusive, non-rabbinic character.

The other option was to deny full membership to women at this time, and to maintain the organization as a rabbinic association open only to Orthodox rabbis.

Although there was strong sentiment on both sides of the issue, the IRF voted for the second option—not to admit women to full membership at this time.

The larger issue is the future role of women in positions of leadership in the Orthodox community. It is only a matter of time before there will be a group of women who have indeed completed
rabbinic education and training equivalent to men. I believe this is inevitable--and positive for our community. At a time when so many Jews are far from Orthodoxy, we need all the talent we can muster to reach out to present and future constituencies. Talented women will play an important role in furthering the message of Torah.

The IRF vote to deny admission to women is, I believe, the correct decision for the current time. The IRF must have the credibility and integrity to function as a rabbinic group, with all members being duly ordained rabbis. However, I am confident that the day will come--not so far into the future--when qualified women will join the ranks of the IRF and make their impact on our communities.

UPDATE: Since the original writing of this essay, the IRF has voted to include women as full members of the organization, and many women are now part of the IRF. We are pleased that the IRF is now a stronger and more representative organization.

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