



THE BLOGS

Esther Altmann

FEATURED POST

Female clergy: What's at stake

A response to the recent OU ruling: it's not about feminism vs. tradition, it's about securing Judaism's future

In 1903, a gathering of Polish rabbis rejected a proposal supporting religious education for girls.

By 1917, however, there were more than 200 Beis Yaacov schools spread across Eastern Europe, educating approximately 36,000 young women. This was due in no small measure to Bes Yaacov's founder, Sarah Schenirer, and her radical vision. She launched a future in which learned women would be passionately committed to Torah and its scholarship. While her detractors warned of dire consequences with a change in the status quo, her allies, such as the Chafetz Chaim, encouraged and supported her.

It is 2017. One hundred years have passed. We are the progeny of genocide, migrations, and the rapid transformations of modernity. We have inherited instincts for survival, tenacity and an indomitable spirit. These qualities, demonstrated in equal measure by both men and women, are the very ones that ensure a robust Jewish future. How then, do we understand the OU's recent ruling written with the intent of thwarting the authority of scholarly women and squelching the development of Orthodox female rabbinic leadership?

Change is hard. As a clinical psychologist, I have had the occasion to think about how we change – or don't – quite a bit. I am perpetually in awe of individuals with histories of deep pain and challenges of great magnitude who make profound changes in their lives. At the outset, the endeavor can feel daunting and risky. However, those with courage persevere. Their persistence frequently yields unexpected surprises and uplifting moments of joy and fulfillment.

Female clergy represent a profound change in the status quo of Orthodox life. This change is difficult, for male rabbis in particular, and for some members of the Orthodox community in general. In Orthodoxy, male rabbis have always been the sole arbiters of rabbinic law. This power has been presented as a birthright. It is fused with an Orthodox man's gender identity and is an integral part of his self-definition. Decoupling one's identity as a rabbi from that of being a man might be disorienting and entail feelings of loss. It always feels safer to stay grounded in the familiar. If change were easy, I tell my patients, I would happily be out of business.

As a woman, it is hard for me to imagine what it might feel like to cede a lifelong rabbinic fraternity. There is a good deal at stake here. Why would one want to share such a precious, sacred authority? How would a co-created rabbinic leadership unfold? What might such a metamorphosis look like? What would be lost and what might be gained? The rabbinic imagination that weaves through our vast textual inheritance is astounding in its creativity and scope. Surely, it can be mined for new perspectives and a different dialogue.

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dichotomy that compromises all parties and impedes the evolution of an enhanced religious experience for both women and men. Including women as leaders at life cycle events and in synagogues honors the sacredness of the human experience for all.

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