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Report on the Ordination of Women 1956

While women had attended Hebrew Union College since its early days, none had been ordained. Throughout its history, the faculty of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion and the members of the Central Conference of American Rabbis debated the issue at various times—reflecting the reality of the status of its female students or simply reviewing the academic nature of the question. While there was one woman who was ordained as a rabbi in Europe prior to World War II—only to perish several months later in one of Hitler's death camps—HUC-JIR ordained Rabbi Sally Priesand in 1972. This decision changed the face of the rabbinate and consequently American Judaism.

*To the Central Conference of American Rabbis
Colleagues:*

This report for which you asked covers an issue which was long ago explored and resolved by this Conference. All we bring is reinforcement of the same arguments which convinced this body in 1922, or contemporary enlightenment regarding them.

The CCAR was brought into being by Isaac M. Wise in 1889. At one of the early meetings of this Conference, just three years after its creation, on July 10, 1892, the following resolution was adopted: "Whereas we have progressed beyond the idea of a secondary position of women in Jewish congregations, we recognize the importance of their hearty cooperation and active participation in congregational affairs; therefore be it resolved that women be eligible to full membership with all the privileges of voting and holding office in our congregations." This early resolution demonstrates that the CCAR began its history with the determination that men and women shall have equal status in Reform Jewish affairs.

In submitting this report on the ordination of women on an equal basis with men, sixty-four years after the aforementioned resolution was approved, this Committee is simply meeting its assignment from the 1955 Conference to reexamine the already settled subject of the religious equality of the sexes in Reform Judaism, with special reference to the unqualified acceptance of women as our colleagues in the rabbinate.

Since that 1892 resolution was passed, this question was subjected to another critical review by the Conference, a review that preceded what we present today by thirty-four years. The issue arose in the 1922 meeting of the Conference when Dr. Jacob Z. Lauterbach wrote a responsum on the question, "Shall Women be Ordained Rabbis?" Dr. Lauterbach argued the traditional orthodox position against their ordination. Among other arguments, his opinion that ordination of women might jeopardize the authoritative character of our traditional ordination ranked highly. Dr. David Neumark, rejecting Dr. Lauterbach's position, argued at this same Conference, "You cannot treat the Reform rabbinate from the Orthodox point of view. Orthodoxy is Orthodoxy and Reform is Reform. Our good relations with our Orthodox brethren may still be improved upon by a clear and decided stand on this question. They want us either to be Reform or to return to the fold of real genuine Orthodox Judaism from whence we came."

After lengthy debate, the following statement was submitted and was overwhelmingly adopted by the convention: "The ordination of woman as rabbi is a modern issue; due to the evolution in her status in our day. The Central Conference of American Rabbis has repeatedly made pronouncement urging the fullest measure of self-expression for woman, as well as the fullest utilization of her gifts to the service of the Most High, and gratefully acknowledges the enrichment and enlargement of congregational life which has resulted therefrom.

"Whatever may have been the specific legal status of Jewish woman regarding certain religious functions, her general position in Jewish religious life has ever been an exalted one. She has been the priestess in the home, and our sages have always recognized her as the preserver of Israel. In view of these Jewish teachings and in keeping with the spirit of our age and the traditions of our Conference, we declare that woman cannot justly be denied the privilege of ordination." Dr. Lauterbach, flexible and pliant in his thinking, along with young Rabbi Brickner, now President of our Conference, were among the seven men who officially signed this document as it was submitted to the 1922 convention.

In his presidential message in June 1955, Dr. Brickner wrote, "I am taking the liberty of bringing back for your consideration a question answered

long ago. The Reform movement pioneered in granting equality to women. Why should we grant women degrees only in religious education, qualifying them to be educational directors, yet denying them the prerogative to be preachers as well as teachers? They have a special spiritual and emotional fitness to be rabbis, and I believe that many women would be attracted to this calling."

Our President continued with the recommendation, subsequently accepted by last year's Conference, that a Committee be appointed to reevaluate this subject, and to present a report to this 1956 Convention. The Committee, consisting of the rabbis whose names are signed below, did indeed give this subject resolute scrutiny and study. We examined the issue in the light of the age-old traditions of our faith and in the light of the sixty-four year old traditions of this Conference. These are the facts we reviewed.

The recognition of women as of equal status with men goes back to the very beginning of the liberal movement in Judaism in Germany long before it spread to America. At the "Conference of the Rabbis of Germany" which took place in Frankfort on the Main in July, 1845, it was stated that, "one of the marked achievements of the Reform movement has been the change in the status of women. According to the Talmud and the Rabbinic Code, woman can take no part in public religious functions but," the rabbis of this convention added, "this Conference declares that woman has the same obligation as man to participate from youth up in the instruction in Judaism and in the public services, and that the custom not to include women in the number of individuals necessary for the conducting of a public service (a *minyan*) is only a custom and has no religious basis." This opinion was expressed to the Frankfort Conference by Rabbi Samuel Adler.

At the Breslau Rabbinical Conference held in July, 1846, the Conference agreed, "that woman be entitled to the same religious rights and subject to the same religious duties as man." In accordance with this principle, the rabbinic body made the following pronouncements: "That women are obliged to perform religious acts as depend upon a fixed time *שהזמן גרמא בה* in so far as such acts have significance for our religious consciousness. That the benediction *שלא עשתי אשה* which owed its origin to the belief in the inferiority of woman be abolished. That the female sex is obligated from youth up to participate in religious services and be counted for *minyan*."

It was at this Breslau Conference that Einhorn said, "It is our sacred duty to declare with all emphasis the complete religious equality of woman with man in view of the religious standpoint that we represent, according to which an equal degree of natural holiness inheres in all people the distinctions in sacred writ having therefore only relative and momentary signifi-

cance. Life, which is stronger than all theory, has already accomplished something in this respect, but much is still wanting for complete equality, and even the little that has been achieved lacks still legal sanction. It is therefore our mission to make legal declaration of the equal religious obligation and justification of woman in as far as this is possible. We have the same right to do this as had the synod under Rabbenu Gershom eight hundred years ago, which passed new religious decrees in favor of the female sex."

The denial to women of equal status with man in the performance of religious duties, obligations, and functions is clearly a survival of the oriental conception of woman's inferiority. To condemn woman to the role of a silent spectator, an auditor, in the synagogue while granting her an important voice in the home is illogical and unnatural in an occidental society; it is incongruous with the customs, standards and ideals of our age. It is true that in Orthodox Judaism the oriental conception of woman's inferiority is codified in the *Shulhan Aruch*, but Reform Judaism has long maintained that these paragraphs do not express its liberal view. The emancipation of woman applies to life within the synagogue as well as to life outside the synagogue.

In view of woman's parity with man, we believe that the unwarranted and outmoded tradition of reducing woman to an inferior status with regard to ordination for the rabbinate be abandoned. Specifically, we believe that she should be given the right to study for the rabbinate, that she should be ordained if and when she has properly completed the course of study, and that she should then be admitted into the CCAR upon application for membership.

The question before us is purely academic at this time. We have no particular case in point. We are drawing a general pattern, not a specific tracing. We are establishing a principle which may be applied as the need arises in the future. We believe that the time has long since passed when a person's sex should constitute a bar to self-expression in any area of human endeavor. The only proper passport to participation in any profession is adequate training and proven capability, regardless of sex. During the last few centuries, the position of women has undergone an enormous revolution. At long last, we must remove the final barrier in her way to becoming a teacher in Israel, a rabbi, of an equal status with men.

This attitude reflects the unaltered conviction of this Conference. It has been the consistent judgement of this body, with each reopening of the subject, for it is in harmony with the high esteem and respect in which women of virtue and valor have always been held in Israel. The opposing viewpoint that would limit woman's activity to a separate and segregated area of expression was refuted and rejected by rabbis generations ago. Furthermore, the

religious equality of women with men can be assumed as universally confessed in all liberal denominations. A number of Protestant Christian denominations such as the Unitarians, the Universalists, the Presbyterians and others have already taken the step to ordain qualified women as ministers. We are not among the first liberal religionists to take this step.

As members of the CCAR, we are in two areas, that of traditional attachment and that of liberal influence. We hear the hour strike on both clocks. We know both arguments. But assuming that we wish to extend the horizons of our faith, we should proceed to remove from woman the degradation of segregation. As liberal rabbis who are concerned with the refinement of Jewish practices, and who are sensitive to the currents of today's thinking, we can reach no other decision about the ordination of women. A modern rabbi with discerning eyes and sensitive conscience must, we believe, support these contentions.

Therefore, this Committee recommends to this Conference that it endorse the admission into the HUC-JIR of educationally and spiritually qualified female rabbinical students. We further recommend that, when a woman shall have satisfactorily completed the course of study leading to ordination as rabbi, as prescribed by the faculty, the CCAR shall endorse her ordination as a rabbi in Israel. Lastly, we recommend that the CCAR welcome into its ranks any woman who has been ordained as a rabbi, who may apply for membership into this professional association.

Respectfully submitted,
 Joseph L. Fink, *Chairman*
 Louis Binstock
 Beryl D. Cohon
 Maurice N. Eisendrath
 Alfred L. Friedman
 Nelson Glueck
 James G. Heller
 Ferdinand Isserman

The report was discussed and a motion was passed to table action so that those who have an opposite point of view may have an opportunity to present a report.