

## “From Now On, No Distinction:” Reform Judaism and the Redefinition of the Religious Status of Jewish Women, 1810-1975

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During the last fifty years, it has become typical, if not fashionable, to assess the changing role of women in Reform Judaism in terms of their roles as religious and congregational leaders. In fact, the struggle to incorporate women as stakeholders in the governance and public representation of Judaism’s most progressive branch

was preceded by a century-long process of redefining women as the religious equals of men in Reform Judaism. Indeed, Reform Judaism itself began with the full inclusion of Jewish girls and women in pediatric Jewish education which was, in turn, followed by a systematic reevaluation of the religious role of women in Judaism. Interestingly, Reform both generated its own paths in redefining the religious status of women and seized on external modernizing trends during the nineteenth century. Subsequently, the “public sphere” of Reform Jewish women was redefined again but this time in response to the external influences of feminism and Progressivism on Reform Judaism. By contrast, earlier religious reforms concerning women were largely products of nineteenth century “modern” or “liberal” religion.

It is interesting to note that even those forces within Reform Judaism that were resistant to the full religious equality of women generally emphasized the Jewish tradition’s high esteem of female spirituality. For example, in prefacing his remarks against the ordination of women in 1922, Rabbi Dr. Jacob Z. Lauterbach (1873-1942), a professor at the Hebrew Union College (HUC), included an extended *apologia* which echoed the American ‘Cult of Domesticity’ in praise of women’s spirituality. “Indeed,” he noted, “the Rabbis of old entertained a high opinion of womanhood and frequently expressed their

admiration for woman’s ability and appreciated her great usefulness in religious work.” “Thus,” he continued, “they say: ‘God has endowed woman with a finer appreciation and a better understanding than man’ (Nidda 45b), ‘Sarah was superior to Abraham in prophecy’ (Tanchuma Exodus beginning), ‘It was due to the pious women of that generation that the Israelites were redeemed from Egypt’ (Sota 11b), and ‘The women were the first ones to receive and accept the Torah’ (Tanchuma Buber, Metsora 18, p.27a).”

However, praise, even hyperbolic flattery, is not the same as equality, and it is important to note that Reform Judaism, with its emergence onto the stage of history, immediately began to take practi-

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cal, if not revolutionary, steps toward emancipating women within Judaism. For example, the year after the first public Jewish and all-male Confirmation service at Israel Jacobson’s Seesen Temple in 1810, girls were included in the 1811 ceremony at Seesen. A rationale for the Confirmation of girls was first offered by Isaac Asher Francolm (1788-1849), a German Reform educator and contemporary of Jacobson. There should be, he argued for the first time, a “significant landmark in the life of boys and girls which consists of the knowledge of religion, they have achieved, that is, when they have finished their education ... Such an act ... was not customary in rabbinic tradition. It is something new, but it is in the spirit of Judaism.” Thereafter, coeducational Confirmation quickly became the norm in Reform Judaism on both sides of the Atlantic and became the basis for ‘reforming’ Jewish womanhood. It could even be said that on a gender basis, Confirmation was a revolution in Jewish history.

It is important to note that early in its history, Confirmation *per se* was not strictly limited to

Reform congregations, although the Reform movement did create Jewish Confirmation. Moreover, there were ‘special events’ in which men and women sang together in synagogue both in Europe and the United States early in the 19<sup>th</sup> century which were not limited to Reform congregations. Writing in her classic work, *Beyond the Synagogue Gallery*:

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*Finding a Place for Women in American Judaism* (2009), Karla Goldman reports that “mixed choirs performed at the dedication ceremonies of both the 1818 Mill Street Synagogue in New York and the 1825 Mikveh Israel synagogue in Philadelphia ... the regular presence of mixed choirs of men and women became a requisite part of such ceremonies, even for the most traditional acculturated congregations.” However, Reform synagogues ultimately fully embraced mixed choirs as part of their religious culture, whereas more traditional congregations resisted the practice and reestablished the traditional belief that “the voice of a woman is a sin” and resorted to male only singing.

The first flowering of Reform Judaism in the United States took place in Charleston, South Carolina in 1824. Triggered by a combination of local circumstances and news of an emerging Reform movement in Germany, a group of young local Jews formed the Reformed Society of Israelites (RSI). Led by Isaac Harby (1788-1828) and Abraham Moise (1799-1869), the RSI produced an original prayer book and plans for a Confirmation service. Included in their proposed worship were hymns written by Abraham’s sister, Penina Moise (1797-1880) was prolific. In 1833, she published *Fancy’s Sketch-Book*, the first collection of poems written by an American Jewish woman. Penina wrote a total of 190 hymns for her home congregation, Beth Elohim, of which over a dozen were included in the Reform movement’s *Union Hymnal*. Moise was also a teacher in Beth Elohim’s Sunday School.

The idea that women could serve as teachers of Judaism to young children actually came from outside of Reform Judaism. Influenced by the earlier

theories of Swiss educational Reformer Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1646-1727) and contemporaneously by American educator Catharine Beecher (1800-1878), Rebecca Gratz (1781-1869) opened the first Hebrew Sunday School in Philadelphia in 1838 taught by women teachers, some of whom also authored their own textbooks. Gratz, it should be noted, was a devoted member of a Sephardic Orthodox congregation, Mikveh Israel. The Gratz Sunday School model, originally pan-denominational, was entirely led by women. It quickly gained traction in the American Jewish community and was widely adopted by Reform congregations. Even more than in the parallel German Jewish schools, the student body was co-educational from the beginning.

In early Reform Judaism in Germany, men and women continued to sit separately in prayer services. The idea of mixed seating, an American Reform adaptation, actually came about accidentally and not initially for ideological reasons. During *Rosh Hashanah* services in Albany, New York in 1850, a physical fight literally erupted between the President of the congregation, Louis Spanier, and its rabbi, Isaac Mayer Wise (1819-1900), the founder of the Reform movement in Judaism in America. Wise was compelled to leave his pulpit and started a new synagogue, Anshe Emeth, where he remained until moving to Cincinnati in 1854. Under his leadership, Anshe Emeth was able to purchase a former Baptist church equipped with family pews. When Wise’s congregation moved into their new digs, families, meaning men, women, and children, all sat together. In 1854, New York’s Congregation Emanu-El adopted the same practice and mixed seating then quickly became the norm in American Reform Judaism. Thus, in the years prior to the Civil War, boys and girls and men and women sat, prayed, and studied together in American Reform “shuls” and schools.

Beyond worship and education, another area concerning women’s religious status in early Reform Judaism involved weddings, marriage, and divorce. Already in 1810, when his Temple opened in Seesen, Germany, Israel Jacobson streamlined the traditional Aramaic *Ketubah* and rendered it into German. Later, the Reform movement provided for

the bride to present the groom with a ring during the wedding ceremony and stating her own vow as a way of symbolizing equality and mutuality in Reform Jewish marriage and lessening the emphasis on the economic and business aspects of arranging marital unions. Previously, as part of the *Ketubah*, only the groom presented the bride with a ring. In 1869, at a conference of American Reform rabbis in Philadelphia, it was resolved that “a judgment of divorce pronounced by a civil court has full validity, also in the eyes of Judaism, if the court documents reveal that both parties to the marriage agreed to the divorce.” By contrast, to this day, the problem of the *agunah* (“chained wife”) whose recalcitrant husband refuses to offer a *get* or Jewish writ of divorce, remains highly problematic in the Orthodox community.

By the middle decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was already clear to Reform rabbis that their movement had radically redefined the religious status of women in Reform Judaism. In his anthology of early Reform documents, *The Rise of Reform Judaism* (1963), Rabbi Gunther W. Plaut offers the 1837 summary statement on women in Reform Judaism by Abraham Geiger (1810-1874), the principal intellectual architect of Reform Judaism. “Let there be from now on,” Geiger declared, “no distinction between duties for men and women unless flowing from the natural law governing the sexes; no assumption of the spiritual minority of woman, as though she were incapable of grasping the deep things in religion; no institution of the public service, either in form of content, which shuts the doors of the temple; no degradation of woman in the form of the marriage service, and no application of fetters which may destroy woman’s happiness.” “Our whole religious life,” Geiger concludes, “will profit from the beneficial influence which feminine hearts will bestow upon it.”

Nine years later, at the Breslau Rabbinic Conference in 1846, the attendees took practical steps to guarantee this new equality. In part, they voted “That from now on, the benediction *shelo assani ishah* thanking God that Jewish men ‘were not created as women’ which was the basis for the religious prejudice against woman, shall be abolished.” Furthermore, the rabbis agreed “that the

female sex shall, from the earliest youth, be obligated to participate in religious instruction and public worship, and in the latter respect, also be counted in a *minyan* (religious quorum).”

Unfortunately, the high-mindedness of German Reform rabbis about women did not translate into social reality in Reform synagogues around the world. Social convention and a deeply embedded patriarchy in the American Jewish community proved highly resistant to change. In her one volume, *The Jews of the United States: 1654-2000* (2004), historian Hasia R. Diner concluded that after he first arrived in America, Rabbi Dr. David Einhorn (1809-1879), the German-born intellectual architect of Classical Reform Judaism in America, “found the role of women in Judaism abhorrent and dysfunctional.” “In Judaism,” Diner concluded, “women, as understood by Einhorn, remained passive and mute objects rather than active

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participants in their religion.” In other words, rabbinic pronouncements were not enough to truly reform the religious status of women, even in Reform Judaism. Active, practical work still needed to be done and, so it seems, done by women. Ray Frank (1861-1948), a schoolteacher, writer, and lecturer provided a powerful model for the full potential of women in Reform Judaism. Known variously as the “girl rabbi” and the “female messiah,” Frank published “a stinging critique” of the American rabbinate in 1890 entitled, “What would you do if you were a rabbi?” That same year, she preached on the High Holy Days to a makeshift congregation gathered in an opera house, and urged the establishment of a truly inclusive, spiritual synagogue. Unfortunately, no congregation was formed and another eight decades passed until a woman was ordained as a rabbi and official spokeswoman for Judaism.

Meanwhile, Reform Jewish women increasingly organized themselves in “sisterhoods of personal service” but mostly along traditional lines. In 1887, a service sisterhood was organized by Congregation Emanu-El in New York City which emphasized



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social justice, philanthropy, and motherhood. Carrie Obendorfer Simon (1872-1961), wife of Reform Rabbi Abram Simon, founded the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods (NFTS) which quickly became the largest Jewish women's organization in the United States, surpassing, in its early years, both the National Council of Jewish Women (established 1893) and Hadassah, the Women's Zionist Organization of America, founded 1912. At first, NFTS' (now known as "Women of Reform Judaism") first priority "was deepening religious observance in the home" as well as to support the work of the synagogue.

Lily Montagu (1873-1963) forged an even bolder path. As early as 1899, Montagu began exploring paths to modernize Judaism, and three years later founded the Jewish Religious Union (JRU) which conducted services along liberal lines. Subsequently, she began founding Liberal synagogues throughout Great Britain. In 1926, she founded the World Union for Progressive Judaism (often running it from her home) which held its first international meeting in Berlin in 1928, at which she preached in the German language. She also served as the lay minister of the West Central Liberal Congregation from 1944 to her death in 1963. In Germany, Regina Jonas (1902-1944), was ordained as a rabbi by that country's Conference of Liberal Rabbis in 1935. She worked in the Berlin Jewish community until she was deported to Auschwitz and murdered along with her mother on October 12, 1944.

In the United States, a century of efforts to reform the religious and public status of women in Reform Judaism came to a head in a 1922 debate at the Hebrew Union College (HUC) in Cincinnati on the question of ordaining women as rabbis. Despite progress, particularly in the United Kingdom and the Central Conference of America Rabbis (CCAR) resolving, "that woman cannot justly be denied the privilege of ordination," HUC failed to proceed with the ordination of women as rabbis. Sally Priesand (b. 1946) did not become the first woman to be ordained as a rabbi by HUC until 1972. Three years later, Barbara Ostfeld (b. 1952) was ordained as the first woman cantor in 1975. Historically, it was necessary for factors outside of Reform Judaism, including the Progressive and Suffrage movements and multiple waves of feminism, to transform the role of women inside the

Reform movement. The work of reforming the social, cultural, and religious status of women in Reform Judaism began early in the nineteenth century and, in large part, was a function of the modernism of Classical Reform Judaism. Sixteen decades later, the possibility of a new, fully enfranchised modern Jewish women which had begun with Israel Jacobson in 1810 in Seesen, Germany was finally becoming a reality in the United States and around the world. However, the work of women's full emancipation and enfranchisement in Reform Judaism is still far from complete. As Rabbi Tarfon taught in Pirke Avot 2:16, "It is not your duty to finish the work, nor are you free to desist from it."

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**The Reform Advocate**

Volume XIII, Number II: Spring 2022