

Who May Lead God's Holy Congregation?

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In 1922, the Reform rabbinate raged with debate. Martha Neumark wished to become a rabbi. None disputed that she was a capable student. Still, Rabbi Jacob Z. Lauterbach, a professor at Hebrew Union College, and the leading Reform scholar of Jewish law at that time, opposed Ms. Neumark's plan. He wrote: "It has been rightly said that the woman who enters a profession must make her choice between following her chosen profession or the calling of mother and home-maker. She cannot do both well at the same time. This certainly would hold true in the case of the rabbinical profession. The woman who naturally and rightly looks forward to the opportunity of meeting the right kind of man, of marrying him, and of having children and a home of her own, cannot give to the rabbinate that wholehearted devotion which comes from the determination to make it one's life work. For in all likelihood she could not continue it as a married woman. For, one holding the rabbinical office must teach by precept and example, and must give an example of Jewish family and home life where all the traditional Jewish virtues are cultivated. The rabbi can do so all the better when he is married and has a home and a family of his own. The wife whom God has made as helpmate to him can be, and in most cases is, of great assistance to him in making his home a Jewish home, a model for the congregation to follow. In this important activity of the rabbi--exercising a wholesome influence upon the congregation--the woman rabbi would be deficient. The woman in the rabbinical office could not expect the man to whom she was married to be merely a helpmate to her, assisting her in her rabbinical activities. And even if she could find such a man, willing to take a subordinate position in the family, the influence upon the families in the congregation of such an arrangement in the home and in the family life of the rabbi would not be very wholesome."

Rabbi Louis Witt, who had led this congregation from 1907 to 1919, was flabbergasted: "Five years ago I had to argue in favor of women's rights when that question came up in the Arkansas legislature, but I did not feel that there would be need to argue that way in a liberal body of men like this." Too bad the Arkansas Legislature hasn't changed in the last century! As for women rabbis, Rabbi Witt wrote: "I believe that this body of men should do nothing that would stand in the way of any forward movement in behalf of the womanhood of America. I cannot believe that a religion that is so splendidly spiritual and forward-looking as our religion will stand in the way of such a movement. I feel that this Conference can only act in one way, and that is to fall in line with what is the destiny of the women of the future." The majority of rabbis and of the seminary's faculty agreed with Witt, but the Hebrew Union College Board of Governors did not. Fifty years would pass before a woman would be ordained a rabbi in American Reform Judaism.

The division over women rabbis was not the last time that our Movement would debate the merits of ordaining members of a previously excluded group. Our seminary long had a firm if unwritten rule that no openly gay man or lesbian would be ordained, a policy that changed only in 1990.

In the 1980s, a small number of pioneering gay and lesbian rabbis were making inroads in Reform Judaism, serving openly as gay and lesbian rabbis after ordination. Few congregations would have them, though, so most served in synagogues established specifically for gay and lesbian Jews, or outside of congregations. Many more remained deeply closeted.

Those serving mainstream congregations would leave the closet at their own peril. In one infamous case, Rabbi Stacy Offner was summarily fired as Associate Rabbi of a Minnesota congregation after coming out. The senior rabbi and lay leadership concluded that a lesbian was unfit to serve God's holy congregation. Were they ever wrong! More than a few members of that congregation, gay and straight, left to form Congregation Shir Tikvah, meaning "song of hope," with Offner as their rabbi. She would thereby become the first openly gay or lesbian rabbi to lead a so-called "mainstream" congregation.

What was it about women – and later, about gay men and lesbians – that made them unfit to serve as rabbis?

Lauterbach's argument sounds antiquated to our ears. We live in a world where juggling career and family is commonplace, even as it sadly remains a greater challenge for women than men. Lauterbach was appealing to the role of rabbi as role model. In his view, a woman rabbi would not be an appropriate wife and mother, and therefore a poor exemplar of family life for the congregation.

Lauterbach and his fellow opponents of women's ordination had another concern: the feminization of the synagogue. He and other opponents of women's ordination knew that men didn't value women's work. Indeed, even in 2015, American women have not yet achieved equal pay for equal work. Lauterbach feared that women's leadership would devalue the synagogue, and that men would flee from participation as a result.

The rabbi as role model was very much at the forefront of the debate over "homosexuality in the rabbinate." The argument centered on heterosexual marriage as the time-honored Jewish ideal. An openly gay or lesbian rabbi couldn't exemplify that notion of a normal Jewish family. In addition, opponents correctly contended that some congregants would be uncomfortable with a gay or lesbian rabbi. They argued vociferously that Jews shouldn't be given an additional excuse to flee the synagogue.

By now, you see a pattern: Those in power suggest that others should not be leaders. Their reasons boil down to two: 1) A rabbi who is different can't be a role model for mainstream Jews; and 2) A rabbi who is different will drive the Jews away.

I wonder if that same concern motivated the commandments that Spencer's grandmothers read from this week's Torah portion. A person who was born into a priestly family, who would otherwise lead God's holy congregation, was disqualified from service if he was disabled. Did our ancestors, in the name of God, fear that a person with a so-called "defect" would not be perceived as a worthy role model by the congregation of Israel? Did they fear that sacrificial service led by a disabled priest would seem less valuable to the worshiper?

One of my rabbinical school classmates and friends, Rabbi Mark Glickman, tells a classic story. Rabbi Glickman has always stuttered. Yes, he's had every kind of speech therapy imaginable, from childhood to the present. *The King's Speech* notwithstanding, not every stutter can be conquered, at least not completely.

Rabbi Glickman recalls being a third year rabbinical student, when he was called to the Dean's office. The Dean, looking serious, perhaps even grim, said, "Mark, we need to talk about something. You stutter." When Mark responded something like, "no kidding," the Dean asked: "What are we going to do about it?"

Let me tell you what Rabbi Glickman did about it. Last month, he received his honorary doctorate, marking 25 years in the rabbinate. He has served congregations with meaning and distinction. Jewish Publication Society is preparing ready to release his second scholarly book, *Burnt Pearls: How the Nazis Tried and Failed to Steal the Books of Europe's Jews*. When his previous book was published, he traveled the country, including as my guest in my prior congregation, captivating audiences with the story of how lost treasures of Jewish learning were discovered in Cairo in the 1890s. And yes, he stuttered from time to time as he delivered that engaging, exciting talk.

In a previous generation, Mark Glickman would have been denied ordination. One might well have asked, even in 1990, "What congregation will want to be led by a rabbi who will stutter during every sermon? Will he drive the Jews away?"

Rabbi Aryeh Azriel suffers from one of the disabilities specifically mentioned in this week's Torah portion: One of his legs is longer than the other. He walks slowly, sometimes painfully, and with a serious limp. He once told me the story of his first visit as a candidate for the pulpit of Temple Israel in Omaha. Apparently, the Ark, like ours, is up a short flight of steps. Immediately, before even offering him their pulpit, leaders of the congregation talked about how they could make the Ark accessible. Rabbi Azriel knew that he had come to the right place. The congregation has grown and flourished under his leadership since 1988, even as his disability has become more pronounced with age. More importantly, he is an unparalleled role model, guiding his congregation to even greater acceptance. Temple Israel is currently a partner in building a unique tri-faith campus, where the Temple, a church, and a mosque will all dwell together.

Having a leader who is different from those who came before can be frightening, just as any change is unsettling. At the same time, such a leader can also be an extraordinary role model. The first women rabbis spoke volumes: Men and women really are equal before God. The brave pioneers among openly gay and lesbian rabbis let the Jewish world know: All kinds of families are welcome in the synagogue.

Imagine if our biblical ancestors had invited the deaf or blind or lame priest serve the congregation. Then, like Rabbis Glickman and Azriel, their very presence would have declared: All God's children are holy.

Amen.