# Where Are Our Teachers?

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By

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Shalom uvrakha, and best wishes to all members of our University Network. I'm including in this emailing an article by Rachel Delia Benaim, reflecting on her frustrations with contemporary Modern Orthodox rabbinic leadership. It raises important issues, and I invite you to share your thoughts by emailing mdangel@jewishideas.org

Where are our teachers?

BY Rachel Delia Benaim

(Rachel Delia Benaim is a journalist and is actively engaged in Jewish life. Her work on the intersection of religion and gender has been published in The Washington Post, The Guardian, and Tablet Magazine, among others. She is currently the assistant travel editor at weather.com in NYC and previously worked as a breaking news editor and writer at Haaretz in Tel Aviv. After graduating from Stern College and Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism (consecutively), she spent a large portion of the next few years visiting and learning from Jewish communities around the world including India, Mexico, and Hungary. When she's not writing or thinking about Jewish ideas, you can find her perusing Spotify.

Traditional Modern Orthodox institutions are failing me. As a young millennial Jew, I'm looking for the leadership to be well versed in Torah, embody those ideals, and most of all to show me how Jewish ethics converges with difficult questions in contemporary society. In conversations with peers and friends, this is a common trend I've noticed. Not only are institutional rabbis not doing that, but instead they are putting their energy into fights that are trivial at this point in time. In practice however, not only are many institutional rabbis failing in this regard, they

are instead committing their energy towards splitting hairs.

The last month has been a particularly stark reminder of this reality. The Rabbinical Council of America and the Orthodox Union have issued a myriad of statements. The most robust statement by far however, had nothing to do with the spike in anti-Semitism in America, the source of questions for President Trump over the last few days, or religious freedom in the United States or the fact that Jews weren't mentioned in this year's White House Holocaust Memorial statement. Instead it was barring female clergy members: they were busy making sure that the title 'Rabbi' would never be conferred on a woman. Of course they reiterated woman can learn Torah, and of course they can teach it, but never in name, only in practice. [https://www.ou.org/assets/OU-Statement.pdf?utm_source=SilverpopMailing&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Letter OTIzMDUzNDAxS0].

While the statement in and of itself denied the facts on the ground-- namely that there are Orthodox women who are serving as clergy members in Orthodox synagogues like Mount Freedom Jewish Center in New Jersey, which hired [ http://forward.com/sisterhood/328427/first-woman-orthodox-rabbi-is-hired-by-synagogue/] the first Orthodox female rabbi last year-- the timing of this robust piece of writing, one which was more conclusive than any statement regarding the moral quandaries facing the United States at the moment, was extremely telling. It said that instead of taking time to craft statements about freedom of religion or in support of underprivileged people-- refugees-- the organization is more concerned about maintaining current power dynamics, which they claim are based on Torah.

It is shocking that bastions of religious sensibility will not take a strong moral stand in the light of certain political realities on the ground in the United States, and yet will continue to make isolating statements surrounding gender, which deny certain realities and moral standards of today.

In recent weeks, I have not seen legacy Modern Orthodox leaders at the forefront of any form of political action or social justice movements-- either within the

Jewish community or outside of it-- nor have I seen them behaving in a way that particularly reflects piousness, reverence, or awareness of the Divine. Where is our self proclaimed Modern Orthodox leadership like members of the Orthodox Union or the Rabbinical Council of America at social justice rallies-- where are the rabbinic leaders guiding any form of morally, religiously infused social action?

Instead, institutions like the Orthodox Union and the Rabbinical Council of America issued a bland one page statement [http://advocacy.ou.org/union-orthodox-jewish-congregations-america-rabbinical-council-america-respond-executive-order/ ] on politics, that neither affirm or condemn any point of view, like their statement on the Muslim ban. All they did was “reaffirm” a statement from December 2015, where they called “on all Americans to reaffirm that discrimination against any group based solely on religion is wrong.” Apart from the original statement having been severely lacking, the new statement is even more spineless, as it does not explicitly state the targets of discrimination in the executive order, nor does it call for any action.

For a denomination that claims to be concerned about Jewish continuity, this is not the way to go about it. In order to resonate with millennials, the Modern Orthodox leadership will need to make a moral stand. Otherwise, they will not garner the respect or support of myself and my peers.  For a group who claims to be so interested in Jewish continuity you are not setting a good or compelling example for me and my peers-- the so-called Jewish future. Without our support, what will these institutions be in another decade and beyond? We will not accept equivocators.

My peers and colleagues have been taking stands, both on Facebook, Twitter, and Snapchat, and in the real world. As journalist Bill Grueskin noted, many of the protesters against President Donald Trump’s executive order regarding immigration were wearing yarmulkes. [ https://twitter.com/BGrueskin/status/825540374693289984]. Many of them, as photos show, were millennials. Their teachers were noticeably absent.

Rabbinical students from Yeshivat Chovevei Torah (YCT) were visibly present at many protests in the New York area this month-- though their teachers, too, were missing. But they are taking a stand and encouraging their students to do the same. The same cannot be said for the more legacy institutions. And I would be remiss, however, if I didn't mention organizations like the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, founded by Rabbi Marc Angel in 2007, which fosters an intellectually vibrant, compassionate and inclusive Orthodox Judaism; the Institute sponsors our University Network and Campus Fellows Program. Also, it should be noted that the International Rabbinic Fellowship, co-founded by Rabbi Marc Angel and Rabbi Avi Weiss, issued a strongly worded statement coming down against the Muslim ban, which included a call to action for the Modern Orthodox leadership and community to "engage in American democracy in order to ensure the Torah's mandate is fulfilled through protests, lobbying elected officials, and fighting for the rights of the stranger." [ http://www.internationalrabbinicfellowship.org/news/irf-statement-executive-order-concerning-entrance-united-states-muslim-majority-nations] The IRF also includes women in their ranks, unlike the  RCA, and is engaged with more grounded conversations about Torah and daily life.

These are organizations doing work that might provide some moral hope for the future of Modern Orthodoxy, along with Uri L'Tzedek, but these organizations do not yet hold the clout of the Orthodox Union or the Rabbinical Council of America. Perhaps, though, their existence can provide a direction and an anchor with which my generation can wade into the storm that is 2017.

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