



AND THE GATES OPENED: WOMEN IN THE RABBINATE

Viewers Guide for High School
and Adult Education Classes

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Preface

At The Jewish Theological Seminary, the graduating class of 2005 celebrated a historic landmark – twenty years of women in the Conservative Rabbinate. In May of 1985, Amy Eilberg made history for Conservative Judaism when she became the first woman to receive rabbinic ordination from JTS.

This new short-form documentary, entitled "And the Gates Opened: Women in the Rabbinate," takes an in-depth look at the rich history of women in the rabbinate.

As early as 1860, there were women who expressed rabbinic aspirations. In the late twentieth century, Reform, Reconstructionist, and Conservative Judaism came to accept the right of women to become rabbis. Today, female rabbis are altering the face of Judaism.

This twenty-minute program tells the stories of Rabbis Sally Priesand (Reform), Sandy Eisenberg Sasso (Reconstructionist), and Amy Eilberg (Conservative) – the first women in their movements to be ordained. It investigates the impact they and others are having on Judaism, including the recent developments in women's religious leadership within the modern Orthodox community, and concludes with an overview of the meaningful redefinition of gender roles and practical innovations in Jewish life that continue to reshape the contours of Conservative Judaism.

"And the Gates Opened: Women in the Rabbinate" can be adapted for viewing through multiple lenses in diverse educational settings. For example, one can view this documentary to study the differences between American Jewish community movements and the way those movements decide change. This program is also good for opening a discussion about the ordination of women in the Conservative Movement.

As you can see, there are many rich themes to develop through the viewing and study of this documentary. We hope you enjoy.

Rabbi Marc Wolf

Introduction

Before showing the documentary, it may be useful to have a short introductory discussion. The following questions can help articulate one's assumptions about the participation of women in Judaism and the ordination of women as rabbis.

After viewing the documentary, you can return to these questions for a discussion about how your viewers' understanding has changed.

Q: Is there a perceived "missing voice" in the transmission of Judaism: in rabbinic texts, commentaries, liturgy, and/or life-cycle rituals?

Q: What assumptions are generally made about women rabbis?

Q: Historically, what do you think has prevented women from becoming rabbis?

Q: Who are the women rabbis in your community: in synagogues, schools, agencies, or institutions?

Q: How many women do you think are serving as rabbis today?
Worldwide?
In your community?

Precursors to the Modern Woman Rabbi

Q: Deborah has been recognized as the first Jewish woman to hold an official leadership role in the community. Read the following passages from the Book of Judges and discuss what it tells us about Deborah's leadership qualities.

Judges (4:4-8) introduces Deborah:

Deborah, wife of Lappidoth, was a prophetess; she led Israel at that time. She used to sit under the Palm of Deborah, between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites would come to her for decisions.

She summoned Barak, son of Abinoam, of Kedesh in Naphtali, and said to him, "The LORD the God of Israel, has commanded: Go march up to Mount Tabor, and take with you ten thousand men of Naphtali and Zebulun. And I will draw Sisera, Jabin's army commander, with his chariots and his troops, toward you up to the Wadi Kishon; and I will deliver him into your hands." But Barak said to her, "If you will go with me, I will go; if not, I will not go." (JPS Translation).

Q: As early as the 1880s, women began to operate like rabbis, similarly to how Deborah was chosen as judge and prophetess. Read the following quotes from Rachel Ray Frank and Henrietta Szold. What motivated them as individuals to seek more public roles in Judaism?

The following is a quote from a sermon Rachel Ray Frank gave on the eve of the High Holidays in Spokane, Washington. Although the city was affluent, they had no synagogue:

"How are you content to go on this way, having neither *shule* nor Sabbath school? Do you think you are doing right toward yourselves, toward your children who are growing up without a creed of any kind, a most dangerous thing for a society and a most ungrateful way of paying tribute to God.... If you would stand well in the eye of the community, uphold your faith and teach your children the glory of perpetuating a grand old creed." – Frank, Ray. "A Lay Sermon by a Young Lady." *American Hebrew*, October 1890.

Szold was, in certain respects, a forerunner of Jewish women's liberation. When her mother died in 1916, a close male friend, Haym Peretz, volunteered to say the mourner's kaddish for the dead woman. Szold graciously refused the offer. "I believe," she wrote him, "that the elimination of women from such duties was never intended by our law and custom – women were freed from positive duties when they could not perform them [because of family responsibilities] but not when they could. It was never intended that, if they could perform them, their performance of them should not be considered as valuable and valid as when one of the male sex performed them." Joseph Telushkin. *Jewish Literacy*. New York: William Morrow and Co., 1991.

Q: Dr. Shuly Rubin-Schwartz spoke of another precursor to the modern woman rabbi: the rebbetzin (rabbi's wife.) She said, "Many of these rabbis' wives had strong Jewish educations. Many of them had graduated from this institution (JTS), from the teachers institute, which was one of the few places where women could get an advanced Jewish studies degree."

Read the following excerpt from Dr. Pamela Nadell and discuss the advances made from the time of Henrietta Szold and Rachel Ray Frank to the time of Paula Ackerman.

In 1919, Paula Herskovitz married Rabbi William Ackerman. As a rebbetzin, Paula Ackerman was an active partner, not only teaching in the Hebrew school and helping out with the sisterhood, but also taking her husband's place in the pulpit whenever he was absent or ill. Ackerman was also a member of the board of the Reform movement's National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods (NFTS) and chairman of NFTS's National Committee on Religious Schools.

After Ackerman's husband died on November 30, 1950, the synagogue's president asked the 57-year-old Ackerman if she could "carry on the ministry until they could get a rabbi." Ackerman wrote in a letter to a friend, "I also know how revolutionary the idea is—therefore it seems to be a challenge that I pray I can meet. If I can just plant a seed for the Jewish woman's larger participation—if perhaps it will open a way for women students to train for congregational leadership—then my life would have some meaning."

Concerns among national Reform leaders about Ackerman's lack of proper ordination and rabbinic education were mostly expressed privately. Many understood the importance of Ackerman's example in showing that a woman could serve in a rabbinical role. She steered Beth Israel for the next three years, leading weekly and holiday services, officiating at weddings, confirmations, and funerals, and participating in meetings of Mississippi rabbis. Eventually, Beth Israel did find a man to serve as their rabbi, but in 1962 when the rabbi of Ackerman's childhood synagogue, in Pensacola, Florida, suddenly quit, she agreed to return to the rabbinical role to temporarily hold that congregation together as well. Pamela Nadell, *Women Who Would Be Rabbis: A History of Women's Ordination, 1889-1985*, (Boston: Beacon Press 1998), p 120-126.

Necessary Changes in the Understanding of Judaism

Q: The women who desired an even larger scholarly role and the right of ordination were met with a reticence by the Jewish community to include them. What changes did Judaism need to make to pave the way for women to become rabbis?

The ordination question should really be put into the context of modern Jewish history. The first accommodation that Judaism needs to make is the extension of equal education to young Jewish women. The second accommodation is the admission of women to positions of communal and political leadership, and the third accommodation was the admission of women to the religious arena of the synagogue. – Dr. Ismar Schorsch

Q: What aspects of traditional synagogue ritual life stand as impediments to women rabbis?

1. mixed seating
2. aliyah (being called) to the torah
3. inclusion in the religious quorum (minyan)
4. serving as religious leaders.

The American Jewish Movements Make a Change

Q: What impact do you think American culture had on the development of American Judaism?

As the teaching profession in American public schools rapidly became feminized, Jewish women also emerged as teachers in the new Jewish schools. Historically, formal Jewish education had remained the exclusive domain of men. But over the course of the nineteenth century, American Jewish women pioneered new roles as teachers of Judaism in the Sunday schools and supplementary schools then emerging to educate the next generation of American Jews. Nadell, Pamela Susan. *Women Who Would be Rabbis*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1998, p 10.

Q: What motivated Rabbi Sally Priesand to become the first woman to be ordained as a rabbi by Reform Judaism's Hebrew Union College in 1972?

By a quirk of history, I was the first. I was in the right place at the right time – there were thirty-five men in my class and me. I didn't think about being a pioneer, and I didn't go into the rabbinate to champion women's rights. I went into the rabbinate just to be a congregational rabbi. – Rabbi Sally Priesand

Q: In 1974, Rabbi Sandy Eisenberg Sasso became the first woman ordained by the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College. What motivated her to become a rabbi?

Women have moved the tradition in new directions. I think they bring certain questions to the text, the sacred text. – Rabbi Sandy Eisenberg Sasso

The Conservative Movement Makes a Change

Jewish women had been pressing the Conservative Movement to make changes to their policies and admit women. After reading the following paragraph, what distinguished their motivation from the motivation of the Reform and Reconstructionist Movements? What had changed?

The educational institutions of the Conservative Movement have helped women recognize their intellectual, social, and spiritual potential. If the movement then denies women opportunities to demonstrate these capacities as adults, it will force them to turn from the synagogue and to find fulfillment elsewhere. "Jewish Women Call for Change," document located in the Jewish Women's Resource Center, National Council of Jewish Women, New York, NY.

In 1977, at the Rabbinical Assembly convention, the first steps toward the ordination of women in the Conservative Movement were taken.

The Commission: JTS Chancellor Gerson Cohen was mandated by a resolution from the Rabbinical Assembly to establish a commission to study the issue of women's ordination.

Be It Resolved that the Rabbinical Assembly respectfully petitions the Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America to establish an interdisciplinary commission to study all aspects of the role of women as spiritual leaders in the conservative movement.

Be It Further Resolved that this study commission, whose membership shall reflect the pluralism and diversity of the Conservative movement, shall be

responsible for a progress report on its findings to be presented to the Executive Council of The Rabbinical Assembly in the spring of 1978 and for a final report and recommendation at the 1979 convention of The Rabbinical Assembly.
"Proceedings of the Rabbinical Assembly 39," p. 139, 1977

Q: Rabbi Joel Roth mentioned three aspects of Jewish law that needed to be examined before the Conservative Movement could ordain women. What are they?

1. whether Jewish law permits granting the title of rabbi to a woman
2. whether women can render Jewish legal decisions and whether the community can accept them
3. whether the functions generally associated with a rabbi in the United States could legally be performed by women.

Q: Rabbi Amy Eilberg became the first woman Conservative rabbi in 1985. What motivated her decision to study to become a rabbi?

It was at an early age that she knew she wanted to be a rabbi. Following her instinct as an adult, she enrolled in The Graduate School at JTS knowing that sooner or later the ordination of women would be voted in. It was a quirk of circumstance that she was the one who would be in the right place at the right time.

Orthodoxy and the Developing Role of Women

Q: Orthodoxy has struggled with elevating women to official positions of leadership. What are some of the changes that have been made? What impact have they had on Orthodoxy? What are some of the impediments to change?

Rabbi Saul Berman stated that the central challenge to Judaism in modern times is the role of women because it impacts every aspect of Judaism. "It is perfectly appropriate for a woman to be a Jewish teacher, a teacher of Judaism. It is perfectly permissible for a woman to be a judge as well."

Blu Greenberg: "You can't expect things to change overnight, and I'm amazed that so much has changed within Orthodoxy in the last twenty-five years. To me, twenty-five years is the blink of an eye, as Jews count time. And it's quite remarkable to think of where we were twenty-five years ago – without a rupture within the community."

Equality of Rabbinic Roles

Q: In the Conservative Movement, women rabbis are just beginning to occupy senior positions in the largest congregations. What do you see as the impediment to this?

"This beginning will not be an easy one; we will need to draw on all of our strengths and to turn to each other for support in moments of triumph and despair. Most of all, we will depend on God to grant us the courage to face the many challenges that lie ahead."
– Rabbi Amy Eilberg 1985

We knew intuitively that there was a glass ceiling in the Conservative rabbinate. There is a process of social change taking place. That can't be dictated from above; it can be advocated, but it can't be dictated. – Dr. Ismar Schorsch

Q: The Rabbinical Assembly recently released a survey on "Gender Variation in the Careers of Conservative Rabbis." The findings of the survey focused on the differences in career paths of women and men rabbis. What do you think is responsible for the differences in career accomplishments of men and women?

To what can we attribute differences in the career accomplishments of men and women, which are both so widespread and so persistent? Scholars and other observers point to a variety of reasons for these gender gaps in prestige, rank, and compensation. Among the factors they cite most often are:

- overt and subtle patterns of **gender bias** – those in a position to nurture, advance, promote, and hire prefer male to female aspirants;
- differential **socialization** of men and women – boys and girls, and men and women evoke different reactions and expectations from their parents, teachers, friends, spouses, co-workers, and supervisors, all of which produce differential aspirations;
- differing approaches to **work-life balance** – women more than men feel responsible or are held responsible for tending to child-rearing and other domestic obligations; and
- **historical lag** – notwithstanding recent changes in hiring (or, in this case, rabbinic ordination), years of differential treatment cannot be reversed overnight. The impact of historical lag may be especially pronounced with respect to the rabbinate, where thousands of years of tradition associate rabbinical religious leadership (and, before that, priestly leadership) with men and not with women.

Enriching the Tradition

Q: The women rabbis featured in this program highlighted one aspect of the importance of women rabbis – the voices and interpretations added to Judaism. What specific domains can you mention that have benefited from women rabbis – and why?

"Judaism has become more vibrant, more creative, by virtue of the inclusion of women in the equation. You have more brain power, you have more spirit. You have more creativity at work here. But I don't think you can separate the renaissance of Jewish life that is taking place here in the United States from the admission of women into the public domain, religiously, and communally, and intellectually of the Jewish community."
– Dr. Ismar Schorsch, JTS Chancellor

"What I'm most excited about learning here at JTS is a women's place in Jewish law. This is the first time that I've ever had the chance to study women and halakhah – or really, women's absence in the Talmud." – Nicole Guzik, JTS rabbinical student

"In the past thirty years, we've seen a flowering of rituals for the birth of a baby girl for example – thinking about women's development, thinking about the religious meaning of the onset of menses and of menopause. Surely, when I first got involved in the question of what should be Jewish rituals for miscarriage and other pregnancy losses, at first I heard male rabbis much older than myself say, 'I've been in the rabbinate for decades and I never heard this question before'. I had been in the rabbinate for just a couple of years, and I heard this question a lot." – Rabbi Amy Eilberg

For Further Exploration

Visit the JTS website for more information about the celebration of the 20th Anniversary of Women's Ordination at <http://www.jtsa.edu/rabbinical/women/>

- studies and responsa on the ordination of women
- the Rabbinical Assembly study
- information about the documentary
- a timeline of the history of Jewish women
- calendar of events.

The Ordination of Women as Rabbis: Studies and Responsa, edited by Simon Greenberg, The Jewish Theological Seminary, 1988.

- contains papers written by the faculty of JTS during the years leading up to the decision to ordain women. It is a historical record of both the halakhic and emotional arguments that eventually resulted in the admission of women to The Rabbinical School.
- To purchase the book go to: <http://www.jtsa.edu/rabbinical/women/excerpts.shtml>

Other Useful Resources

Nadell, Pamela Susan. *Women Who Would Be Rabbis: A History of Women's Ordination, 1889-1985*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1998.

Jewish Women's Archives at: <http://www.jwa.org>. Active resources online on Jewish women.

The Rabbinical Assembly at: <http://www.rabbinicalassembly.org>

Maertens, Thierry 1921: *The Advancing Dignity of Woman in the Bible* De Pere, WI: St. Norbert Abbey Press, 1969.

Wessinger, Catherine Lowman. *Religious Institutions and Women's Leadership: New Roles Inside the Mainstream*. Columbia University of South Carolina Press, 1996.

Aronson, David. *Women as Rabbis: A Many-Sided Examination of All Aspects, Halakhic-Ethical-Pragmatic*. New York, NY: American Jewish Congress, 1984.

Schulman, Sydele Ruth. *Empowerment and Ordination: A Study of the First Class of Women Admitted to Rabbinical Training at The Jewish Theological Seminary*. 1992.