

Women rabbis

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

The issue of women rabbis in Orthodox Judaism has come to the fore again. This time, it has come through a petition before the Israeli Supreme Court on sexual discrimination in religious affairs.

<https://www.israelhayom.com/2020/07/05/chief-rabbinate-threatens-ordaining-strike-if-forced-to-train-women/>. This is interesting when considering the US Supreme Court has just declared the State should not interfere or impose its value systems on religious communities. But, leaving out religious politics, the fact is that calling a woman a “rabbi” is not a real issue.

Over time and regardless of whether under Jewish Law, government intervention or social mores, the nature of who, how and what a rabbi is has gone through many metamorphoses. There is no mention of rabbis in the Torah. The Torah gave us priests who were men only. But it also gave us judges and prophets- who could be female. Religious leadership depended on passing down traditions from one generation to another. But there is no mention of titles. “Poo Bah” would do just as well as “rabbi”.

What is sometimes called “rabbinic Judaism” started with Ezra the Scribe (not Ezra the rabbi). The Talmudic era created a new kind of leadership to rival that of the priests – the Men of the Great Assembly. At that moment, laying of hands, *semicha*, took on a formal function. The term *semicha* comes from the biblical obligation to lay one's hands on an animal before sacrificing it (that's appropriate for some rabbis) and was also used when Moses made appointments (Aaron as High Priest, his successors and Joshua).

Initially, only the leadership of the Sanhedrin, was given *semicha* by the teachers of the previous generation. But their successors went under a variety of titles such as Rav, Rebbi, Rabba, Rabban. Some (such as Benei Bateyra, Hillel and Shammai) took no title at all. They were scholars not pastoral leaders. Their function was like Supreme Court judges who administer law and set moral standards. And sometimes they were community leaders too. This tradition ended during the Talmudic period (as a result of a Roman ban) and has not been officially revived since. Despite occasional resurrection attempts over the centuries, it has failed.

Until the medieval era, the emergence of religious leadership in the Jewish world relied entirely on reputation and scholarship. Various titles were adopted, Gaon, Rav in the West. Haham in the east. Medieval rabbis were

expected to teach, pass on tradition and give sermons in the synagogue twice a year (before Pesah and before Yom Kipur) and then they were scholarly, not popular. That was the role of the Darshan or the Maggid.

The function of a rabbi, as we understand it nowadays, emerged as a result of external influence from priests and imams who took on specific communal duties. Judaism did not, and does not, rely on priests for religious functions. You do not need a rabbi to marry or bury. Although there are specific areas where superior knowledge and expertise is required – divorce, for example.

Pastoral matters were usually dealt with by popular folk healers, *Balei Shem*. These were men and women who knew how to create cures – magical, mystical and natural. Many scholars, like Maimonides, earned a living as a doctor – not a rabbi to avoid benefitting from Torah knowledge. Those who wanted to take up a formal position had to get approval, often called *semicha* (except it did not have the same significance as the earlier forms), by a major rabbi or Beth Din.

In Europe, the Protestant Reformation introduced new kinds of ministers whose jobs were largely pastoral and ceremonial. This is where our modern idea of a rabbi emerged. Under Christianity rabbis began to adopt clerical dress, pastoral roles and even such as Reverend. States began to appoint official rabbis. Rabbinical colleges (in contrast to yeshivot) began to emerge to provide State qualifications. And, as Reform expanded, they too chose to borrow the title. Often, personalities, preaching talents and social skills mattered more than learning.

Eastern European Jewry strongly objected to such moves. For them, study in yeshivot was the only path to rabbinic authority. A yeshiva was not designed to train rabbis. The great Vilna Gaon was not an official rabbi despite being accepted as the greatest authority of his era. Many of the greatest scholars and authorities in Judaism today, as then, never bothered to get the “title”. For them, study for its own sake was the only route to authority. Nevertheless, *semicha* or a *ksav rabbanus* (a document of appointment) became a requirement – but only for a position in a religious community.

I received *semicha* from three of the greatest head of Yeshivot in the previous generation. Yet none had been given *semicha* themselves. Hassidism, although initially meritocratic, soon began to appoint a leader simply based on his descent. Some of them were brilliant scholars and leaders. But they were called Rebbes. In addition, rabbinical colleges and Yeshivot began to water down the original formula for *semicha* by removing or limiting certain

authority. One semicha could be very much less significant than another.

Nowadays, the title "rabbi" bears little resemblance to its origins. It's like a degree. Many people get it for the kudos and do not use it. Anyone can follow an online course and become ordained in programs where traditional learning is only mentioned in passing. I have come across not a few rabbis of modest capacity who bought their titles. Some got them just so the yeshiva could see the back of them. Like any system of education, there is a huge gap between the elite colleges and correspondence courses. They all give degrees but what matters is where one got it from.

In Israel today, where rabbis and judges are state appointments and get State salaries, being a rabbi is much prized for all the wrong reasons. The system is open to abuse and political corruption. From this, you gather I value the person, not the title. So why does the very Orthodox world still balk at giving women the title?

There is a halachic issue. There are specific roles that women in Judaism cannot perform on behalf of men. Some apply only to Cohanim. But women rabbis in the Orthodox world anyway would not perform on behalf of the community those mitzvot which they are not obliged to. Calling a woman "rabbi" would not affect that. These limitations apply mainly to public religious services which, nowadays, play a relatively minor role in rabbinic life. Areas such as the pastoral or educational pose absolutely no such difficulties – and they are what take up most of a modern rabbi's time.

It is also argued that, thanks to an opinion by Maimonides, women cannot be appointed to positions of authority in the community. Which is strange since, as I mentioned above, there were women prophets, judges and queens. And it is clearly an opinion based on the social prejudices of the time and now largely disregarded.

The main argument against calling a woman "rabbi" is that it has never been done before. It goes against tradition, *massora*. Important as *massorah* is, there are plenty of examples of old *massorot* falling out of use and new ones coming in. There was a time, in every society, that women were not permitted, or expected, to rival the intellectual or religious level of men. But in Judaism today, there are enough women whose knowledge of traditional sources more than qualifies them for *semicha* of the highest order. Times have changed. It is like saying we cannot drive cars because Moses did not.

In Israel, there are women leaders in religious courts, halachic consultants

and advisors attached to local religious authorities. In more moderate Orthodox communities women are already performing many of these roles. The only issue is what to call them. Rabbi? Rabbah? Rabbanit? Maharat? Rabbit?

Sadly everything religious in Israel is politicized. Thanks to the catastrophic mixture of state and religion. Like many trade unions, the established Chief Rabbinate fights to preserve a closed shop. If there were no state-guaranteed rabbinic posts (as in the USA), each community would be free to establish its own criteria and appoint who they want with whatever *semicha* the candidate had. No one would be forced to join a community they do not want to.

The Chief Rabbinate has responded by saying that, if the petition for no sexual discrimination in religious affairs were to be granted, they would refuse to give *semicha* to **anyone**. Perhaps that's the best solution.

Refusing to give women a title they merit is a gratuitous insult. A storm in a teacup. An example of narrowminded rabbinic bureaucrats shooting themselves in the foot and cutting off their noses to spite their faces. Or, at the very least, male chauvinism. It is about time we left that behind.

If you are interested in following the halachic issues, I refer you to <https://www.jewishideas.org/article/gender-roles-ordination-leadership-and-public-analysis-ou-paper>