

This is an article about Einat Ramon, the first Rabbi that the Missoula Jewish Community hired. Perhaps the "old timers" would find this article of interest:

Jerusalem Post, March 10, 2005

A pulpit of her own by Lauren Gelfond Feldinger

Just don't call her "miss." When Israeli commentator Dan Margolit once interviewed her and referred to her as "Miss Ramon," she corrected him, saying, "Rabbi Ramon." But it wasn't until he replied: "So what, that means you are not a miss?" that Rabbi Einat Ramon really let him have it. Rabbi Dr. Einat Ramon, Schechter Institute lecturer and advisor to women rabbinical students at the Schechter Rabbinical Seminary.

It was nothing new. Even after 20 years of female rabbis in the Holy Land, Israelis can't get used to the title - let alone the idea. But the problem is not just with the public. The majority of Masorti, or Conservative, synagogues are not hiring, and often not even interviewing, the women ordained at the movement's Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies. As the adviser to female rabbinical students, Ramon watches female rabbis struggle to find jobs, much more so than the men. Twenty years after she launched her own struggle to become Israel's first native-born female rabbi, she can't believe her students are still facing some of the same obstacles she did two decades ago.

The Reform and Conservative movements have long made ordination for women an issue of the past, but Israel is still grappling with the concept. And whereas female Reform rabbis face discrimination in the larger Israeli society, female Conservative rabbis also face hurdles within their own movement.

Underscoring the issue is the same controversy that existed before there were any female rabbis in Israel: Can a woman, no matter how learned, bear the title of rabbi?

BY THE time she was 15, Kinneret Shiryon had decided she would eventually become a rabbi. It was 1970 and there were no women rabbis in the world. This was two years after she had decided she would leave the US one day to make her life in Israel. After years of reading Holocaust literature and trying to make sense of what happened to her relatives, at 13 she asked her parents, "Why do we live here and not in Israel?"

When her family moved from upstate New York to a town in California with only two synagogues, one Reform and one modern Orthodox, they opted for Orthodox, thinking it was closer to their Conservative beliefs. "I was the first bat mitzva, but they wouldn't let me read from the Torah. It was really revolutionary, but I felt cheated," she says.

Her parents eventually dropped their synagogue membership and started their own havura study group for 10 local families, and later Shiryon would take over teaching the children. By the time her family found a Conservative synagogue to join a few years later, Shiryon was teaching Hebrew and leading the junior congregation, and the younger students started calling her "rabbi" as a joke. But Shiryon liked it and says that by that point, her destiny was

sealed. What she didn't know then was that there would be such a long struggle in front of her.

On the University of California at Berkeley campus in the 1970s, she was recruited by a scout from the Reform seminary at Hebrew Union College. The more she read about Reform ideology, the more it made sense to her, says Shiryon.

"The Halacha didn't keep pace with the changes in Jewish life and society. Reform Judaism always gives weight to Halacha but it is not seen as the sole author for decisions on religious behavior," she says. Previously she had not considered affiliating with the Reform movement because she came from a Conservative background and "Conservative Judaism in the US looks down on Reform Judaism," she says.

In 1976, on her year abroad in Israel, Shiryon turned to the Jerusalem office of HUC to get an application for its Israeli rabbinical program - only to discover they did not yet accept women.

Feeling cheated again, Shiryon returned to the US, and in 1981, with HUC ordaining a trickle of women since 1972, she graduated as one of the first 22 female rabbis in the world.

When she moved permanently to Israel and was offered a pulpit in 1983, she became the first woman to serve in Israel. She also quickly became the first female rabbi on the Israel Council of Progressive (Reform) Rabbis.

But the revolution wasn't over. During her first stint as a rabbi in a north Tel Aviv congregation, it took the community a long time to accept her. Even when the majority was convinced, a few families dropped their membership.

By 1984, her classes were full and members praised her services, sermons and melodies. The women, especially, confided to her that it was easier for them to feel connected with her leading services. But after a bar and bat mitzva ceremony, several of the parents told her that when the time came to have their sons become bar mitzva, they would "do it right," she remembers.

Others at services would sometimes come to gawk. Some would even laugh out loud. These Israelis were open to attending Reform synagogues, but they did not accept the full ideology of the egalitarian movement.

Shiryon still keeps a 1985 clip from the Hatzofe national-religious newspaper warning the public that a woman was masquerading as a rabbi in north Tel Aviv and poisoning the minds of young children.

BY 1996, there was still controversy. After Shiryon became rabbi at the Yozma Community Center in Modi'in and opened a Jewish preschool there, an anonymous flyer was sent to every resident, again portraying a woman masquerading as a rabbi and warning residents not to be lured by her charm and register their children.

But the parents of the preschool children, including three Orthodox families, got together

and placed an ad in the local paper denouncing the flyer as slander and lies, and supporting the program and Shiryon as its leader. One Orthodox resident of Modi'in sent a letter to the editor stating that he wouldn't register his children at the school, but that the school deserves a place in the community.

Though women in the Reform Movement today have gained total equality with men, the movement also spent many years debating the role of women as rabbis. The movement started to discuss informally the possibility of having women rabbis as early as the late 1800s, but the Central Conference of American Rabbis only put it formally on the table in the early 1920s. The HUC faculty and the Central Conference of American Rabbis concluded that there was no reason not to ordain women, but the HUC Board of Governors maintained the policy of ordaining only men as rabbis. Their reasoning was based partially on concern about public opinion as well as putting women in the position of having to choose between rabbi and homemaker.

Even so, in 1935, a Reform rabbi in Germany privately authorized ordination for German scholar Regina Jonas and in 1972, after the feminist revolution in the US, the first woman at HUC was officially ordained. It took another 20 years before the Israel program of HUC ordained its first woman, Rabbi Naamah Kelman.

"The Reform movement was born in Israel in the 1970s and I'm not saying there wasn't sexism in Israel then, but there wasn't a movement to speak of and the [Israel rabbinical] program was small and struggling. Only in 1986 did we have a real budget," explains Kelman. "Then I was the first woman to apply."

Today there are some 25 Reform synagogues in Israel, and of 19 with rabbis, nine have female rabbis. "Gender was never a problem in the last 10 years," says Rabbi Yehoram Mazor, secretary of Maram, the Israel Council of Progressive Rabbis. Indeed, Shiryon was recently appointed president. This egalitarianism is active within the congregations and the leadership, says Shiryon, but not necessarily within the public, even among those who admire Reform Judaism.

"We have hundreds of couples who get married in our movement and the vast majority choose male rabbis. They will take the leap of having a Reform rabbi, but not take the leap of egalitarianism. They often buckle under family pressure." Moreover, she says, female rabbis struggle to be recognized in larger Israeli society, "but our male colleagues face the same problem."

IN THE Conservative movement, despite vast change, the obstacles have always been internal as well as external. In 1984, the movement's US-based Jewish Theological Seminary decided to ordain female rabbis. A small item about the decision buried in the back of an Israeli newspaper stirred Ramon, though she had, until then, considered herself secular.

Ramon's ordination in New York, 1989

Just a few days earlier she had attended a Hebrew University interfaith seminar with religious people from all over the world, where she first began questioning her identity. Although she celebrated Shabbat and holidays with her family and had loved studying traditional Jewish texts throughout her childhood in Jerusalem, she had never considered

herself religious. After all, her family was certainly not Orthodox.

But comparing herself to the other religious people she met, and then reading the article, an awareness was crystallized: She was not only deeply connected to religion, even observant in many ways, but she wanted even more involvement.

In a fit of excitement, she contacted the Israeli branch of Conservative Judaism, the Masorti Movement, and was told that it had recently launched a seminary - but that it did not accept women as rabbinical students.

Since there was no place for her to study for the rabbinate in Israel, Ramon left for New York's JTS. Five years later, in 1989, she became the first native-Israeli female rabbi.

The debate in the Conservative Movement about women's ordination took 10 years in the US to be resolved, and another 10 years in Israel. In 1974, the legal committee in the US voted against admitting women as rabbinic candidates. In 1977, the Rabbinic Assembly and JTS created a commission to study the issue.

Eventually, nearly a dozen members of the committee ruled that there was no direct halakhic objection to training and ordaining women to be rabbis or teachers, but controversy broke out and the issue was shelved again until 1984, when the resolution finally passed. Even then, the decision caused a major rift. Many prominent leaders, including Talmudic scholars, felt alienated and parted ways with the movement.

That same year, when the Israeli sister movement founded the Seminary of Judaic Studies (since renamed the Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies), it did not accept women as rabbinic students.

The movement in Israel, although part of the Conservative Movement, saw itself as a separate entity, with its own institutes and Jewish law committee. At times, it also found that responsa being issued in the US were not suitable to Israeli society. They followed more slowly on women's issues, not because of Halakha at first, but because Israeli society wasn't ready yet for female rabbis, says movement head Ehud Bandel. "The feeling was, let's first start with [Conservative] male rabbis being accepted in Israeli society, before admitting women," says Bandel.

In 1992, as more female candidates approached Schechter, the law committee released three responsa: one, that Halakha permits women to be accepted as rabbinical candidates without conditions; two, that women can be accepted on the condition that they fulfill the same mitzvot as male rabbis, particularly the time-bound positive commandments and don't serve as witnesses or in rabbinic courts. The third rejected the idea. The board of directors reviewed the three responses and despite dissension, voted on the first, that women could be accepted without conditions, says Bandel.

Schechter's newest women rabbis at their ordination, Jerusalem, Dec.'04

In 1993, Valerie Stessin, who had previously studied in Schechter's Jewish studies program, was the first female Conservative rabbi to be ordained in Israel.

"You can still feel it's the first hard years," says Stessin, a rabbi serving as project director for the TALI Jewish Education Fund. "Inside [at Schechter], the female students feel totally accepted. But the minute they go out, it's not so simple in the communities, being accepted as women. I work with teachers, and it's not impossible, it's getting better, but there are fewer people who look for female rabbis."

Though teachers at TALI have been resistant to working with female rabbis, "opposition usually evaporates after the teachers, kids and parents meet the rabbi," says Rabbi Dr. David Golinkin, Schechter president.

In Stessin's experience beyond the movement, she is viewed as "pretty alien," she says. "People think it's abnormal or that they haven't heard correctly, they say, 'What? What?' Even the secular see Orthodoxy as authentic Judaism; even those who are curious and open to listening are not open to having a woman rabbi."

Today, Ramon represents a victory for women in the movement: She has become the first female rabbi to be offered a tenured faculty position at Schechter. "But we are not equal yet," she says. "In Israel, the southern congregations - Beersheba, Omer - are more egalitarian, and now Ashkelon is becoming egalitarian. But in the movement, things are progressing slowly."

The recently-founded Yaltha, a forum for Conservative female rabbis and students, advocates for greater recognition. Yaltha even raises funds for fellowships to help encourage congregations to take on the female rabbis. "It's sad to say that though within the movement and rabbinical assembly there is no difference between male and female rabbis, the congregations have a hard time accepting women," says Bandel. "It's not only a question of accepting female rabbis, but a question of egalitarianism. We are a pluralistic movement, so it's up to each congregation, we are not forcing anything."

In Israel, of some 50 Conservative congregations, and half with pulpit rabbis, the vast majority are male rabbis. Conservative female rabbis continue having a harder time than Conservative male rabbis and even than Reform female rabbis in finding leadership and pulpit positions.

In recent years, Ramon has faced struggles beyond the movement, with the Israeli public, and says it's still hard to get respect. People keep calling her by her first name, or miss, or Reform instead of Conservative rabbi, or even "rabanit," the vernacular for rabbi's wife." And sometimes people won't speak of or to her at all. Meimad founder Rabbi Yehuda Amital, "a liberal," says Ramon, sat on an interfaith panel a few years back and was okay sitting next to a Muslim imam, but when he heard a Jewish female rabbi was on the panel, too, he dropped out.

And though there is degradation of the Reform and Conservative movements in Orthodox society, sometimes secular society is the most difficult to penetrate, says Ramon. "Secular media have trouble calling me rabbi. But once, an ultra-Orthodox rabbi corrected a panelist and said he should call me rabbi and not desecrate my honor. As an Orthodox rabbi, he understood the importance of rabbis and secular people don't always recognize this."

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