# Women and World Religions

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20. AJA, Nearprint Files; Mrs. Abram Simon, "Four Presidents on the N.F.T.S. Silver Jubilee," *Topics and Trends* 4, no. 1 (Jan.–Feb. 1938): 3.
21. AJA, MS #267, 1/3, Abram Simon Collection, Sermons and Addresses O–Y, Untitled, "What Can the Women Do for Judaism?" p. 6. It is exceedingly unlikely that this typed, unsigned, undated sermon was given by Rabbi Abram Simon. In several places (p. 5), it speaks of "us women," "our husbands," and "we women." In addition, a handwritten addition at the end seems to correspond with a sample of Carrie Simon's handwriting located in the archives of the Washington Hebrew Congregation, Washington, D.C. Consequently, we are attributing its authorship to Carrie Simon and would suggest that this may have been a text she used when she spoke from the pulpit on behalf of NFTS. See *Washington Star*, 21 Nov. 1913, p. 1, which reported that she spoke from the pulpit of Temple Israel in Boston on "the call of the Sisterhood"; and her biographical sketch in *Who's Who in American Jewry* (New York: Jewish Biographical Bureau, 1926), which claims that she "spoke in many pulpits throughout the country in the interest and advancement of Jewish womanhood."
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25. William H. Chafe, *The Paradox of Change: American Women in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 5, 9–10, 35–36.
26. *The Evening Star* (Washington, D.C.), 9 Oct. 1920, 4.
27. When, in 1922, Reform rabbis debated the question of women's ordination, they voted to allow their wives to join in the debate ("Resolution on Ordination of Women," *Central Conference of American Rabbis Year Book* 32 [1922]: 51).
28. Women of Reform Judaism, *Index of Resolutions: Adopted by the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods, 1913–1985* (New York: Women of Reform Judaism, 1988).
29. Cited in Wenger, "Jewish Women of the Club," p. 327.
30. AJA, National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods, Box 73, 5/3, "Resolutions at the 23rd Biennial, 1961," p.6.
31. In 1972 Sally Priesand became the first woman in America to be ordained a rabbi.

# Personal Vignettes

## *Susan Grossman*
## *Rivka Haut*

### Growing Up Lubavitch:
### Shoshana Gelerenter-Liebowitz

When I was very young I loved to go to *shul* with my father. One of the many privileges I enjoyed as the oldest child was having my father to myself on our long walks to and from 770 (the headquarters and main synagogue of the Lubavitch Movement). My parents came from Poland and became Lubavitch when they arrived in the United States. I am therefore a first generation American and Lubavitcher.

On our walks to and from *shul* my father spoke to me quite freely of his parents who had died in the Holocaust. In Hrubishov, Poland, his mother was the *foreleiner* in *shul*. She was the woman who was able to read the prayers. She would say the prayers, word for word, and the other women would recite right after her. This meant my grandmother was a literate woman, which was atypical, as most women could not read or understand Hebrew. My father would talk about his mother with great pride.

When I was little, I was allowed to enter the men's section with my father. Some other fathers brought in girls older than myself. When a little girl looked a little too old to be in the men's section, around ten years old, the men would become very agitated. Sometimes someone would say something to admonish he, and the big little girl would understand that she was too old to be with the men. Nobody had to explain why girls can not sit with their fathers in *shul* past age ten or why boys and girls don't pray together. Boys and girls don't do anything together. Nobody questions this. The separation of the sexes is accepted throughout the society. Boys and girls are never together. During my childhood, if a girl played with boys outside of *shul* she was called a *Hamor eizel*, a donkey. It was very frowned upon.

I don't remember ever feeling upset that I couldn't pray with the men anymore. The men's section was not a pleasant place in which to pray. It didn't feel peaceful because it was always crowded and hot and there was no room to sit.

From Susan Grossman and Rivka Haut, eds. 1992. *Daughters of the King: Women and the Synagogue: A Survey of History, Halakhah, and Contemporary Realities*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society. Reprinted with permission from the Jewish Publication Society.

Lubavitch women don't ever feel secondary or deprived. Their lives are as busy as the men's. There is always so much activity. An equal responsibility for performing *mitzvot* rests with with the males and females. All children are soldiers in *HaShem*'s army. The boys encourage nonobservant men to wear *tefillin;* the girls ask women to light candles: equal roles.

When girls start lighting candles on Friday nights, at three years old, their womanhood really begins. They light and their brothers don't. Candlelighting is stressed very much. Although little boys at age three get their first haircut, receive their first set of *tzitzit* (ritual fringes), and begin to always wear a *yarmulke* (skullcap), the *mitzvot* of *tallit* and *tefillin* only begin at a later developmental stage for boys. Girls do not feel at all like second-class citizens; little girls do not envy boys because there are *mitzvot* for both to observe.

Mothers don't usually go to *shul* on Friday night because they are home with their children. (*Editor's note: Observant Jews do not carry or wheel baby carriages outside on the Sabbath.*) My mother had her children closely spaced so she couldn't go to *shul,* but she davened at home every Shabbes. As I started to learn *tefillos* (prayers) in school, I began to daven at home every Shabbes morning and on Friday nights. My mother would say to my sisters and me, "Let's daven *Kabbalas Shabbes*" (the Friday evening prayers) and we would do so together. As we got older, each of my sisters would take a *siddur* and daven separately, though at the same time.

During the week, I had to say the beginning prayers before I came to breakfast. The rest of the morning prayers were recited in school. On days when there was no school, I was expected to complete the prayers at home after breakfast. My mother would remind me to daven, the same way she would remind me to get dressed in the morning. This was a normal part of the day's routine. At one point, I went through a little phase of davening *Minhah* and *Ma'ariv* (afternoon and evening prayers) of my own volition, and my parents were very pleased. They viewed it as a sort of charming thing. I remember when any of us exceeded their spiritual expectations of us, my parents smiled and my father was very proud of his daughters.

In my family, and, I think, in all Lubavitch families, women's prayers are taken very seriously. The power of a woman's prayers was often stressed as being the most valuable to God when granting blessings of help and health.

Every Shabbes my mother said all of *Tehillim* (Psalms), and she added specific verses to her daily prayers. My mother used to do this as a European custom, but now everyone does this. When someone is sick, there is a lot of focus on praying and saying *Tehillim.* I remember in my girls' school they would often announce on the loudspeaker that so and so, the daughter or son of so and so, is sick, and the children should have *kavannah* (intention) to pray for a *refuah sheleimah* (complete recovery). Girls were repeatedly told



that their prayers are very important and that good things happen because of the *zekhut* (merit) of women.

Teenage girls go to *shul* on Friday night. Partly they go to *shul* to daven and partly for the social ambiance. They don't say "I am going to *shul.*" They say "I am going to 770." All their friends go to *shul.* They don't talk in *shul,* but once they leave *shul,* they chitchat. There is no mingling between the sexes. The men stand on their side, and the woman on their side, socializing after *shul.* The women start walking, and their husbands usually catch up to them.

On *Yom Tov* (holiday), when baby carriages may be wheeled to *shul,* there is a noticeable increase in the number of women and children present. An entire area outside the *shul* is filled with women, with prayer books or *Tehillim* in their hands, rocking their baby carriages and praying at the same time.

Most married women also go to *shul.* However, some women don't go to 770 because they find that the social aspect of getting dressed, putting on their *sheitels* (the wigs that married women wear), and seeing and talking to friends might be a distraction to their *kavannah* (intention in prayer). Lubavitchers, compared to other kinds of Jews, however, do not dress up to a point that might be considered vain. Social standards are quite subtle though, for vanity can often be a woman's Achilles' heel when it comes to her observance of *mitzvot.*

Part of the focal point of going to 770 is really to see "The Rebbe." That is special in Lubavitch life. The people want to get a glimpse of "The Rebbe." Women daven quietly because, if there is any noise, they can't hear the Torah reading or the *ba'al tefillah* (prayer leader). It is a gigantic place, 770. The downstairs (men's) section is very large. The women's section is built over it. There is a dark-tinted glass partition. The women can see through, but the men can't see in. The window opening is chest high, so women have to bend their heads in order to see down. There are only a limited number of seats in the front row, the only row from which one can see. Usually the young girls come early and get those front seats. When older women see this monopolization, they sometimes fight over seats, because everyone wants the privilege of seeing "The Rebbe."

In *shul,* the women never sing aloud. They only whisper "amen" and the sections that the entire congregation chants aloud. If hundreds of women started to say "Amen," in unison, nobody would hear what was going on. Also, in terms of *tzniut* (modesty) this would be inappropriate. However, in school, when the girls daven, they do daven out loud. They are led by a *hazzanit* (prayer leader). There is no Torah reading. Also, women never sing *zemiros* (Sabbath songs) out loud at home. However, Lubavitch has a girls' choir that sings only for women. They put on plays, always with a Lubavitch theme, such as celebrating the previous Rebbe's release from prison.

Women are supposed to go to *shul* to hear the *shofar* blown on Rosh Hashanah and to hear the *Megillah* read on Purim. They go to the little *shuls* for that. There are many small synagogues in Crown Heights, which serve many kinds of Jews. Now Lubavitchers are the only Jews in the area, and they do their best to maintain these *shteiblakh* (small *shuls*).

Women's responsibility to participate in all the *mitzvot* that are possible is taken very seriously by the women themselves and by the men. If a woman cannot get to *shul*, someone will come to her home to blow the *shofar* or read the *Megillah* for her. If anyone is in the hospital, arrangements will be made for her. Sometimes her husband will do it, or, if he cannot, someone else will.

Women never say *Kaddish*. If there is no male relative, then someone else is given that responsibility. Women do participate in many fund-raising activities for the synagogue and many charities.

"The Rebbe" is a role model for both men and women. There are special *farbrengen* (gatherings to hear "The Rebbe" teach) for women several times a year. "The Rebbe's" wife was a mysterious figure in Crown Heights. It is rather unusual that the rebbetzin of the community was so anonymous. Nobody knew anything about her. She did not have a special place in the *shul* where everyone davens (770) but stayed in a private room in the building.

"The Rebbe" is a transcendental figure, very elevated and spiritually capable of guiding his followers in their personal decisions. Men and women share a respectful reverence toward him. Women and men share a desire to be in "The Rebbe's" presence, often pushing themselves to their physical limits to stay up at *farbrengens* until the early hours of the morning. He activates everybody. Women and men basically have the same role in their relationship to him....

*Since 1972, when Sally Priesand became the first woman rabbi to be officially ordained, increasing numbers of women have entered the rabbinate and the cantorate. Despite the official endorsement by their movements, women who seek to enter these professions still experience difficulties. As Rabbi Emily Korzenick and Cantor Nancy Hausman show, congregants are often slow to accept women in roles traditionally reserved for men.*

*Hausman discusses the process by which women achieve professional equality: by dispelling male fears that the feminization of their profession would lower its status and by persisting in their efforts at communal acceptance. Hausman illustrates that discrimination often dissipates as congregants grow accustomed to women as leaders in the synagogue.*

*Korzenick details how women bring to the rabbinate special nurturing skills often acquired in their roles as mothers and wives. She is one of a growing number of rabbis who seek to re-establish the home as a focus of religious life. While in the Orthodox community religion was always centered both in the home and the synagogue, during the past century, non-Orthodox synagogues have supplanted the home as the loci for Jewish observance. The inclusion of women in the rabbinate has facilitated the process of integrating home and synagogue.*



## On Being a Rabbi:
## Emily Faust Korzenik

I am one of the oldest women to become a rabbi in the United States, a fact that has significant implications for the way I have perceived my role in this profession. I took my own four children through *Bar* and *Bat Mitzvah* ceremonies, and then had my own *Bat Mitzvah*, before I began to guide other families through that meaningful rite of passage. Most often, I guide mothers who, whether they work or not, usually bear the major responsibility for supervising their child's *Bar* or *Bat Mitzvah* preparation and for arranging the festive celebration.

Being older than most new rabbis also means that I had confronted the death of a loved one, a parent, before I began trying to assist others in the most painful hours of their lives. It also means that I graduated college and began my life as a wife and mother at a time when most middle-class women saw their primary function as serving their families.

Nurturing is good preparation for the rabbinate. For example, I enjoy inviting members of my congregation to my home for Shabbat dinner. I cook the meal as well as prepare a talk on a Jewish theme. This spring I invited my college bound youngsters for a Shabbat dinner and asked them to bring their college catalogues so that together we could look over the Jewish Studies courses available to them. Every Sukkot my very helpful and encouraging husband and some grown children build a *sukkah* in our yard, to which I invite some of the young couples I have married. They are beginning to come with their little ones. Passover is madness for me. I prepare and cook for my own big *seder* at home, and on the second evening I conduct my congregation's community *seder*. It is exhausting but I love it.

Coming to a rabbinical career as an older person and as a woman also means that I am not lonesome. Rabbinical colleagues, notably men, speak about the difficulty of making close friends, of being set apart, of having a religious and public role that complicates intimacy. Long before I became a rabbi, I had formed my cadre of close friends. Now I marry their children and can bring some special comfort, I believe, at sad times. I am first of all their friend, and, as a result, I intuitively approach my congregants as a friend who has a particular role. My way of being a rabbi has been shaped as much by my life as a wife and mother, a high school history teacher, and a social and political activist, as by rabbinical study and preparation itself.

People often ask me if I experience discrimination as a rabbi because I am a woman. From its inception, the Reconstructionist Movement accepted

women as peers. Mordecai Kaplan performed the first *Bat Mitzvah* ceremony for his daughter in 1922. There was never any question about the role of women in the Reconstructionist congregation in White Plains, N.Y. to which my husband and I have belonged for thirty years. I read from the Torah, chanted the *haftarah* portion, was president of the synagogue, and even chairperson of the ritual committee. I was just one of many studious, participating women. That was the milieu within which I began to form my desire to become a rabbi. It was a milieu that made discrimination against women elsewhere in the Jewish religious world seem incomprehensible and, therefore, something to be overcome.

There have been disquieting moments, of course. A young woman doctor asked me to officiate at her wedding, and then she discovered her Israeli fiancé and his family would not be comfortable with a woman rabbi. She asked if I would co-officiate with a man. I replied that if I was not rabbi enough to perform the ceremony, I preferred not to participate. She wanted to satisfy her fiancé but she meant to be kind. Didn't I understand that the "social customs" were different in Israel? I did not remind her that "social customs" had kept women from becoming doctors until not long before her own entry into that profession.

The most egregious example of discourtesy toward women in the synagogue that I experienced took place in Poland. In September of 1985, I participated in a Shabbat morning service in Cracow with a *Bar Mitzvah* boy and his family who are members of my congregation in Stamford, Connecticut. A gentleman, whose daughter I had married the year before, returned from a United Jewish Appeal-Federation mission to Poland and Israel with a request from a leader of the remnant of elderly Jews in Cracow. When the American visitors had asked what they could do to help, Maria Jakabowicz said, "Bring us some life. Bring us some youth. Bring us a *Bar Mitzvah*." One of my *Bar Mitzvah* students, his family, and I immediately responded to the request. I also invited a wonderful, traditional Jewish man, a survivor of Auschwitz, to come with us to daven *Shaharit*, as I was sensitive from the first to the probable preferences of the elderly Jews in Cracow; however, I did plan to participate in the service.

In Cracow, I stood upon the *bimah*, *tallit* in hand, to be with the *Bar Mitzvah* boy when he chanted his beautiful *haftarah* portion from Isaiah. I offered a brief commentary, despite the actions of an American rabbi, who pulled my *tallit* from me and attempted to prevent me from speaking.

The experience in the synagogue was not painful because the congregation's sympathy was with us. We had succeeded in bringing some joy to these old people who had suffered so much. We had fulfilled their request. We had handled ourselves with dignity and restraint. It was a triumphant day, the rabbi who had challenged me notwithstanding.

However, it was sad, so very sad, to know that leaders of the Orthodox community at home in the States had, in fact, asked the Jews of Cracow to rescind their invitation to us because, as non-Orthodox Jews, our use of the fifteenth-century Remu Synagogue would have been a desecration in their eyes. The Jews of Cracow responded by arranging to have the *Bar Mitzvah* held in the Templum, a nineteenth-century non-Orthodox synagogue. The day following the Sabbath ceremony, Ed Blonder, the survivor who had led the morning *Shaharit* service and chanted the Torah portion, took us through Auschwitz. The torturers and murderers of over three million Polish Jews had not differentiated between the Orthodox and the non-Orthodox. I remembered stinging words from a Sholem Aleichem story, "You know how we Jews are, if the world does not pinch us, we pinch each other."



I cannot, however, end on so sorrowful a note. It is wonderful to be a woman and a Jew in America at the close of the twentieth century. Without question, the new opportunities for women in the religious world had their impetus in America's open, democratic, secular society. I am blessed to be a rabbi when most Jews are proud to be themselves. And I am so eager to serve.

**On Becoming a Cantor:**
**Nancy S. Hausman**

My parents raised me to believe that I could do anything I wanted to do. Partway through my junior year in college I realized that the prelaw program I was taking was not for me. It was then that I considered going to cantorial school. My parents were very active Reform Jews. They were one of the founding families of our temple in Upper Nyack, New York, and I had sung in the temple choir from its inception, eventually becoming the soprano soloist. Cantorial school seemed just the right career for me, a person who loves Judaism and who also loves to sing.

I entered Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion's School of Sacred Music in the fall of 1974. I was part of a class of three women and five men—there was a grand total of forty-five students in the School of Sacred Music.

When I think back on my time at the School of Sacred Music, I remember it fondly. Since my class was so small, we were like a family. Everyone knew what was going on in everyone else's life. We tried to support each other during times of stress and cheered each other on during the good times. Our professors, mostly cantors, were still not sure how to teach women the traditional *"nusah"*[1] so every class was an experimental one for both them and us. However, they were all very positive; no exclusionary practices took place.

I do, however, remember negative comments from some of the male students about the female students. Some of the men were afraid that the women would take all of the jobs, leaving them with no employment. Others

complained that salaries would suffer because occupations considered "women's" jobs are traditionally underpaid in our society. These kinds of comments made me angry, but as far as I can ascertain, these fears were unjustified.

There are now more women than men entering cantorial school. The number of men applying to cantorial school has always been small; therefore, the current increase in class size is due to the number of women applying. The changing class profile does not seem to be discouraging congregations from applying for cantors. The need for good Jewish music seems to be transcending any latent bias toward women.

One of the teaching techniques used in cantorial school is on-the-job training, or student pulpits. When I was applying for such a position, some congregations specified that they did not want to consider women. Fortunately, it was and still is a policy of the School of Sacred Music that any temple requesting a student cantor has to audition whoever applies for the job, regardless of sex. As it happened, my student pulpit was with a congregation that originally did not want to hear women. However, after the interview process, they were interested in two students, both women.

I worked there for three very happy years. I heard that there were some members who objected so strongly to my being hired that they left the temple. I also learned that those members owed back dues when they left. This appears to be another case of people using women as scapegoats for other, totally unrelated problems.

I taught second and third graders when I was in my student pulpit. I remember once, when we were all together for an assembly, one little second grader said to me, "Cantor, where is the cantor who was here last year?" I responded, "He's working at another temple." A first grader, who had been silently listening to this conversation, blurted out, "A boy cantor? In all my life, I never heard of one!" I had become the role model for these children. They thought that all cantors were women, just as I had once thought that all cantors were men.

These encounters heightened my awareness of the prejudices against women, which exist in varying degrees. I had a fine relationship with the rabbi of my student pulpit; however, he and I had to establish some rules from the outset. When I began at the temple, the rabbi let me know how glad he was that I was there. He said that I could assist him in so many ways. Often, there were appointments he needed to make by phone, but he had no time to do this. He suggested that I could make these calls as well as write some notes for him. I immediately responded, "I won't have the time, and I don't know how to type." He never made a similar suggestion again, and I think we understood each other and had respect for each other as a result of that encounter.

In my last year at the seminary, I was under a great deal of pressure. I worried about where, and even if, I would be working the following year.



Women were still in the minority as students in the school. We were still a relatively untested phenomenon.

There was one job-hunting experience that left a lasting impression on me. A large Southern congregation came to New York to interview cantors. About twenty cantors (both graduating cantors and those out in the field) auditioned. I was one of three cantors, the only woman, that the temple chose to invite to their town for extended interviews. It was a very intensive experience, and I was pretty "green," but I thought it went well. When I came back to New York, some of my professors who were close to people in that temple told me to pack my bags; however, I didn't get the job. I wondered why, but the job I took instead kept me too busy to ponder this for long.

I became Associate Cantor at Hebrew Union College in Jerusalem. While I was in Israel, a convention of the World Union for Progressive Judaism took place. Jews from all over the world attended. I was fairly visible as one of the College's cantors. A member of the Southern congregation where I had been interviewed introduced herself to me. She said she had been on the cantorial search committee the year before but had been out of town when I was interviewed. She had heard very nice reports about me and was disappointed that I had not been hired, but there had been controversy over hiring a woman cantor, so they had hired a man. I was angry about that for a long time. That temple, by the way, now has a woman cantor.

I came back to the States in the spring of 1980 and took a full-time position. I worked at that temple for two years. During my second year, after the High Holy Days, two long-time members (women) told me that at first they were not used to seeing me on the *bimah*, but that now my presence seemed very natural to them. It was interesting that they never said they did not like me; they said they were not used to me.

The next congregation for which I worked was in Florida. I stayed there for four years and left to come back up North. However, it is rewarding to realize that I was able to be a positive role model for so many young girls there. By being exposed to a female cantor, they were made aware of yet another possible occupational choice. After I was at that congregation for a few years, a congregant made an interesting observation. He said, "Your voice seems to have gotten lower." We both laughed and agreed that rather than my voice having changed registers, he had just gotten used to hearing a woman's voice on the *bimah*.

I now have two jobs, one as a cantor in a temple in New Jersey and the other as the placement administrator of a national cantorial association. Through the second job, I speak with many congregations that are considering hiring cantors. They have all kinds of questions and a wide variety of needs. Not one has said that it does not want to hire a woman. In fact, some specifically request a woman cantor. These congregations feel a woman would add an extra dimension to their temple family. I try to convey to them that sex should not be a factor in employment. Their questions should be,

"Does this cantor have the right qualifications for our temple? Can he or she add personally to our congregation?" An interview can only reveal so much about an applicant. When trying to make a positive impression, none of us needs the extra burden of sexual prejudice weighing us down.

## Note

1. The traditional musical modes to which certain parts of the liturgy are sung.



## Questions for Discussion

1. How has the status of Jewish women changed from the days of the Israelite religion?
2. Would you say the similarities or the differences are more significant in Jewish women's experiences?
3. Is it possible to eliminate male bias from Judaism?
   - Why or why not?
4. Do the gender-distinctive aspects of Jewish religious practice, which largely specify the domestic sphere as the space for women's religious ritual practice, signify complementary roles for men and women, or hierarchical, male-dominant ones?
5. How are the lives of Jewish women spiritual leaders (rabbis and cantors) different from those of Jewish men?
6. How do the lives of Jewish women spiritual leaders compare with those of women in other religious traditions we have examined so far?

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