Women as Orthodox Jewish Religious Leaders, by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Submitted by mdangell1 on Sun, 01/15/2017 - 00:00

In February 2010, I wrote a blog in reaction to a proclamation of the "Moetzes Gedolei haTorah" of the Agudat Israel, in which they declared that women are not allowed to serve in "rabbinic" positions since this is a violation of Torah tradition. (https://www.jewishideas.org/blog/women-orthodox-religious-leaders) I expressed concern that the Modern Orthodox rabbinic leadership would be intimidated into following suit with this position.

Indeed, the Rabbinical Council of America and the Orthodox Union have just published a rabbinic report forbidding women from being "ordained" or serving in some capacity as a "rabbi." The paper seems particularly directed against the emergence of women who graduate from Yeshivat Maharat and receive titles akin to 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.

Functionally, then, it seems that it's fine for women to do almost everything a rabbi does, as long as she is not given a title that implies that she has any status resembling that of rabbi. In point of fact, outside of some specific areas of religious ritual, a woman can indeed perform all the functions a rabbi does.

When Orthodox Jews use the term "ordination," or "semikha" they generally think of a sacred process in which the holy office of rabbi is passed down from rebbe to talmid. They imagine Moses placing his hands on Joshua, the original semikha. Yet, in actual practice today, "ordination" and "semikha" are basically available to any male student who passes the required tests and who is deemed to have reasonably good character. These certificates are more akin to MA or PhD degrees, than to any holy transmission passed on to the unique few holy students worthy of being called rabbi. Hundreds of students receive "ordination" in various yeshivot around the world each year; there is no particular mystery to the process. If a female student studies the identical texts and passes the identical tests as a male student, why should she not receive the same degree? Why should the words "ordination" or "rabbi" be such red flags? I admit that I have not been in favor of "ordination" of women.

I have been in favor of women receiving all the Torah education available to them, and having as many opportunities as possible to share their wisdom and experience in positions of religious leadership in our community. My discomfort with "ordination" is precisely because I think the word is misused and misunderstood today, and is given much more sacred value than it in fact has. I think that if we did not use the word "ordination" or "rabbi" in connection with women, we would...
make much more progress getting women accepted into leadership positions in our communities. But I also understand that the women involved want--and deserve--the recognition that goes along with a rabbinic title. Instead of stifling these women, our community should be actively seeking ways to enhance their status. If we have communities and rabbis who wish to employ these qualified women in rabbinical-type positions, then they 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 within our community. They exacerbate tensions and undermine the vitality and creativity that exist within the Orthodox world. The Modern Orthodox community should not fear positive change and growth, but should welcome it.

The Modern Orthodox community should not model itself along the lines of the Agudat Israel, and its worldview should not be stifled by an inferiority complex in relation to "the right." Whatever our personal views about "ordination" of women, we should not be passing resolutions that are hurtful to the aspiring female students, to the women already holding positions of religious leadership, and to the many honorable Orthodox rabbis who favor the greater involvement of women in the religious leadership of our communities.

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