

Shabbat Shalom. I'm so glad to be here. Rabbi Moshe Smolkin from Adath Israel Cincinnati has spoken so highly of this congregation and sends regards. So glad that Rabbi Wirtschafter called me to share reflections on 50 years of women rabbis.

As I stand here before you right now, Rabbi Sally Priesand, the first woman to be ordained as a rabbi in the United States, stands on the bima of Wise Temple in Cincinnati, speaking on the same topic. I feel a special connection to her in this moment.

When I was in pre-school, Rabbi Priesand was a rabbinic student intern at Wise Temple. My father was president of the congregation, and I do remember being at Friday night services when she was there. As a small child, what I remember of services at Plum Street Temple, is the soft, red velvet pews, the sound of the organ, my parents' voices reciting the prayers, the stenciled patterns and colorful stained glass windows. My eyes used to wander around the cathedral-like structure and imagine myself climbing around the walls and the ceilings, finding foot holds in the ornate architecture. I can't say that I was very focused on what was happening on the bima. But I do remember spending time with Rabbi Priesand before and after the service. I remember her talking to me and taking interest in the stuffed animal that I often brought with me. I also recall telling anyone who asked that I wanted to be a rabbi when I grew up. At that young age, I don't think that I thought about becoming a "Woman Rabbi". With Rabbi Priesand on the bima, a woman was a rabbi, and rabbis could be women.

The Jewish Community of Cincinnati took great pride in being part of Rabbi Priesand's training and ordination. I grew up hearing former HUC chancellor Nelson Glueck's family speak of his strong belief in and support of the ordination of women. I was told of how brave it was that the chancellor who succeeded Nelson Glueck made the controversial choice to lay hands on Rabbi Priesand's head, conferring ordination. I even took pride in the role that my father played, in encouraging the Temple Board to bring her on as a rabbinic intern.

Rabbi Priesand speaks well of the men who supported and encouraged her during that time. But, between the 1970's and until 2020, I was never taught about the American WOMEN who paved the way for Rabbi Priesand's ordination

In 1890, a woman named Ray Frank was dubbed by the press as “The Girl Rabbi of the Golden West”, for leading services and preaching in Spokane WA, when she realized that they had no one to conduct High Holy Days Services.

In 1921, Martha Neumark was admitted to the Hebrew Union College and studied to become a rabbi. Reform rabbis at that time, even said that they saw no reason that a woman couldn't be a rabbi; But the College refused to ordain her.

In the 1950's, Rebbitzin Paula Ackerman of Meridian, Mississippi, led her husband's congregation for 3 years after his death. She officiated weddings and funerals, and did all of the things that her husband had done as rabbi prior to his death.

National leaders of Temple Sisterhoods voiced the opinion that women should be rabbis a good 20 years prior to Rabbi Priesand's ordination.

I think it's sad that I was not taught about the women who paved the way, but rather learned that the ordination of women came exclusively through Rabbi Priesand's hard work and the noblesse of the men who opened doors for her. I'm so glad that the history of women's contributions have come to light.

The stories of women were not heard until recently. I think the absence of women's perspectives in telling this story, enabled the community to sweep under the rug the intolerance, the disrespect, the sexual harassment and abuse, and the inequitable treatment of women through all of those years. As you probably know, the Reform Movement recently conducted an investigation of the terrible, inequitable, and sometimes criminal treatment of women at the hands of male rabbis and male faculty at The Hebrew Union College. The report itself is harrowing, and its only a first step. Moving forward we are challenged to foster a lasting culture of accountability, protection and safety for all, where misconduct and abuse are never tolerated. We have to be sure that every last victim is listened to and supported. We cannot stop fighting until every perpetrator is brought to task. We must take big steps to keep people safe in the future.

The ordination of women fostered dynamic changes in how all of us think about Judaism, and in how we all do Jewish.

We now have Women's Commentaries on the Torah, midrashim told from the perspective of women, articles and books written by women, and women faculty at HUC-JIR and other seminaries. Women's scholarly approaches to history, liturgy and theology have informed how all rabbis preach, teach and understand our Jewish experience.

A central tenet of Judaism is that God has no physical form. But the Union Prayer book that I grew up with referred to God exclusively as Father, he, and him- or come to think of it "Thee" and "Thou". Now, our prayerbook translations use more gender neutral terms for God, and prayerbooks in Israel are updating the ways that we address God in Hebrew.

Judaism always recognized that both men and women stood at Sinai. But until the ordination of women, it did not occur to anyone to have our liturgy reflect that. In the Amidah, for example, we recognize the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as we always did. We now recognize our matriarchs Rebecca, Sarah, Rachel, and Leah, too. (chant) Eloheinu v'elohei avoteinu v'imoteinu. Elohei Avraham, elohei Yitzchak, v'elohei Y'aakov. Elohei Sarah, elohei rivka, elohei Rachel, v'elohei leah.

Kippot and prayer shawls have become more diversified. Although pink tallesim and beaded head coverings were once a little controversial, I now see men and women wearing wear kippot and tallesim in every color of the rainbow, and sometimes even rainbow-colored.

We see Miriam's cup on the Passover Seder table, in addition to Elijah's cup, a renewal and expansion of the use of the mikveh ritual bath. And creative rituals and liturgies for miscarriage and other experiences that touch women's lives.

The Women's Rabbinic Network has spearheaded discussions of Family and Medical Leave Standard for the Jewish community, which impacts all Jewish professionals, men and women.

And, women's ordination has expanded to Reconstructionist, Conservative, and even some Orthodox seminaries around the United States and the world. I'm told that some Protestant seminaries were influenced by Rabbi Priesand's ordination, and followed suit with the ordination of women ministers.

Even after 50 years, There is still much work to be done. Some of the problems that women face in the rabbinate are common to other professions, as well. Studies by the Central Conference of American Rabbis indicate that for every \$1 that male rabbis earned, women earned only 80-90 cents, for comparable work.

Often, congregations hire their male senior rabbis through outside searches, rather than thinking to promote women who have served as assistant rabbis for many years, right in their own congregation.

Try googling “rabbi” in google images. Oh, my goodness. Such a sea of photos of men. Mostly Chassidic men in fact, but that’s another matter entirely.

Women’s Day Magazine has a panel of 25 regular, expert contributors to their magazine. All but one of them are women. The rabbi who writes for them is a man. Even though, there are nearly 800 Reform women rabbis, representing about 1/3 of all Reform rabbis, the magazine’s editors didn’t think of inviting a woman. And I do apologize that I have only statistics on the number of Reform women rabbis. There are many other women rabbis they could have turned to from other movements. They conceived of inviting 24 women lawyers, writers, doctors, scientists, psychologists, etc. But their image of “rabbi” was “man”.

And then there are things that sound petty, but they hurt and demean in a great way.

Cincinnati is celebrating the bicentennial of Jews in the city. There are programs in the city throughout the year, and even on PBS and NPR. I was privileged to write and recite the opening prayer for the kickoff event. Kind of a big deal. Crafting prayers for public events is one of my superpowers. I do it often and well, if I do say so myself. After the ceremony, someone I’ve known since I was a student said, “I am so proud of you. . .” “You have lost so much weight, and you look fantastic”. On the facebook page for Women’s Rabbinic Network, and I read so many posts from rabbis who are objectified and valued or criticized for their appearance, rather than being honored for their very important work. “You’re far too pretty to be a rabbi”. “You’re such a sweet girl, but at our wedding, we really want a real rabbi, a male rabbi to officiate.” “Your skirt’s too short, your dress is too frumpy, you wear too much make-up, for heaven’s sake- put on some lipstick when you preach”. . . The list goes on, and I don’t think that Rabbis Smolkin and Wirtschafter are quite so often scrutinized in that way.

Sometimes, women are not well represented on expert panels. I've served on panels where they introduce Rabbi Chaim Cohen, Rabbi David Schwartz, and . . . Elena." As you can see, there is more work to be done.

I certainly don't mean to kvetch, because I have loved being a rabbi, and I know that all rabbis, male and female struggle with various challenges and indignities. I have had so many incredible experiences leading worship, teaching, preaching, crafting creative rituals and prayers, hearing peoples' stories, being with wonderful people at times of both joy and crisis, and representing Judaism to the broader community. It has been an honor and a privilege to serve as a woman rabbi. I just know that we still have work to do, and as a rabbi, I have to act as a prophetic voice and speak those truths.

As we look hopefully into the future. It is clear that women broke the stereotype of who could be a rabbi. Because of women rabbis, our ears are attuned to the voices on the margins of the Jewish community.

Like Jews of Color. Both Rabbi/ Cantor Angela Buchdahl, the first Asian-American rabbi, AND Rabbi Alysa Stanton, the first African-American Rabbi are women. We, women rabbis, hopefully with support of men and other Jews, are opening doors for Jews of Color, and that is a great thing.

My daughter is of Chinese Heritage and came to my family through international adoption. At a public program for Israel's Independence Day, she sang Ha-Tikvah along with the rest of the crowd. The couple sitting next to her said, "It's just so funny to hear Hebrew prayers coming out of the mouth of a little Asian girl." I was stunned. And my daughter's response was even more upsetting to me than the original comment. She said, "Yeah, I get that all the time." All the time! So clearly, there is more work to be done by way of recognizing that there is not one way to "look like a rabbi", and certainly not one way to "look Jewish".

As I look into our near future as rabbis, I share something that I know is sensitive for many people and perhaps, difficult to wrap one's mind around. But it is important to share, and critical that congregations listen and hear. I teach sometimes at HUC, and the future of our rabbinate is gender fluid. Both my congregation's sisterhood and The Women's Rabbinic Network have re-written their by-laws to include "Female Identified Rabbis or female-identified members". The future rabbis that I meet when I teach are, many times, transgendered, non-binary, or without gender. Some have personal pronouns "he" or "she". Some use the personal pronoun "they". As an example of this, let's consider the wording that is used on ordination certificates.

Until 2012 (just ten years ago), the Hebrew in ordination certificates for women said something different than the ordination certificates for men, and not in a good way. Men's certificates expressed the chain of tradition, using terms that indicated that the community believed in their authority. Women's certificates simply said, "Rabbi and Teacher". Interestingly, even Rabbi Preisand did not realize that her ordination certificate was different from her classmates. I didn't realize this about my diploma. I think what happened is that a married couple who are rabbis, noticed that their diplomas were different, and the issue was raised.

In 2012, 40 years after Rabbi Priesand's ordination, the ordination certificates were standardized, with women receiving some options for how they want to be addressed in Hebrew. Hebrew is a gendered language, so there are grammatical issues with what Hebrew words are used to refer to women who are rabbis. When it was standardized for men and women in 2012, women were given some options. In 2022, Ordination certificates for The Hebrew Union College will include an option for people who identify as non-binary. In the future, we have to learn, be open to, and advocate for female-identified and non-binary rabbis, just as we once had to adjust to women rabbis, such as myself.

I want to conclude with the words of Sally Preisand herself, as she reflects on 50 years of women rabbis: “We are richer for the gifts that female rabbis bring to our shared tasks. Rethinking previous models of leadership, empowering others to become more responsible for their own Jewishness, discovering new models of divinity, knowing that God embodies characteristics of both masculine and feminine, training new leaders to become more gender aware, by welcoming to institutions of higher learning respected female scholars able to share with us lessons and insights unique to women, creating new role models and allowing them to be heard, often for the first time, those whose voices have been silenced for too long, the countless number of women who have enriched our people from biblical times on.”

It’s been 50 years since I first met Rabbi Preisand at The Plum Street Temple in Cincinnati. I’ve been a rabbi for 25 of those years. I am proud to be a leader and a teacher in the House of Israel. I am proud to be a woman. I am grateful to the all of those who came before and paved the way for me to live as a Jewish woman and to become a rabbi. The rabbinate has been very fulfilling to me. It has enriched my life. And I can only pray that I will have the opportunity to enrich and inspire others, just like all of those women and rabbis paved the way for me. I stand on the shoulders of great women, including Ray Frank, Martha Neumark, Rebbetzin Paula Ackerman, and Sally Preisand. I pray that my shoulders will be strong enough and broad enough to support all future rabbis as together we continue in the work of transmitting Torah and healing the world.

Shabbat Shalom.

Rabbi Elena Stein

Friday 5/20/2022 for Sisterhood Shabbat at Adath Israel, Lexington, KY. On the 50th anniversary of the ordination of women rabbis in the US.