

Her Ambition Is to Become a Rabbi -- And a Housewife

By GEORGE VECSEY Special to The New York Times

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pg. 32

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CINCINNATI—"A rabbi is a scholar, a teacher, a preacher, a counselor, a comforter, a leader and a preserver of Judaism," said the young rabbinical student. "And most important, a rabbi is a human being."

These roles of a rabbi have been taught to Sally Priesand in her three years at Hebrew Union College.

There has probably never been a female rabbi in the history of Judaism, but on June 3, 1972, Miss Priesand will be ordained from Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, the parent rabbinical school for Reform Judaism in this country. On that date she will be legally as much a rabbi as the men in her class and the thousands of rabbis who have served their religion over the ages.

Temple Duties

This year Miss Priesand has been commuting every other weekend to Temple Beth Israel in Jackson, Mich., performing all rabbinical duties except marriages, for which a diploma is needed.

She admits people criticize her for her miniskirts, and she also admits there have been moments when she was not accepted as a potential rabbi. But the closer she comes to ordination, the more positive she sounds, refusing to dwell on the traditional patriarchal aspects of Judaism.

"In some ways I guess you could call this a defense

mechanism," said Rabbi Kenneth Roseman, the dean of the college. "But this is part of Sally's strength. This is why we're pulling for her."

Miss Priesand says she has had support ever since she set her goal in the 10th grade. She says her father, who died three years ago, always encouraged her as did her rabbi back in Fairview Park, a suburb of Cleveland.

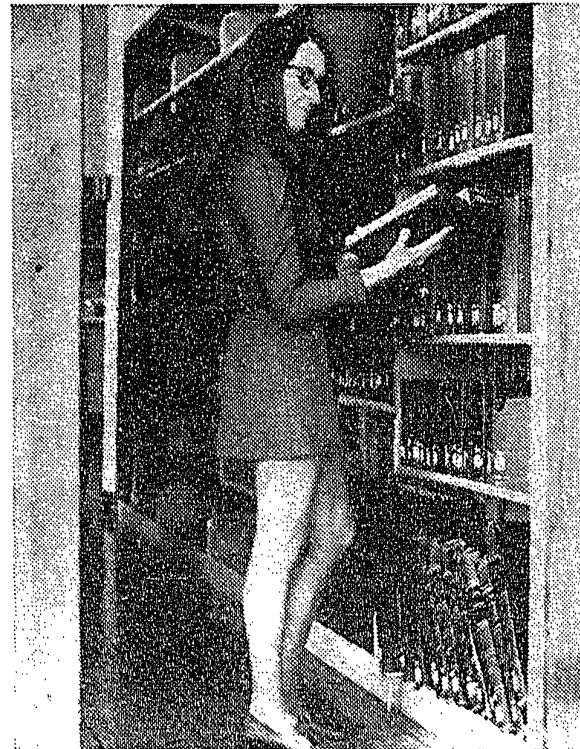
Received Encouragement

"Maybe people thought I was crazy," she said the other day. "Maybe they thought it wouldn't last. But they encouraged me."

She soon learned there was no legal reason why she could not attend rabbinical school.

"Rabbi is a Hebrew word for 'my teacher,'" said Dean Roseman. "It does not have a masculine or feminine ending. Traditionally, Jewish law prohibited women by defining the role of rabbi in such a way that it included performance of legal functions. There was also the feeling that women could not participate in services during menstruation because they were unclean.

"Reform Judaism has tried to negate the difference in sexual roles, going back to the 19th century. There was a conference in Pittsburgh in 1885, I believe, that redefined seating in the congregation, the right to conduct services, the right to initiate divorce proceedings.



The New York Times
Sally Priesand has been studying to be a rabbi

"We had women studying here back in the nineteenth-twenties. We've been committed to a female rabbi going back 30 to 50 years," Dean Roseman said.

Miss Priesand was encouraged to attend Hebrew Union by its president, Dr. Nelson Glueck, the noted

archeologist and scholar, who died two months ago.

"Dr. Glueck always told me how proud he would be to ordain me," she said.

After taking her bachelor's degree in English at the University of Cincinnati, Miss Priesand enrolled at Hebrew Union, just across the street. While there had been other

women at the school, she felt strange at first.

"Teachers would begin their lectures by saying, 'Gentlemen . . . oh, yes, and lady.' There were a few little incidents. But I didn't want to rock the boat. Now everything is fine. They even tape lectures for me when I'm out of town."

Student Leader

Dean Roseman says Miss Priesand is a "good B student and a leader in our student body" but has not been accepted as "one of the boys"—meaning the men do not seem to invite her along "when they go out for a beer."

"I'm not an active supporter of women's lib," Miss Priesand said. "I don't need it. But I do think the feminist movement is important because it is time for us to overcome psychological and emotional objections. We must fulfill our potential as creative individuals."

Miss Priesand feels it is possible for a woman to achieve all the roles defined for a rabbi. She has found some resistance, particularly from women, in three congregations she has served—and one congregation in Tennessee would not accept her at all. But the congregation in Michigan has given her full status, she says.

"I do bar mitzvahs, funerals, I preach, I lead services. At one service, I asked a woman to read from the Bible. People seemed surprised when she was called. But it was almost as if they

had forgotten that I was a woman."

Miss Priesand, while not serious about any man right now, envisions herself married with a family.

"My husband will have to work out any problems he might have about being married to a rabbi," she said. "But if he can't, then he's not the right man in the first place. He'll realize how much the rabbinate means to me. But if I married a rabbi, I'd be his assistant. I'd never serve equal to him or above him.

"And, yes, I can envision myself in my study, with the nursery in the next room. A rabbi can have children."

Potential Problem

"The rabbi has irregular hours," Dean Roseman noted. "You can be called to counsel somebody, or visit a family where death has taken place, at any hour. For a woman with a screaming kid who must be fed at certain times, this could be a problem. But she's not married yet, so that really isn't the issue now.

"I think there are still a lot of questions. Some congregations will resist this concept because they seek a male figure for a rabbi. Next year at this time, she'll have to find a congregation that will accept her as a full-time ordained rabbi. I'm sure she will. But next year will be a tense time for all of us."

"All I need," said Miss Priesand, "is one congregation. I don't think that will be so difficult."