

The Bat Mitzvah at 100 and Women Rabbis at 50

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Rabbi Barry H. Block

When I became Bar Mitzvah in the spring of 1976, Bat Mitzvah was rare at my Houston Reform congregation. Virtually all the boys became Bar Mitzvah, but among the girls, only the “super Jews” had a Bat Mitzvah. Nevertheless, we had a new rabbi that year, and he had a plan. He would speak with the parents of girls a few years younger than I, encouraging them to enroll their daughters in Hebrew studies alongside the boys. By the time my sister turned thirteen, three years later, a Bat Mitzvah was as common as a Bar Mitzvah at our Temple.

By 1976, the Bat Mitzvah had a half-century history in this country. In March 1922, Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan brought his daughter Judy to the synagogue to celebrate the religious milestone. No, she did not read from the Torah scroll or recite blessings over it, privileges retained by men that morning. Instead, she read from a *chumash*, the Torah published as a book.

A different story about another matter: In the words of Jewish Women’s Archive, a century ago, in 1922, “Martha Neumark, a 17-year-old student at Hebrew Union College (HUC) in Cincinnati...asked to be assigned, like her male rabbinical school classmates, to a high holiday student pulpit. Her request raised the possibility that Neumark, daughter of a HUC faculty member, might ultimately present herself as a candidate for ordination.”ⁱ The College’s Board of Governors requested the input of the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR).

One of the leading Reform rabbis of the day, Rabbi Louis Witt who had served this congregation from 1907 to 1919, lifted his voice: “We have witnessed the revolution in the status of women. Five years ago, I had to argue in favor of women’s rights when [women’s suffrage] 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. There is a principle involved, and I hope that...we will have the vision to see what is before us...The question is: [Do women h]ave...the qualifications to function as spiritual leaders? What does it require to be a spiritual guide? It requires a great spirit and the quality of leadership. Some women have it and some women have not. Some men have it and some men have not...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.”ⁱⁱⁱ

A substantial majority of the CCAR adopted a resolution favoring women's ordination. However, in the words of the Jewish Women's Archive, "Despite the CCAR resolution, Neumark was never ordained. The College's governing board voted in February 1923 to bar female ordination, indicating that there did not seem to be any practical need for such a step."ⁱⁱⁱ

Fifty years later, and fifty years ago this spring, Rabbi Sally Priesand would be the first woman rabbi ordained in North America. Rabbi Priesand has written, "Dr. Nelson Glueck, president of HUC-JIR, was the man most responsible for my ordination...From the moment I arrived in Cincinnati I knew that he believed in me, and I was conscious of the fact that ordaining a woman as rabbi was a decision being made by the College-Institute itself under his leadership."

This year, we celebrate the centennial of the Bat Mitzvah and fifty years of women rabbis. I have told the stories, though, as they are often recounted: initiated by men—Rabbi Kaplan, who established the Bat Mitzvah; Rabbi Karff, who made it normative in my childhood congregation; Rabbi Witt, who spoke eloquently of the justice of ordaining women rabbis a half century before the goal was achieved; and Rabbi Dr. Glueck, who made it happen. Each of these men's work enabled significant enhancement in the role of Jewish women.

Women have been defined and limited by men in our tradition from the very beginning. In this week's Torah portion, for example, we read rules about the confinement of women after childbearing: twice as long after the birth of a girl as of a boy.

We who study American history, though, know that, while men voted to grant women the right to vote, they did so only after decades of women's activism, demanding that their own voices be heard. And we who study Jewish history know that developments in our tradition most often reflect changes in the surrounding culture. Supporting women's ordination, Rabbi Witt recalled the suffrage debate. The proximity of the dates of the CCAR's support for women's ordination and the 1920 ratification of the 19th Amendment guaranteeing women's right to vote is no coincidence.

These days, few rabbis' spouses attend CCAR conventions—unless, of course, they are also rabbis. In 1922, though, the rabbis' wives were present. The Jewish Women's Archive tells us that something unusual happened there. One day, the *New York Times* reported that sentiment among the (male) rabbis opposed ordination; the next day, the tide had turned. What happened in between? The rabbis had taken the unprecedented step of inviting their wives to speak to the

matter.^{iv} Women played a decisive role in moving male rabbis to support the ordination of women.

During the next fifty years, women, particularly girls denied equality when they became Bat Mitzvah, agitated for more significant roles—in Jewish ritual and in synagogue lay leadership. In the words of historian, Rabbi Dr. Carole Balin, “When Sally Priesand became America’s first female rabbi in 1972, she had girls half her age to thank for paving the way.”^v

As we prepare to celebrate Passover, we recall that Israel was enslaved in Egypt for 430 years. God did not seek to liberate them until they cried out for freedom. Oppressed and disadvantaged people, whose voices are often not heard, do require the partnership of those in power. Let us never, though, diminish the importance of those who demand their own freedom and equality.

On Monday morning, at our CCAR Convention, we honored Rabbi Sally Priesand and other *vatikot*, the trailblazers ordained in the first ten years of women rabbis. We did not focus our praise on the men who ordained them or on those who voted for that 1922 resolution. Instead, we heard the story of the rabbinic wives of 1922, and we rose in well-deserved ovation to the women who took the bold and often torturous paths to ordination and transformative service to the Jewish people as rabbis.

ⁱ “Reform rabbis debate women’s ordination,” [Reform rabbis debate women's ordination | Jewish Women's Archive \(jwa.org\)](https://www.jwa.org).

ⁱⁱ “Ordination of Women as Rabbis, *American Reform Responsa* 24-43-2, Volume XXXII, 1922, pp. 156-177, [as Rabbis, ordination of Archives - Central Conference of American Rabbis \(ccarnet.org\)](https://www.ccarnet.org).

ⁱⁱⁱ “Reform rabbis debate women’s ordination.”

^{iv} “Reform rabbis debate women’s ordination.”

^v Rabbi Carole Balin, “The bat mitzvah turns 100—a history of the female trailblazers who paved the way,” *The Forward*, March 18, 2022, [Bat mitzvah turns 100 – The Forward](https://www.forward.com).