

## JEWISH REFORM PERSPECTIVES

### ON RELIGION AND GENDER

Rabbi Eve Ben-Ora

I am grateful to Professor Judith Plaskow for her paper because it helped me put into perspective many difficult and complicated issues that I personally face as a woman, as a Jew, as a rabbi, as someone who believes very strongly in God and is trying to put it all into perspective. Unfortunately, she also raised many other plaguing issues that are even more difficult than I ever anticipated in the process of coming here today.

I stand here before you as the beneficiary of many others who came before me who were willing and able to fight the initial battle of what it means to have women in leadership positions, not just in religion, but in all aspects of our society. I sometimes think there is even a generation gap between me and my husband, who is a mere three years older than I, because he vividly remembers the 1960s, and to me they are just vague memories of people running around with long hair and beads and women burning their bras. I did not really have to face those same kinds of struggles when I was growing up because there were so many who came before me who paved the way. That background in my previous experiences has had a great deal of influence on me and what I chose to do with my life, how it is that I deal with the reality of being a woman who is a rabbi, or a rabbi who is a woman.

I represent the result of what happens when people begin taking seriously the question of gender. Once people start raising the questions in public forums, others start thinking very differently about both women's and men's roles. That is why I am able to stand here before you as who I am, a rabbi.

I also represent the Reform movement in Judaism, which is now a mainstream movement, although at its inception it was considered something controversial and radical. (In some circles today it is still considered very radical.) In spite of the fact that I represent a mainstream movement of Judaism, I am still very much an anomaly, particularly here, because I am the first, and only, woman who is a rabbi in Denver. People still look at me with a great deal of curiosity. They are not quite sure what it is that I represent, or who I am, or why I want to do something like this. I am reminded of being an anomaly quite often when I meet

someone for the first time and they say to me, not "I have never *met* a woman rabbi before," but "I have never *seen* a woman rabbi before," as if a woman rabbi is supposed to look different. I am not sure what they are expecting, but I certainly do not fit the typical physical stereotype of what people associate with the term "rabbi."

I have now set the groundwork of who I am and what I represent. At this point I turn to a response of Judith Plaskow's presentation by addressing some questions of how I personally deal with the issues that have been raised. I will explain first how it is that I can do what I do, particularly taking into account what Rabbi Berman has shared. I will also illustrate some of the ramifications of my serving as a Jewish rabbi.

I had the opportunity to hear Judith Plaskow speak on Sunday night at the Jewish Women's Resource Center. She spoke about "listening to silence." I understood what she was saying because that is what I did as I was growing up. I grew up in a Conservative congregation and the rabbi of that congregation was a powerful leader. He was an excellent speaker and was influential enough to even get my parents into the synagogue on more than just the High Holidays. For some reason, I identified with him. I am still not sure why, but there was something about his manner, there was something about what he was able to do, and there was something about how he moved people that had an influence on me. As a young girl, I thought that I would like to be a rabbi, too. But I never made the connection between the fact that he was a man and I was a woman and that maybe there was not any way that I could do what he did. There were no women rabbis. But I did not know that. In some ways I was blessed by that ignorance, because I never felt that I had to fight anything. No one had told me that I could not, so I was just going to go ahead and do it.

In 1972, Reform Judaism made that possibility of women rabbis a reality by ordaining the first woman rabbi, Sally Priesand. Reform Judaism was able to begin ordaining women because it is not based on the halachic model, as is Orthodox Judaism; it does not accept the Torah as divine revelation. Rather, Reform understands Torah as a human document that was divinely inspired and so allows for interpretations. Reform was an effort to allow Judaism to continue to change and develop as Jews entered modernity, in order to allow Jews to continue to participate, both as Jews and as members of the communities in which they lived. Therefore, many of the issues that Orthodox Jewish women and men face are not really my issues. The questions of whether or not I can serve as a leader of the congregation and help lead the services do not arise.

Other kinds of frustrations operate within my own world: I face other kinds of dilemmas as a woman who is a rabbi. Within my own world of Reform Judaism I am showered with many mixed blessings. For instance, the issue of being a woman rabbi, as opposed to a rabbi who happens to be a woman. A very large part of me would like to believe that I am a rabbi who just happens to be a woman. I was trained in the same way as my male colleagues were and I can do the same things that they can do. Nothing in Reform Judaism prevents me from doing this. But as I am more involved in the world of Judaism and come in contact with some of the other issues that are more based in such society, rather than in Jewish tradition, I discover that the identity that is almost forced upon me is that I am a woman who happens to be a rabbi. Sometimes my "womanness" gives me entree and sometimes it becomes a barrier.

Plaskow speaks about the idea in Jewish history of the concept of just "adding woman and giving it a stir." This notion is one that I face as a result of becoming a woman rabbi in Reform Judaism. Plaskow's characterization identified for me why it is that, even within my own movement, I face difficulties. When Reform decided to ordain women, it was done within the model of how men were ordained. And when it was decided to train women as rabbis, it was the same model that was used for men. No one considered what a woman rabbi would mean. No one thought about the ramifications or laid any groundwork for both training women in how to deal with what they would face as women and training the people in the congregations and in the Jewish community in how to deal with women who become rabbis.

A few examples from my own experience, both as a student and as an ordained rabbi in this community, exemplify how this conflict plays itself out in reality. At the Hebrew Union College (HUC) there are female students who take the same classes and fulfill the same requirements as do male students. However, there are no female faculty members in the rabbinic department. There are females who serve on the faculty at HUC, but none are ordained rabbis. So we do not have female role models as students. We are not sure what we are supposed to be striving for and what we can hope for ourselves. We experience a great deal of struggle as women students trying to figure out what this all means. A telling example is the fact that at the Cincinnati campus we have an organization called the Rabbinic Organization *on* Women, not *of* women. The title implies that men are also invited to be a part of this organization. In my second or third year of school the organization decided that the men would no longer have voting powers in the group, nor were they permitted to be officers, except if one of the men wanted to serve as a secretary. Many of the

women in the group felt great power by this decision and felt as if they had really achieved something absolutely fantastic. There was one man who decided that he did want to be the secretary, and so he served in that capacity. He explained to me several years later that he did so to give women the opportunity to do the work of the organization and not have to worry about the day-to-day operations. He was quite happy to serve in that role. But I felt that there was a problem. We were women trying to define ourselves, trying to figure out who we were, and feeling some anger and pain about how in the past women had been oppressed. Yet we were doing the same thing to our male counterparts. Somehow it just did not sit right. Several of the women, including me, later dropped out of the organization because it seemed to be taking a direction that we were not comfortable with and did not really define what we thought the ideal world in Judaism was supposed to be.

A second example: Yes, the Reform movement ordains women and men. We are sent out to find our own way and to try and make of it the best that we can and try and bring our ideals into reality, which is probably what led us into rabbinical school in the first place. But since I have been ordained, I have encountered more resistance from my male Reform rabbinic colleagues than I have from my traditional colleagues. On one occasion when a male colleague was supposed to do a wedding and was unable to, he said to me, "You know I would ask you to fill in for me, but I just do not think that these people would feel comfortable having you do this." I was really shocked by that. I have found that sometimes men who did not go to school with women tend to have difficulty with women rabbis, but here was a man who had gone to school with women and is close to my age. This incident was more painful than anything my male traditional colleagues might have done because at least the traditional colleagues are basing their discomfort with my presence on halachic grounds. My Reform colleague was merely perpetuating attitudes regarding women that our movement supposedly eliminated.

The third example concerns women in the congregation. Here the mixed blessing plays itself out most vividly. I find that some women feel themselves empowered when they see me in the pulpit, reading from the Torah, giving a sermon, or leading the service. They are able to live out their fantasy of what they would have liked to have done, or they are simply gratified seeing a woman in this role. They have been told that women cannot do this, and here is a woman doing it. Interestingly, often these women are two or three generations older than I. However, the women who are only one generation older than I are the ones who seem to be the most threatened by my presence. This is extremely painful. It gets played out in many different ways. Perhaps they cannot look me in the eye when they shake hands

with me, or they are not exactly sure what to say to me after I have conducted a service. At first I took all of this personally. But then I realized that the same socialization phenomenon that prevents men from accepting a woman rabbi also prevents certain women from understanding and accepting what I represent.

There are some women in the congregation who can go either way, not really caring one way or the other. They are comfortable with who they are and what they stand for and think that a woman serving as a rabbi should have happened all along. They do not see anything great and dramatic about it. When I first came to Temple Emmanuel, just out of rabbinical school, I had wonderful ideals. I was going to change this congregation and make them understand that women could be leaders. I had a meeting with some of the women from Sisterhood, during which I was asking them what it is that they like to do in the congregation. I asked them if they would not like to get into some other solid educational kinds of things. They responded that they really liked getting together to cook, finding it a very fulfilling experience going into the kitchen as a group and preparing meals. I learned that they had their right to enjoy this, and I, as a young rabbi, had no right to tell them that what they were doing was not what women should be doing.

As a woman who has been ordained by the Reform movement, I have access to the institutions of Judaism. I am fully counted in the congregation, can read from the Torah, lead services, and do funerals and weddings. There is nothing that prevents me from doing anything Jewishly within Reform Judaism. I chose a mainstream path because, given what I wanted to do in my life and the avenues that were open to me, this choice made the most sense. But I have found that often the way is painful. I try not to allow that to stop me. It is constantly a challenge to go on, to go beyond my initial understandings of what this is all about, and to help other people go beyond it. My presence is part of the process. I can be effective with the liturgy in the congregation and try to make changes there. My presence has an effect on the children in Religious School. I can be effective with a great deal of patience tempered by impatience, so that I am constantly moving forward but not letting the battles that were previously there prevent me from doing what I think I can and should do.

I am part of this process. By being in a mainstream environment, I serve a purpose as a role model where I had none for myself. I am still trying to figure out what the final picture will look like, not just for me, and how this phenomenon of women given the opportunity and women taking opportunities will affect Judaism, both now and in the future.

#### Copyright and Use:

**As an ATLAS user, you may print, download, or send articles for individual use according to fair use as defined by U.S. and international copyright law and as otherwise authorized under your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement.**

**No content may be copied or emailed to multiple sites or publicly posted without the copyright holder(s)' express written permission. Any use, decompiling, reproduction, or distribution of this journal in excess of fair use provisions may be a violation of copyright law.**

This journal is made available to you through the ATLAS collection with permission from the copyright holder(s). The copyright holder for an entire issue of a journal typically is the journal owner, who also may own the copyright in each article. However, for certain articles, the author of the article may maintain the copyright in the article. Please contact the copyright holder(s) to request permission to use an article or specific work for any use not covered by the fair use provisions of the copyright laws or covered by your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement. For information regarding the copyright holder(s), please refer to the copyright information in the journal, if available, or contact ATLA to request contact information for the copyright holder(s).

#### About ATLAS:

The ATLA Serials (ATLAS®) collection contains electronic versions of previously published religion and theology journals reproduced with permission. The ATLAS collection is owned and managed by the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) and received initial funding from Lilly Endowment Inc.

The design and final form of this electronic document is the property of the American Theological Library Association.