

(The) Sisterhood is Powerful:

Remarks by Rabbi Rachel M. Isaacs upon the Inauguration of the Dorothy “Bibby” Levine Alford Professorship in Jewish Studies.

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In October of 1957, the Beth Israel Congregation sisterhood met to discuss issues that ranged from the pedestrian to the controversial. After a vigorous conversation on the value of having a gossip column in the synagogue newsletter, the women of the sisterhood turned to their attention to an issue that was as salacious as it was fantastical: the possibility of women rabbis. Even though the Reform movement had ordained one woman, Regina Jonas, in Germany before the Holocaust, she had perished with her congregation in the concentration camps, and was largely forgotten by the mainstream Jewish world for many decades to come. But on this day in October of 1957, the sisterhood leaders of Beth Israel Congregation discussed the issue in Waterville, Maine.

According to synagogue records, “Mrs. George Chesner introduced Rabbi Steinberg who was the speaker of the evening. His topic - ‘Women Rabbis’.” Sisterhood secretary Esther Paikowsky recorded his remarks: “Rabbi Steinberg is definitely opposed to women following this

profession. One reason being that there would not be a 'Rebbetzin (a rabbi's wife), and since a 'Rebbetzin' has functional duties in a congregation, it would not do to have the husband perform these duties.

Another objection is who would raise the family and care for the home, certainly a man cannot do that. Therefore a man in his prayers every morning thanks God that he was not born in the image of a woman."

"Another reason of objection," he explained, "is that with an attractive woman in the pulpit, men will not concentrate on prayers, but will have their minds elsewhere." He further claimed, "The Rabbis of old feel that women could not concentrate and are incapable, and therefore are relieved, of rabbinical aspirations." Rabbi Steinberg, however, "feels that women have as good minds as men, but it is much more necessary to have them as 'Rebitzens.'"

At that point, even though the sisterhood notes may appear to some as dry historical record, the attentive reader can physically sense Esther Paikowsky's palpable disdain for the rabbi's remarks. With one pithy sentence, she expressed an opinion that was probably percolating among some of the other women in the room: "If I may interject my own opinions

right here, I would like to say that the laws were written by men and were made to suit their own best interests.” Mrs. Paikowsky’s comments were not only entertaining, but also illustrated that she anticipated seismic changes to come in the American Jewish community.

Hundreds of miles away from the epicenters of American Jewish life, largely forgotten and ignored because of their small numbers, limited resources, and isolated location, the sisterhood, Hadassah, and Theodore Levine Bnai Brith chapters at Beth Israel Congregation were nonetheless part of larger historical trends in American Jewish life. These women, like women across the United States, served as the lifeblood and guardians of American Jewish life, and grappled with some of the most controversial topics of the past century; participating in debates that have concomitantly defined the contours of the American Jewish landscape, and fractured the larger Jewish world even until today.

Though there were three women’s organizations based at Beth Israel, the most dominant force of the three was the sisterhood. While Hadassah may have tended to the practical needs of mandatory Palestine and Israel, and Bnai Brith to serving the on-the-ground needs of Jewish college

students around the world through the creation of Hillel International, it was the sisterhood that maintained synagogue life locally and nationally.

Sisterhoods were the backbone of synagogues throughout the US in the mid-20th century. They played a unique role in the life of the Jewish woman at the time, simultaneously providing her with leadership roles and stature, while also reinforcing her unique, womanly, domestically-oriented responsibility for Jewish continuity. Scholar Beth Wenger explains this complex dynamic:

As volunteers and clubwomen, Jewish women fulfilled the traditional duties of "women of valor" by dedicating themselves to the betterment of their families and communities... Volunteer work, initially designed for women's selfless activities, allowed women to acquire a sense of selfhood and gender consciousness while sharpening leadership and organizational skills. Jewish women who began as behind-the-scenes workers gradually emerged as public agents. Behind the myth of self-sacrificing female benevolence existed a quietly radical redefinition of behavioral norms for Jewish women. Without overtly challenging inveterate notions of Jewish womanhood, Jewish clubwomen assumed new roles and responsibilities within the Jewish community.¹

On one hand, the sisterhood provided a public stage for Jewish women to exercise leadership, but consequently, the synagogue became viewed an

¹ Wenger, Beth S. "Jewish Women and Voluntarism: Beyond the Myth of Enablers." *American Jewish History*, Vol. 79, No. 1 (Autumn 1989), pp. 16-36: 16-17

extension of Jewish domesticity. Whether in the home of the atomic family or in the home-writ-large of the synagogue, the Jewish woman was expected to be the guardian of Jewish religiosity and cultural transmission. The success or failure of the Jewish community to resist assimilation, or at the very least mitigate and manage its effects on the family and community, clearly fell on the shoulders of Jewish women. Wenger describes this how this dynamic presented opportunities and unique pressures for women in the Jewish community:

Fears about assimilation and the loss of Jewish identity were most clearly expressed through references to home and family. As guardians of religiosity, women assumed primary responsibility for the health or deterioration of the Jewish home. ... The metaphor of the home became a centerpiece in both the defense and condemnation of women's involvement in public affairs. The home symbolized "proper" Jewish womanhood and stood as another code-word for the negotiation of gender roles.²

The sisterhoods' responsibility for food-preparation, synagogue maintenance, and Hebrew schools crystallized and reinforced the link between Jewish womanhood and domesticity. On the other hand, the deep responsibility for the physical, cultural, and religious reproduction of the Jewish community allowed for novel expressions of leadership, especially

² Beth S. Wenger. "Jewish Women and Voluntarism: Beyond the Myth of Enablers." 32

in a Jewish context. Paula Hyman writes, “... [Jewish women] embraced the responsibility of cultural transmission and of maintaining the boundaries inherent in the project of assimilation. In other words, the increased identification of Jewishness and femaleness that induced anxiety among Jewish men enabled Jewish women to lay claim to new public roles.”³

By the mid-20th century, the *tachlis*, or the day-to-day functioning of synagogues and Hebrew schools across the country, was the public and shared responsibility of Jewish women. Most were high school or college educated, middle-class, and had the skills, time, and dedication to maintain the Jewish community free of traditional, financial cost. However, the heyday of synagogue sisterhoods and women’s clubs encountered some of its greatest challenges starting in the 1960s and into the 1970s. Two competing modes of women’s empowerment emerged -- on one side the powerhouse women of Hadassah and synagogue sisterhoods who had established themselves for decades in the Jewish institutional world, and on the other side, the feminist movement led by women whose names

³ Hyman, Paula E. *Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History: The Roles and Representation of Women*. University of Washington Press. Seattle. 1995: 161

became as famous as they are identifiably Jewish: Betty Friedan, Shulamit Firestone, Gloria Steinem, and Steinem's close friend, the woman who came to be known as the "Notorious RBG," Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg – all of whom were to be followed by even more radical leaders in the GLBT liberation movement like Leslie Fienberg, Kate Bornstein, and Judith Butler.

Many of these women had tenuous, if not negative associations with Judaism, in large part due to the patriarchy and sexism found in traditional Judaism. Betty Friedan famously declared in 1970, "Down through the generations in history, my ancestors prayed, 'I thank Thee, Lord, I was not created a woman. From this day forward, I trust women all over the world will be able to say, 'I thank Thee, Lord, I *was* created a woman'.'" Even those women who did not feel as aggrieved by traditional Judaism as Friedan had conflicted feelings about their considerable unpaid labor to the Jewish community. June Sochen describes the dilemma,

Since the middle 1960s, Jewish American women... read feminist writings that question volunteerism, laud personal satisfaction, and challenge the family structure. As both leaders and followers in the women's movement, Jewish women have had to come to terms with the meaning and relationship of feminism to Judaism and their

personal philosophy of life. Few had questioned the importance of volunteer activities; few had considered their communal work non-paid, or exploited, labor.... [But] As well-educated members of the Jewish American community, women were sensitive to the new message. Those who defended their wifely/motherly/volunteer life found the exploration and the defense to be an energizing, positive experience. Those who accepted the new feminism and rejected the traditional female roles often sought personal rewards in new occupations and professions.⁴

Jewish women questioned whether they were fulfilling responsibilities and doing mitzvahs or being specifically exploited as women for their labor.

Moreover, the “right” feminist choice was not immediately evident.

Sochen explains “...feminist rhetoric has sometimes been confusing. While feminists criticized American society for ignoring its women volunteers, women were told to demand salaries for their homemaking work.

Capitalism, the profit system, and competition were denigrated by the same feminists who told women that their volunteer work symbolized their low self-image. Were women fools not to demand salaries for their volunteer activities? Were they hiding in community affairs rather than face the competitive job world?”⁵

⁴ Sochen, June. *Consecrate Every Day: The Public Lives of Jewish American Women, 1880-1980*. Albany, NY, USA: State University of New York Press, 1981: 76

⁵ June Sochen. *Consecrate Every Day: The Public Lives of Jewish American Women, 1880-1980*: 78

As women became more empowered in the Jewish political and organizational sphere, as well as in secular contexts, their traditional disempowerment and exclusion in the religious sphere became all the more glaring. On the question of equality in the religious sphere, Jewish women's attitudes varied, often by age and denomination. Starting in the 1930s, the sisterhoods of the Reform movement came out strongly in favor of full equality for women in all elements of religious life.⁶ Nonetheless, it still took another forty years until the first woman was ordained in the American Reform Movement in 1972.

The Conservative Movement's history, true to form, was more complicated. Anne Lapidus Lerner, a historian of gender in the Conservative movement, explains that the sisterhood movement was always conflicted about embracing feminism and the advancement of women within the religious sphere. Sisterhood leadership was concerned about the impression that supporting women's ordination would feminize, and consequently threaten, the future of Conservative Judaism. In 1970, the president of the Women's League for Conservative Judaism, Evelyn

⁶ Paula E. Hyman. *Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History: The Roles and Representation of Women*. 165

Henkind, tried to downplay the threat of women's leadership in the movement by saying, "...[there is] no danger of feminizing religious life because women are not asking to take on traditional religious roles of the male—nor are they trying to become rabbis. Most of our work has to do with educating the Jewish woman to continue the Jewish traditions in the home—as a mother and wife, in addition to being responsive to issues in the community and in the world.”⁷

However, by the time Selma Rapaport, Henkind's replacement, assumed leadership of the organization, views had already changed. The young women who were pushing for ordination were not viewed as an external threat to the Conservative movement but rather, she stated, were "...reared in our Conservative congregations, graduates of our religious schools, products of our Ramah Camps, our LTF [Leaders Training Fellowship], our USY, some of them enrolled for studies at our Jewish Theological Seminary.”⁸ Eventually, the Women's League came to be supporters of their younger sisters' striving for leadership in the religious

⁷ Lerner, Anne Lapidus. "Who Hast Not Made Me a Man": The Movement for Equal Rights for Women in American Jewry." *The American Jewish Year Book*, Vol. 77 (1977), pp. 3-38 : 26

⁸ Anne Lapidus Lerner. "Who Hast Not Made Me a Man": The Movement for Equal Rights for Women in American Jewry." 27

realm, and women's ordination became a reality in 1983, the year of my birth.

On a more local level, the expression of feminism at Beth Israel Congregation was far less dramatic and fraught, and in a respect, far more humorous. According to synagogue legend, the first woman to receive an *aliyah* (Torah blessing) at Beth Israel Congregation was Myrt Wolman, simply because there weren't enough men to say the seven blessings during the Torah service. At one Shabbat in the 1980s, Sam Shapiro, a man few would describe as Maine's most prominent feminist, but a Jew with a strong sense of justice and equality, who confronts realities for what they are, gruffly approached Myrt and said, "You've got the next one." And that is how Beth Israel became an egalitarian congregation.

However, just as on the national scale, the women's groups of Beth Israel Congregation were the ones who always got things done. They funded and ran the Hebrew school, planned all of the parties and successful fundraisers, built the kitchen and maintained its *kashrut*, and at times, even extended loans to the synagogue when the larger community needed funds. One of the only committees that they did not lead was the

building committee, and the synagogue suffers for that absence even until today. There are only two rooms that the building committee forgot to insulate in the 1950s, the kitchen and the bathrooms – a mistake that probably would have never happened if the sisterhood had been in charge. Every time we shiver while frying latkes for the Chanukkah party, we rue the absence of sharp minds and strong wills like that of Giselle Miller, Myrt Wolman, Phyllis Shiro, Myra Sterns, Bibby Alford, Paul Lunder, and others in that planning process, even over sixty years later.

Also in line with national trends was the palpable and visible impact that the feminist movement had on the synagogue. As women chose to devote their talents and energies to the workforce instead of serving as the workhorses of religious and community organizations in Waterville, there was no longer the same pool of committed women to carry these groups and actualize their missions. Additionally, instead of exercising their leadership in sex-segregated groups, women came to join the synagogue board, serving as presidents, treasurers, secretaries, and in all of the positions previously reserved exclusively for men. We have come a long way from Rabbi Steinberg's warnings about the dangers of women's

religious leadership, but many of the struggles -- like the burden of Jewish cultural transmission being placed primarily on the shoulders of women -- and the successes -- like the centrality of women's leadership in sustaining Jewish homes, synagogues, and institutions -- remain the same.

Even though it is easy to look back at the past judgmentally, we must not allow ourselves to be guilty of a sin that the famed Mizrahi Jewish political theorist Seyla Benhabib calls "presentism." Presentism is the practice of judging the past according to the standards of the present, and in the process, eschewing the invaluable wisdom of our forbearers. It is a practice that is haughty as it is foolish, and all too common in a world that fetishizes the novel at the expense of traditions hewn and refined over millennia. Much has changed since that sisterhood meeting in 1957, held in a fresh, modern building on Waterville's Main Street, whose cornerstone was laid by none other than Harold Alfond.

It was probably inconceivable to the powerhouse women of Beth Israel that in 2015 the congregation would still be a thriving, Conservative community, but with a membership of primarily intermarried families. The kitchen has remained kosher, and the traditional standards of Shabbat

observance are still begrudgingly upheld, but mostly through the stubborn insistence of the community's now-pregnant rabbi and her wife. What has not changed, however, is that the women are pretty much still in charge, doing the hard work to make sure it all still happens. There were two Jewish women who did most of the heavy lifting to bring and keep me in Waterville: Colby's Provost, Dr. Lori Kletzer, and Beth Israel President, Tiffany Lopes. While men do still serve on Beth Israel's board, when it is time to decorate for Chanukkah, set up Shabbat *oneg*, or make sure that the bills get paid on time, there remains a steadfast cadre of women who make sure the lights stay on, the children learn, and most importantly, everyone is fed.

The role of women in the Jewish community of Waterville is at once radically different than it was in the mid-20th century, but also has remained quite similar. Judaism has always survived by being able to balance a commitment to tradition and the flexibility to adapt to changing times and new locations. That same measured balance characterizes the role of women within the Jewish community. Since the rabbinic era and the advent of matrilineal descent, our community has entrusted women

with the most vital elements of cultural and religious transmission of identity. Women's roles have evolved over time and differed based on geographical location, but have always been a central part of the thousands-year old drama of the Jewish people.

We are here today because of the contributions and commitments of one matriarch in particular, Dorothy "Bibby" Levine Alfond. Over the past few months, I have been part of a process to learn about who this woman was, and the role she played in the Levine-Alfond-Lunder family and Beth Israel Congregation. What became clear quickly was the role she played as the Jewish soul of her family, insisting upon the Jewish education of her Jewish children and grandchildren in the synagogue of her youth. She was a leader in the synagogue's Bnai Brith chapter that was named after her brother, Theodore Levine, who died tragically and prematurely. She kept his name and legacy alive through her philanthropy and attendance to the needs of the Jewish people. She offered the Alfond family camp for yearly Beth Israel fundraisers, and along with Paula Lunder, arranged the annual Bnai Brith-Hadassah art auctions that funded the basic needs of the synagogue.

But the most compelling element of her legacy, and I would argue the most fundamentally Jewish, was her commitment to Waterville. We learn from Maimonides that of all of the mitzvot, *tzedakah* -- the achievement of justice through the sharing of our riches -- is the most important in all of Jewish civilization. Moreover, according our sage, not all forms of *tzedakah* are of equal value. The highest forms of *tzedakah* are those given to those physically closest to us -- first the individuals in our families, then in our local Jewish communities, then in our own cities, and only then, the greater world. The greatest gifts we give are to those to whom we are most intimately responsible. Bibby was a woman who put family and community first, and through leadership that was simultaneously quiet and resolute, instilled those values into her family.

Even though I never knew Bibby personally, I am proud to keep her legacy alive by adopting her name as part of my own through this new position. When I was born, I was named after my great aunt Rose, the first woman in my family to graduate from college. When I was ordained, I took on the title of Rabbi, carrying on a tradition of commitment to Jewish education and action. Today, I am joining a group of people who keep

Bibby's memory alive through the actualization of her most deeply held values -- family, faith, and community. *Zichrona tzadikah L'vracha*, may her righteous memory be for a blessing.