

Women Rabbis, again!

What is it about Chief Rabbis? Perfectly nice, intelligent human beings, yet when they get to be Chief Rabbis their spines turn to jelly. Once again, a British Chief Rabbi has put his foot in it, or rather, got into an unnecessary fight in which there are no winners, and a little common sense might have averted making fools out of the pious.

In the USA each denomination tends its own garden. In the UK, with its legacy of pseudo imperial control, the Charedi world interferes with the more centrist United Synagogue which appoints the Chief Rabbi. Sadly, the center does whatever it takes to appease the Right Wing. But the Charedi world has always made a point of disrespecting the holder and the position regardless. As a result, the very constituency that the Chief Rabbis should be catering to gets let down time and again in favor of appeasement. It has always been this way.

The latest example concerns Dr. Lyndsey Taylor Guthartz.

<https://www.thejc.com/news/uk/rabbis-attack-glass-ceiling-of-torah-after-female-lecturer-dropped-from-jewish-studies-role-1.517731>

No, it is not about a woman who wants to study Torah at the highest level or become a rabbi and take over a pulpit. It concerns a highly regarded Orthodox lady who has been teaching at various Orthodox institutions in London for many years. But it is because she took a correspondence course in advanced Torah studies at an admittedly controversial but orthodox institute in New York at the end of which, it bestows the title of *Maharat* (sounds Indian to me). She has now been told that she can no longer teach at the London School of Jewish Studies, an adult education center that is supposed to be open-minded, even if it does come under the purview of the Chief Rabbi. The Chief Rabbi aided and abetted by the God Squad to his right has stood firm and refused to budge. It may on the surface look like an attack against an institution that the Right-Wing considers heterodox, and it is possible that in their eyes they are right. But in practice, it is a downright insult to Orthodox women.

Normally, the thinking members of the United Synagogue Rabbinate avoid getting involved in such disputes. They fear for their jobs. Or have already gone over to the other side. This time, Rabbi Michael Harris, Rabbi of Hampstead Synagogue, son of the late Chief Rabbi Harris of South Africa, has resigned in protest as a senior lecturer at the LSJS. Good for you Sir. Someone in the Anglo Jewish Rabbinate with a spine.

As I have argued before, the title of *Rabbi* is pretty meaningless in itself. In the Talmud, titles of *Rabban*, *Rabbi*, *Rebbi*, *Rav*, *Gaon*, *Mar*, *Haham* were honorary marks of respect. Some like Hillel were happy to have no title at all. The great heads of Yeshivah who ordained me never deigned to descend to the level of having to qualify as communal or synagogue rabbis.

You do not need a rabbi to marry or bury you. Although there are specific areas where superior knowledge and expertise are required – divorce, for example. In many communities, pastoral matters were usually dealt with by popular folk healers, *Balei Shem*, men and women who were not rabbis. They were relied upon to create magical, mystical, and natural cures for every problem. Many scholars earned a living as doctors or businessmen 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 authority or Beth Din.

Nowadays anyone can follow an online course and become ordained in programs that range from serious to trivial and not go anywhere near a serious yeshivah. Like degrees, what matters is where one got it from. So why does the very Orthodox world still balk at giving women the title? There is no good reason whatsoever other than a fear of anything new, particularly if it comes from outside its sacred boundaries or a fear of being thought Reform.

The *halachic* issue is that women in Judaism cannot perform functions that they are not obliged to. Besides, such *halachic* limitations apply only to certain public religious ceremonials 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. As for "sameness," there are other areas, such as Cohanim and Leviim, where Orthodox Judaism differentiates ritually between and amongst the sexes. Calling a woman rabbi or any other title need not affect the law in Orthodoxy in the way it does in progressive Judaism.

The main argument against women in the public religious arena is that of *Masorah*, tradition. It has never been done before (neither did people fly in airplanes). 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 to know what the law is. Times have changed.

In Israel, today there are women pleaders (Toanot) in religious courts, halachic consultants, and advisors attached to local religious authorities. You can call up *Beit Din* and ask for a female to respond on a halachic issue and believe me, most of them know a great deal more than many rabbis I know. In more moderate Orthodox communities, women are already performing many of the non-halachic functions that men do in terms of advice, education, and inspiration.

Some quote Maimonides, that women cannot be appointed to positions of authority in the community. This is strange since there were women prophets, judges, and queens not to mention all those wealthy and powerful women over the ages whom the rabbis always made a great effort to cultivate. Like several of his opinions, it is based on the contexts of the time.

Refusing to recognize female achievements by giving women a title they have earned, or merit, is a gratuitous insult. It reinforces the idea that women

do not matter as much as men and their studies cannot be serious. It inhibits young Jewish women from bringing their talents to enhance Judaism. But even more disturbing is to say that because you have studied somewhere we do not approve of, regardless of your personal theological or behavioral standards, we forbid you to teach what you have been teaching for many years with our complete approval hitherto. This is simply an example of cowardice. And bowing to pressure.

This knee-jerk reaction of men frightened of being thought of as betraying orthodoxy is just like all those lecturers, artists, journalists, and politicians who are being silenced by the anti-Semitic Woke who simply cannot tolerate another point of view. Talk about the Cancel Culture, this is our version!

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>

And if you would like to know where the title *Maharat* comes from, look here <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maharat>