

Women Rabbis

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

There's a storm in a teacup over [Rabbi Avi Weiss](#), a well known Orthodox American rabbi who has, it seems, [appointed a woman "rabbi"—no, a "maharat", no, a "rabba"](#), or perhaps it is a "rabbit". The Orthodox right is up in arms. There was even talk of expelling Rabbi Weiss from the Orthodox Rabbinical Council of America.

What really is the issue? Is it anything more than a quibble about titles? If a woman is counselling, advising on religious and personal matters, answering pertinent questions on Jewish law, and teaching Torah to those in the community who want it, there are enough major and universally accepted rabbis of impeccable Orthodoxy who agree there is nothing halachically wrong with this at all. Nowadays, in Israel and elsewhere in the Orthodox world, women do all these things all the time, and plead in rabbinic courts, sit for the same exams as men, and give halachic advice from official positions within the State Rabbinate.

It is true that there are certain ritual functions that women cannot perform for men. But these do not define who a rabbi is or is not. Unlike priests in Christianity, rabbis are no different than any religious male in terms of what they can or cannot actually do. You don't need a rabbi to marry you or bury you. There are limitations and differences between men and women in Orthodoxy. One may or may not agree with them. But no one who supports women functioning in Orthodox communities has suggested changing that order.

Rabbinic ordination in the Talmudic sense no longer exists. The term for ordination, *semicha*, literally "laying on of hands", originally was a way of passing on the chain of tradition directly from one great leader to the next. The Romans under Hadrian tried their best to hamper this transmission and banned it. Nevertheless, the religious leadership staggered on until finally the line of the Gamliel dynasty was terminated around 1500 years ago.

The great post-Talmudic Gaonim derived their authority from their acknowledged expertise. Communities appointed their religious leaders based on their qualities, or they emerged thanks to their charisma. It was only later when non-Jewish states started to appoint official ecclesiastical representatives and chose the term "rabbi" that the question of qualification and ordination emerged as an issue. The schism between Orthodoxy and Reform muddied the waters; because the Reform movement chose to call its clerics "rabbi" the title lost much of its lustre. It seemed to the Orthodox inconceivable to have a rabbi who ate pork and did not keep Shabbat. (This is not to say that non-Orthodox rabbis cannot be scholars or make important contributions to Jewish life.)

The rabbinate today owes more to imitating non-Jewish clergy than it did originally, when it simply denoted a scholar, a Talmid Chacham. A Talmid Chacham could well be a leader. True spiritual leadership is earned, not

appointed. In the Mir Yeshiva of my day, the heads did not have semicha and they were no less regarded for it. They did not need it. They considered semicha rather like a qualification someone going out to teach school needs, whereas those who stayed in Jewish academe were all research PhD's. In fact in yeshiva to call someone a rabbi (as opposed to "rav") was a putdown. Semicha, the title "rabbi", does not define religious leadership in Orthodoxy. On the contrary, if anything it might be a handicap!

The term "rabbi", itself, is nowadays pretty meaningless. Anyone can call himself, or herself a rabbi. Like "who is a Jew", or having a degree. You can buy one online. What matters is where and from whom you got it. Because of the devaluation of the title many Orthodox leaders prefer to be known as Rav or Rabban or Rebbe. "Rabbi" in many Orthodox responsa is written "RA Bi" which in Hebrew means "Bad for Me". It is indeed intended in some quarters as derogatory. So why the fuss?

One Orthodox objection is based on tznius, modesty. According to [Rabbi Avi Shafran](#), Agudah's director of public policy:

[Tznius isn't a mode of dress. It includes the idea that women are demeaned and not honored when they're put in the public eye and put on a pedestal. Putting a woman in front of a group of men and women on a regular or ad-hoc basis is violative of tznius.](#)

Codswallop. Modesty is a matter of comportment and attitude. Male Orthodox rabbis have projected far more arrogant, immodest concupiscence and corruption this past year than women. Are they suggesting that any woman automatically is immodest? So why are Orthodox women allowed to appear and plead in public rabbinic courts in Israel, or function in public as teachers, doctors, lawyers, and CEOs? Are they all loose women? Come on!

Rabbi Steven Pruzansky, of Congregation Bnai Yeshurun in Teaneck, NJ, gave the real game away when he lambasted Weiss's move because it ["not only mimics Reform, but in fact is a throwback to pagan ideologies and a perennial challenge to religious establishments."](#)

Well, knock me down with feather. Since when is a woman teaching Torah, counselling, visiting the sick, and making herself useful around a large community pagan? But it is Reform that is the issue, because they thought of it first!

In the end, Rabbi Weiss gave in to pressure and changed his mind. I do not agree with many of Rabbi Weiss's political positions, but I do admire his guts and ideals, and I do think Jewish religious life is all the richer for having highly learned and qualified women contributing to it. But then, as Rabbi Shakespeare said, ["What's in a name?"](#)