

Women as Religious Leaders in Orthodox Communities: Blog by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

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(In August 2018 I was asked by Moment Magazine to participate in a symposium on the role of women in religious leadership. My comments related specifically to the Orthodox Jewish community. Here was my reply.)

During the past few decades, women have had dramatically more opportunities to study Torah, Talmud, halakhic texts etc. As could have been anticipated, this increase in learning has led to an increase in women's choosing careers relating to religious education and religious leadership.

While some Orthodox leaders have welcomed the participation of women as clergy, the "establishment" has been opposed. Not only has the Agudat Israel issued prohibitions for women to be ordained and to serve as rabbis, the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations and the Rabbinical Council of America—both historically viewed as mainstream Modern Orthodox—have strongly opposed ordination of women as rabbis. The RCA and OU do not want their members to hire these women, or to allow any women to serve in a rabbinic capacity. They do not object to women serving as teachers, administrators, hesed givers etc. The key objection seems to be that of conferring "ordination" on women, and giving women titles that imply rabbinic credentials. Their basic argument is that ordaining women is a violation of tradition and halakhic precedent.

Orthodox supporters of engaging women as religious leaders obviously realize that this represents a change in historic patterns. But they also realize that we live in a new era when women receive unprecedented religious education, including not only sacred texts but also pastoral and communal training.

Dr. Noam Stadlan wrote an extensive paper demonstrating the halakhic permissibility of women serving in positions of religious leadership. (Please see <https://www.jewishideas.org/article/gender-roles-ordination-leadership-and-public-analysis-ou-paper>). It seems that the real issue is not halakhic, but psychological and sociological. It is emotionally difficult to overcome past patterns and attitudes.

In 2008, Rabbi Avi Weiss and I founded the International Rabbinic Fellowship, an association of Modern Orthodox rabbis. The organization began with a membership of male rabbis only, but we early on deliberated including females who had attained a high level of religious education and who were serving communities. It took several years for us to vote to include female religious leaders...and this was an amazingly important decision.

The IRF has grown to about 250 members. The participation of women in our conferences, discussions and online conversations has been a boon to all of us. The women—using various titles such as Rabbah, Maharat, Rabbanit—have expanded our range of concerns and our knowledge base.

Surely, female clergy serve as inspirations to women congregants. But of equal importance, they break stereotypes about the “role of women;” they demonstrate to male and female congregants that women can lead communities wisely and sensitively.

Orthodox communities that wish to employ qualified women in rabbinical positions should be free to do so and should have our blessing. If some communities and rabbis do not wish to employ these women, that is their decision. Dogmatic and divisive resolutions do not solve controversial issues. The Modern Orthodox community should not fear positive change, but should welcome it.

Changing long-held attitudes and communal patterns is not a simple matter. There are those who raise the fear of “the slippery slope.” Once one change is made, it will lead to others, and yet to others...and we will end up abandoning halakha altogether. While we do need to think carefully about the potential dangers of “slippery slopes,” we have another potential danger to consider: becoming a frozen fossil. With the inclusion of Orthodox female clergy, our community moves toward increased creativity, inclusivity...and vitality.

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